Adopting sustainability in the organization

Managing processes of productive loose coupling towards internal legitimacy

Sanne Frandsen
*Department of Management, University of Southern Denmark,
Odense, Denmark*
Mette Morsing
*CBS Sustainability Platform, Copenhagen Business School,
Copenhagen, Denmark, and*
Steen Vallentin
*Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy,
Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen, Denmark*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between sustainability adoption and internal legitimacy construction.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is designed as a critical inquiry into existing research and practice on sustainability adoption, illustrated by two corporate vignettes.

Findings – Prior studies tend to assume that awareness raising is a sufficient means to create employee commitment and support for corporate sustainability programs, while empirical observations indicate that managerial disregard of conflicting interpretations of sustainability may result in the illegitimacy of such programs.

Originality/value – The authors suggest that a loosely coupled approach to sustainability adoption is a productive way to understand internal legitimacy construction, as it appreciates complexity and polyphony.

Keywords Organizational culture, Employees behaviour, Sustainability, Internal legitimacy, Implementation, Employees, Loosely coupled systems

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over the last ten to 15 years sustainability has become a mainstream phenomenon and a widespread norm. It is something that companies are increasingly expected to be involved in to gain legitimacy among their stakeholders (Mohan, 2003). Positive support and effects of such efforts in terms of legitimacy and improved social standing are generally confirmed by empirical studies or taken for granted (e.g. Maignan and Ferrell, 2001). Although prior research on sustainability has pointed to the importance of considering the cultural dimension in organizational adoption (Gitsham, 2012; Lingard, 2006; Morsing and Oswald, 2009), much research has assumed that cultural

norms in the organization per default will support and enable easy integration and tight employee alignment with the sustainability agenda set forth by management (e.g. Turban and Greening, 1997) – as if sustainability *per se* motivates and commits organizational members to attribute legitimacy to sustainability programs (Morsing, 2009). Yet, it is worth reminding ourselves that top management, as critical scholars have shown, can occasionally be so confident about the positive value of corporate policies and their company "doing the right thing," that they forget to check the potential incongruences and different perceptions among their employees and other key constituencies to the detriment of achieving their stated goals (Cheney and Christensen, 2001).

In this paper we discuss the relationship between implementation of sustainability programs and employees' attribution of legitimacy to such programs. We propose that management's urge to conform to the external institutionalizing forces of sustainability instead of effective implementation may lead to internal legitimacy challenges and disagreements among employees with different ideas about sustainability. On this basis we propose "loose coupling" (as opposed to tight employee alignment) as a new productive approach to deal with internal legitimacy issues, that embrace organizational polyphony and ensure that employees are given space to engage and act within the corporate sustainability program.

The assumption of awareness as precursor for organizational adoption and legitimacy

Management studies on sustainability have focussed on how structures, techniques and learning modes may serve to ensure effective integration of sustainability in managerial and employee practices and hereby achieve legitimacy. Much emphasis has been given to the role of management training (e.g. Lacy *et al.*, 2012) and managers as role models (e.g. Andersson and Bateman, 2000; Rasmus and Steger, 2000). The challenge is often presented as a matter of cognitive change related to managerial mindsets, while it is implicitly assumed that employees will understand, accept and follow the direction set forth by management (Waddock and McIntosh, 2009). Haugh and Talwar (2010) propose that the main challenge is that "many employees may be unaware of sustainability issues beyond their immediate work responsibilities" (p. 384), and they suggest a number of methods and techniques that substantially are expected to increase "not just their knowledge but also commitment to sustainability" (Haugh and Talwar, 2010, p. 384). In his study of the embedding of sustainability at Marks & Spencer, Grayson focusses on employee volunteering and employee champions to create awareness and enthuse co-workers to improve the company's environmental and social performance (Grayson, 2011). Other research has, in a similar vein, pointed to lack of awareness among employees as the main challenge pertaining to sustainability adoption (Spar and LaMure, 2003; Cramer, 2005; Gladwin *et al.*, 1996). Hence, the main managerial task becomes one of effective sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) or issue selling (Webber *et al.*, 2012), while prospects of potential disagreements and conflicts are brushed aside. The optimistic assumption is that the process of implementation will be successful – overcoming obstacles in a top-down and integrating manner – to the extent that the message is conveyed effectively and convincingly to employees. Thus, prior research has to a large extent neglected the critique and skepticism that may also result from implementation of sustainability programs.

In the two vignettes presented below, we draw on research colleagues' interaction with employees during processes of implementation of corporate sustainability programs. A vignette is a short and "vivid account of a professional's practice

written according to a pre-specified outline, iterated through interaction with a researcher" (Miles, 1990, p. 37) and is often applied as method in qualitative studies, "particularly in the discussion of sensitive topics" (Barter and Renold, 2000, p. 307). The vignettes demonstrate how sustainability programs represent a topic of some sensitivity, as they portray the sort of skepticism, resistance and critique that may occur among managers and employees when faced with such programs in practice.

Sustainability in practice – two corporate vignettes

Vignette I: VELUX

VELUX, a worldwide manufacturer of roof windows and skylights, declares itself as "a Thought Leader on Sustainable Buildings." Sustainability and responsible management was always an implicit part of the VELUX corporate vision, family values and corporate culture. Although it has not been formalized nor explicitly articulated in any detail in the corporate strategy, managers and employees have been in strong agreement that VELUX is a responsible company concerned about its impact on society. Prior to the Climate Summit COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009, top management was met with increased pressure from global subsidiaries to engage in the global debate on responsible business in the wake of climate change. Top management coined the notion "Sustainable Living" and defined it as "energy efficiency, healthy indoor climate and renewable energy" (Skovmøller, 2012, p. 125[1]) in order to accommodate external expectations and to achieve external recognition for a vision that management saw as integral to the VELUX core values. This branding potential was not to be missed.

However, internally among employees emerged a significantly different rationale for engaging in CSR and sustainability, which they perceived as a fundamental part of the organizational identity. "We like to think that VELUX was one of the first corporations to talk about CSR due to our stated objective of always being a role model – even back in the late 1940s. I am of course a little proud of this. It means a lot to me that the company I work for conducts business in a decent way, and that we work with CSR. Otherwise I could not work here" (employee quoted in Skovmøller, 2012, p. 128). Employee commitment to sustainability was driven by personal engagement and not by an economic rationale for the company to profit on its sustainability brand. "To me it is important that you help people who are poor and in need, whenever you can. It is important for me to know that VELUX donates a large sum of money to people in poor conditions who are not able to provide for themselves or are victims of a tragedy. And that VELUX does not afterwards use it to market the company, but engages because it is an integral part of our business philosophy" (employee cited in Skovmøller, 2012, p. 129). As such, the employee rationale for a sustainability engagement was to a large extent motivated by the "social case" rather than the "business case" of branding advocated by management.

The two potentially conflicting understandings of sustainability in VELUX were never raised as an issue among management. Consequently, employees were annoyed and frustrated to find management's ideas of sustainability to differ significantly from their own perceptions and they distanced themselves from the corporate sustainability program. "I have often been thinking that they must be talking about another company, when management makes official statements about VELUX's grand focus on sustainability internally and in our life-cycle-analysis. At least this is not how

I know the company. It adds to my confusion about what this really means," as one employee puts it (Skovmøller, 2012, p. 176). An other employees says: "Sustainable Living" is different from other corporate programs because it is all about attitudes to issues that are very close to the heart of the company. And suddenly we have to talk about the company, for instance our CO_2 emissions or our attitude to future sustainable building. That is new to VELUX. We are used to talk about our products. And that causes a great deal of uncertainty among many employees (Morsing and Skovmøller, 2009, p. 13).

Employees and management alike praise a culture of strong values and emphasize the importance of being a role model for responsibility, sustainability, decentral control and empowered employees. At the same time, however, employees have increasingly become passive and demotivated to engage in sustainability at work because they experience that management is too preoccupied with symbolic talk to external stakeholders and marketing the organization as sustainable.

Vignette II. American Cafes Corporation

The top management team of American Cafes Corporation[2] decided in June 2010 to develop a sustainability strategy. So far they had engaged in multiple and dispersed sustainability activities initiated by passionate employees and managers wanting to contribute to their local community or support specific pet projects. In regard to sustainability, one top manager described American Cafes as a "'golden retriever with a heart of gold' that would run around sporadically loving everyone it encountered and licking everyone's face, but it had no focus and 'was losing money hand over fist'" (Strand, 2012, p. 15). In establishing a sustainability strategy the top management team wanted to "put some guardrails around the things that we're doing to work on and eliminate some things we're not going to work on. It magnifies the impact of anything that the organization does," said one manager (Strand, 2012, p. 31). They worried that the current budding of sustainability initiatives did not serve the end of doing good because they were uncoordinated. A top management team member stated: "We're gratified by the wrong things. We're gratified by how busy we are doing good as opposed to the impact of the good that we do" (Strand, 2012, p. 21). Accordingly, efforts were made to streamline sustainability activities, to align them with the core business areas, and to standardize and formalize initiatives and efforts. The process meant that some initiatives were brought to the fore: they were included in the corporate strategy, personnel was appointed and assigned responsibility for these initiatives, and they became subject to annual evaluation based on specific KPIs.

However, other issues and concerns were excluded, and passionate employees, who were not heard in the streamlining process, were left disappointed and disillusioned. The individual sense of responsibility, which had previously driven the sustainability engagement, was taken away from individual members and placed in structures, formal processes and assignments of responsibility. One member gave this example: "When the [local disaster occurred] […] among the first 50 people that were on site was the store manager for American Cafes and the staff. And they ran there. What the hell happened? Nobody told them: 'You are a disaster relief worker'. Nobody told us we should just give coffee to the firemen and the people […] We just did it. You guys get whatever you need. So, some of those things – I hate to use what typically can be seen as a naïve statement – but they don't require a business case. You just know that they're the right thing to do […]" (Strand, 2012, p. 28).

Top management themselves were concerned that the "personality" of the organization would be lost in the streamlining process, and that the "corporate speak" would risk to strip the meaning of the sustainability initiatives. Strand himself concludes, based on his study of American Cafes, that "some space for individuals to act on issues of substantive rationality from their own standpoints can be a desirable characteristic for an organization and the individuals within it. [...] [Therefore] a complete 'ethical closure' across the organization is not [...] a desirable quality" (Strand, 2012, p. 31).

The American Cafes Corporation vignette demonstrates how committed employees experienced demotivation and disempowerment as management engaged in formally embedding and setting perimeters for the corporate engagement in sustainability. While the formalization of sustainability was supposed to support and improve sustainability adoption among employees, it seemed to have had the reverse effect in an organization where commitment was to a large extent an informal, dispersed and employee driven part of the corporate culture.

Integration as the ideal strategic approach to legitimacy?

Ideally, sustainability efforts provide strategic benefits for the company, one important – and under-explored – benefit being increased legitimacy among internal stakeholders. However, as our two vignettes indicate, sustainability programs may also lead to disappointment, skepticism and critique resulting in members distancing themselves and not identifying with corporate policies. In our further exploration of sustainability as a provider of legitimacy we will first turn to the distinction between integrated and easily decoupled modes of organizational adoption.

A tightly coupled – and thus integrated – system is often considered as the ideal within the sustainability literature. Alas, congruence between what is said and what is done is perceived as a precondition for legitimacy. In a tightly coupled system changes involve the system in its entirety, which implies that every attempt to reorganize is transferred to all parts of the organization (Christensen *et al.*, 2008; Weick *et al.*, 2001). This notion of integration is appealing to managers as it assumes control and predictability. Managers should ideally be capable of effective sensegiving that directs employees' sensemaking of complex issues like sustainability in ways that are considered beneficial and in accordance with the overall corporate strategy. However, we propose that this integrating and rationalistic model needs to be modified in order to properly capture the practical organizational challenges that sustainability adoption entail. The alternative to tight coupling that we are proposing is not decoupling but loose coupling. The contribution of Weaver *et al.* (1999), who distinguish between integrated and easily decoupled ethics programs, is useful in making the first part of the argument (against decoupling).

According to Weaver *et al.*, the integrated approach ensures that structures and policies affect everyday decisions and actions and thereby achieve support from managers and employees. The integrated form also entails what Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) label the substantive managerial approach to legitimacy. Substantive management "involves real, material change in organizational goals, structures, and processes or socially institutionalized practices" as a response to social pressures (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 178). In contrast, the easily decoupled mode of sustainable adoption runs the risk of being disconnected from the mindsets and everyday thinking and organizational activities. Easily decoupled practices occur when management appears to conform with external expectations, i.e. in grand statements about sustainability,

but does not embed those visions in concrete organizational routines. In effect, decoupled sustainability adoption is perceived as a symbolic managerial approach to legitimacy, one that is disconnected from the substantive level of management.

The two vignettes demonstrate that both managers and employees expect sustainability to be an embedded and widely supported organizational practice. In VELUX, employees expect sustainability to be an integral part of the company's identity. They become frustrated when they perceive that management confines sustainability to symbolic marketing purposes. At American Cafes, top management is eager to streamline activities and achieve a tighter coupling of sustainability efforts in order to maximize the impact of "doing good." This, however, leaves employees de-motivated with a sense of being excluded from concerns they had otherwise valued. While decoupling is perceived negatively in both cases, the vignettes also point to certain limitations of the integrated model. In both cases, employees are objecting to a tight coupling that is orchestrated by management (sensegiving) and which fails to take account of the experiences of employees (sensemaking) and leaves little space for them to enact their moral intuitions and personal experiences. Thus, the vignettes demonstrate that a tightly coupled, integrative mode of sustainability adoption may not be a productive way to gain organizational legitimacy. Sustainability cannot be enforced upon employees.

Productive loose coupling of sustainability
We suggest that a loosely coupled mode of understanding sustainability adoption put emphasis on the need for organizational tolerance toward a variety of meanings and ways of interpreting sustainability. This can in turn pave the way for new ideas, processes and actions in response to the ever-changing environment of the organization. Ideally, sensegiving and sensemaking should influence each other in iterative processes that can be initiated by both management and employees. Loose coupling can be defined as "a situation in which elements are responsive, but retain evidence of separateness and identity" (Orton and Weick, 1990, p. 203). Loose coupling entails an image of organizational sub-units operating with "distinctiveness and responsiveness" (Orton and Weick, 1990, p. 205). We consider loose coupling as a productive principle for understanding the creation and maintenance of organizational legitimacy in regard to sustainability.

A tightly coupled mode of sustainability adoption tends to pacify or limit responsiveness from employees. It subjects the lived experience and sensemaking of employees to a dominant rationale and tends to exclude issues, concerns and motivations that do not fit within its formal scheme. It gives priority to managerial sensegiving rather than employee sensemaking. Both vignettes illustrate how employees have already formed strong opinions and ideas about sustainability long before management decides to give sense to a certain interpretation of it. Yet, employees' a priori commitment is taken for granted and not questioned and therefore incongruence between managerial and employee understandings are overlooked and local ideas and co-ownership are lost. As Weick (1995) argues: "When told to walk their talk, the vehicle for discovery, the walking, is redirected. It has been pressed into service as a testimonial that a handful of earlier words are the right words" (p. 193). Loose coupling entails attention to the polyphony of voices in the organization and can thus lead to the linking of sensemaking and sensegiving in dialogues that invite incongruence and confrontations and further stimulate development of a more acute corporate sensibility (Roberts, 2003).

Implications for management development

Having discussed the complexity of organizational adoption of sustainability and argued for the need to tolerate and appreciate heterogeneity of rationales among employees and managers, we will now turn to the implications of our argument in terms of management development more specifically. Our basic argument is that managers should learn – and have the courage – to embrace diversity and impulses from employees. They should not fall prey to the temptation of reducing sustainability to a matter of compliance and rule following that only needs effective (one-way) communication to work. This kind of top-down approach can instil a false sense of security. It is prone to elicit overt or covert resistance from disengaged employees. Instead of considering the manifold ideas and experiences of employees negatively as threats to managerial authority, they should be considered not only as a precursor for internal legitimacy but also as resources for development. More specifically, we propose that the perspective of loose coupling can contribute to management development by acknowledging the importance of complexity and polyphony in achieving internal legitimacy and producing results.

Managerial acknowledgment of the complex processes of internal adoption of sustainability

First, we propose that more attention should be given to the complexity of internal adoption of sustainability and the challenges involved in achieving internal legitimacy. Prior research has demonstrated that individuals like to associate with positive activities related to the grand challenges of society (Whetten and Mackey, 2002; Polletta and Jasper, 2001), and our two vignettes have illustrated how employees are deeply engaged and want to be involved in supporting sustainable development. However, ironically, the two vignettes also point to how employees may become demotivated by the very process of adopting sustainability – and this in ways that were neither anticipated by employees nor by management.

We suggest that management development needs to acknowledge that current understandings of employee responses to sustainability programs are incomplete. Issues of sustainability elicit personal, professional, political and ethical responses at a cognitive as well as an emotional level, and in many instances such diverse and not necessarily rational responses do not seem to be neither acknowledged nor appreciated by managers. The fact that employees may have strong ideas about sustainability and responsible behavior that differ from management does not seem to be sufficiently reflected in research or in management development programs. Merely informing or making employees aware of how to behave when confronted with sustainability challenges may prove counterproductive in the face of such diversity as indicated by the two vignettes.

In order to create legitimacy around a sustainability program, we propose the very basic idea that managers must acknowledge that employees may not be as enthusiastically embracing the managerially defined sustainability program as managers themselves. While this may, in and of itself, seem a trivial observation, we think it requires non-trivial management development skills to enact this insight – in particular since much research and guidance in management development still seem to build on such ideals. Hence, we suggest that management development will benefit from a critical understanding of why and how employees not only identify with, but also dis-identify with, critique, challenge and ironically distance themselves from corporate sustainability programs while on a personal level they are, at the same time, dedicated to sustainability.

Managerial tolerance for polyphony as a condition for corporate engagement in sustainability

Second, we propose that management development recognizes that tolerance for polyphony is a condition for sustainability, not a hindrance to be removed or suppressed. Prior research has argued that organizational culture and employee engagement in corporate sustainability efforts are important. However, this research tends to assume managerial control over employees' mindsets and actions through tight coupling of sustainability into formalized structures, standards and procedures. In other words, employees must align themselves with the managerially defined corporate sustainability program. This literature neglects that sustainability is a contested concept, which is ascribed meaning and enacted in a variety of ways within any organization. From the perspective of tight coupling and integration, such diversity of understanding is seen as an unproductive result of "failed implementation." However, we argue for the value of a loosely coupled approach, where multiplicity of understandings are embraced, and where it becomes part of management development to understand how to use such diversity productively to engage employees and move the sustainability agenda forward.

Instead of aiming to minimize differences of opinion, thus closing down internal debate to ensure a "streamlined" sustainable profile, we suggest that management development should focus on developing internal processes and structures that encourage an organizational culture where different meanings of sustainability may be surfaced, debated, negotiated and critically challenged. Importantly, while management development suggests that managers should serve as role models, we propose that such role models should signal tolerance for incongruent concerns and interest and for integrating disparate ideas on sustainability. Managerial persuasive (or "selling") communication should be replaced with more symmetrically inclined interaction, and thus organizational structures should be set in place to allow polyphony (Bakhtin, 1981). Management development techniques should embrace polyphony and not cast it aside as "evil" or unproductive. While this may seem a somewhat abstract observation, we suggest that it implies concrete and non-abstract techniques for management development. For example, we envision the development of education programs that conceptually unfold polyphonic and contrasting understandings of sustainability for managers to acknowledge, appreciate and prepare for diverse responses among employees and to engage an open debate with employees rather than an a priori closure.

Conclusion

In this paper we have suggested that sustainability may be adopted in ways that are loosely coupled yet productive in order to achieve what we refer to as internal legitimacy, i.e. employee support and co-ownership. We have presented two vignettes that question the often taken for granted assumption that adoption of sustainability is a process characterized by alignment and integration toward consensus. We have also questioned the widespread notion that awareness creation mechanisms are the most important means to secure organizational support and thus internal legitimacy for corporate sustainability efforts. Alternatively, we have argued that loose coupling can be a productive approach to sustainability adoption in the sense that it encourages continuous dialogue and engagement with employees rather than a managerially defined discursive closure constraining the corporate enactment of sustainability. We argue that tolerance toward loose coupling in the implementation of sustainability can

create spaces for different interpretations and enactments of sustainability, and this in turn calls for a new understanding of how to construe internal legitimacy. In such a new understanding of the conditions for internal legitimacy, enhanced tolerance for complexity and polyphony take center stage. These are vital concerns if employees are to support corporate efforts to move toward a more sustainable future.

Notes

1. The VELUX case is studied and analyzed by Carina Skovmøller (2012). Her work is published in Danish, thus all quotes presented in this paper have been translated by the authors from the original Danish to English.

2. American Cafes Corporation is a synonym for a US-based company studied and analyzed by Robert Strand (2012).

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About the authors

Dr Sanne Frandsen, PhD at Copenhagen Business School, is currently Postdoc fellow at University of Southern Denmark. She is interested in the relationship between corporate branding and identity work at organizational, as well as individual, levels in various contexts, particularly the context of low-prestige corporations. She uses qualitative, ethnographic methods to understand processes of employees' identification, ambivalence and cynicism.

Professor Mette Morsing, PhD, is the Co-Director of CBS Sustainability Platform. From 2002 until 2012, she was the Founding Director of CBS Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (cbsCSR). She has served as Member of the Management Board of the European Academy of Business in Society (EABIS) and she is currently Board Member of the LEGO Foundation and the Danish Government's National Council for Social Responsibility. She has published on issues of management, strategy, CSR and communication from theories in organizational sociology and communications studies. Her research has appeared in journals such as *Journal of Management Studies, Human Relations, Management Communication Quarterly* and *Business Ethics* and in publishing houses such as Sage, Routledge, Palgrave MacMillan and Oxford University Press. Professor Mette Morsing is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: mm.ikl@cbs.dk

Steen Vallentin is Associate Professor in CSR at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), where he is also associated with the Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (cbsCSR). His research is mainly focused on the political aspects of CSR, including the role of government, the emergence of new modes of governance and the impact of media and public opinion on corporate communication and action. Together with Sara Louise Muhr and Bent Meier Sørensen he has recently (2010) published the edited volume *Ethics and Organizational Practice* (Edward Elgar). His most recent publications are a critical book on CSR in Danish (*Afkastet og anstændigheden – Social ansvarlighed i kritisk belysning*) (2011) and a paper for *Organization* on "Governmentality and the politics of CSR" (Vallentin and Murillo, 2012).