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# WORK ETHIC FOR SUSTAINABILITY-AS-FLOURISHING

By Sashika Abeydeera

Sustainability-as-flourishing is introduced by renowned management scholar, John Ehrenfeld as the capacity of all life on Earth to endure indefinitely. It is important for our collective future.

Sustainability-as-flourishing calls for a fundamental shift in how we think about and conduct business. Three universally applicable values – interconnectedness, moderation and empathy can help businesses move from an organisation centric focus, based on endless growth and a competitive ethos, towards sustainability (see Figure 1).

Sustainability-as-flourishing requires careful and collaborative use of the world's limited resources and understanding how and what we each choose to do impacts others. Seeing business and other organisations as a part of a system is highly relevant when businesses are serious about sustainability. This systems focus enables business leaders and managers to appreciate the inherent connections between ourselves and others and the world we live in.



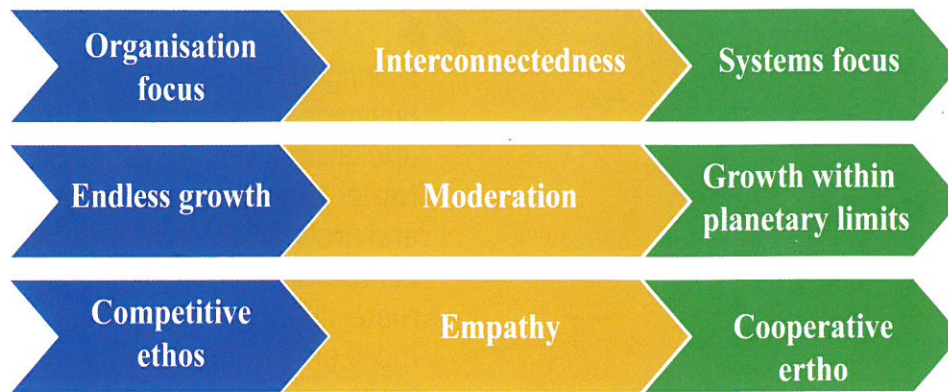


Figure 1: Alternatives to business-as-usual offered through sustainability values

If we fail to see those connections, we risk taking more than the world can provide in terms of resources. We risk continuing with a focus on endless growth. Already we are in global overshoot – we use non-renewable resources at a greater rate than they can regenerate. A growth at all costs mentality without considering the planetary limits leads to over-production, over-consumption, wastage and exploitation of resources, including, alarmingly, depletion of non-renewable resources. The value of moderation in organisational practices encourages growth within planetary limits.

Businesses usually see competition as important and necessary to encourage more innovative business opportunities. However, today's business world seems to emphasise never-ending rivalry with one another in search of more opportunities to gain competitive

advantage. Such competition leads to contentious and conflicting relationships with other business counterparts due to lack of empathy, which is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Fostering empathy could convert competitive advantage into a cooperative advantage that would pose radically new business opportunities to combat unsustainability through collective innovation. Empathy, therefore, enhances a cooperative ethos in place of rivalry, enriching the nature of relationships between both internal and external stakeholders of a business or an organisation.

How can an organisation enact these values and contribute towards sustainability-as-flourishing? Below are four key points that will help managers adopt a work ethic that enables sustainability-as-flourishing.

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## SUSTAINABILITY IS A MINDSET



Sustainability-as-flourishing involves more than ticking boxes related to energy efficiency and community relations. It starts with a state of mind that appreciates interconnectedness, and sees the need for moderation and empathy. Such a mindset enables an individual to see the connections within and between self and others. In an organisational context, it is indicative of managers' capacity to contemplate connections between different managerial functions internally but also their relations externally across multiple stakeholders and the Earth's ecosystems. It involves a personal ethic of responsibility and care.

### A MULTILEVEL APPROACH

An approach to foster sustainability should be holistic involving organisational members at all levels to promote its wider application. Strategic, middle and operational managers and staff need to be involved. It is vital to create a forum to build shared understandings and agreements of what interconnectedness, moderation and empathy mean for the organisation to probe the possibilities of translating these values from an individual to an organisational level, and to a societal level. Incorporation of interconnectedness, moderation and empathy in the organisation's values, mission statements and in sustainability initiatives will also be helpful. Hierarchical barriers should not limit new ideas from employees at different levels to inspire new links within and beyond the organisation.

### AN EMPHASIS ON DYNAMIC STABILITY INSTEAD OF GROWTH AT ALL COSTS

This is key in promoting sustainability in organisations. Managers are encouraged to create business models that assume social and environmental responsibility



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rather than pursue short-term profits and growth at all costs. Organisation-centeredness that promotes materialism feeds into the craze for more growth disregarding planetary limits, risking the stability of both the organisation and the Earth. Reflective practice encourages managers to be aware of short- and long-term effects of their decisions on the organisation, wider society and the environment. Transformation of business practices so as to routinely consider and seek to eliminate adverse effects for a wider range of stakeholders (including community and nature) would better serve future generations.

### ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY

Organisational identity provides organisational members with a sense of 'who they are' through the discipline of abiding by a set of agreed principles, values and ethics. It sets the business's products and services apart from competitors' products and services despite possible similarities. Embedding and enacting values of interconnectedness, moderation and empathy within sustainability practices has the potential to create a strong, positive organisational identity. Such an identity would empower organisational members to make positive choices on behalf of the organisation and a wider array of stakeholders.

Organisations that adopt a work ethic that appreciates and fosters values of interconnectedness, moderation and empathy can enable sustainability. Organisational leaders and members with these values can contribute to flourishing. Is your business ready to take on this work ethic?

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