A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by

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Change is Critical for Sustainability to Take Hold

At the turn of the century, Motorola was the largest mobile phone company in the world with an outstanding line of analog phones. The company was content with its superior marketing position and didn't consider making a change to digital phones. The Finnish phone giant, Nokia, however, saw the need to improve the quality of mobile phones and developed the digital technology. Within a few years, Nokia overtook Motorola as the world's leading company in mobile phone sales, and Motorola has never recovered.

One of the top graduate business schools in the world was considering introducing environmental and social sustainability into its MBA program but decided against it. The school was concerned that the MBA graduates may be perceived as environmental activists, then considered a negative, if a prospective employer sees an environmental course on the job applicant's transcript. The school continued along based on its excellent reputation and still has not really adopted sustainability into the curriculum. Why change if its ranking is still acceptable even though every MBA graduate should have a clear understanding of the benefits of sustainability?

Government agencies, corporations, academic institutions and even citizens must be in a position to accept change. Let's talk about governments first. A good example of what can and should be done is the City of Seattle. It has established a composting program for organic waste, and it is being enforced. Any resident that disposes of trash containing over 10% of wood waste will be fined. In a more dramatic situation, last month a court in The Hague has ordered the Dutch government to cut its emissions by at least 25% from 1990 levels within five years, in a landmark ruling expected to cause ripples around the world. The court felt that government plans to cut emissions by just 14-17% by 2020 were unlawful, given the scale of the threat posed by climate change. The City of Chicago has had plans to become the "greenest city" in the U.S. for over 10 years. However, to cut costs it eliminated the Department of Environment and currently does little recycling compared to its goals. In a recent study of the 25 greenest cities in America, Chicago did not even make the list. Some government bodies are talking about it while others are doing something about it.

I really believe that corporations should set an example for everyone as to what can be done about integrating sustainability in their operations. Sustainability will help protect the environment while at the same time provide improved financial performance. Most companies are not willing to embrace the concept as they feel it will require major changes. This can be

accomplished very easily if the company is willing to take small steps at first. Some large companies have done it and are very successful, like Unilever. Other companies have started on that path but their size has made it more difficult. For example, WalMart has added solar panels on a few stores but it could be doing more. Also, Shell Oil is capturing carbon dioxide emissions from a oil refinery and feeding them to a large green house, but it could also be doing more.

Academic institutions should be leading the march to protect the environment. Smaller and newer schools or programs have been able to introduce sustainability courses and programs, but the larger schools have been too slow. One of the problems is the tenure system where professors that have been teaching a course or two for 20-30 years are reluctant to change the syllabus to include new concepts.

Individuals are also reluctant to change for the good of the environment. I have presented many seminars on the state of the environment and what needs to be done to save it. Individuals don't want to make the necessary change for any one or more of three reasons: 1) "I am not going to be around when the consequences develop so why should I change my lifestyle." 2) "My becoming more sustainable will have such a little impact on the world, so why bother." 3) "I don't believe we have a problem." And there could be even more reasons why people are not adopting environmental sustainability.

Government agencies alone can't do it; corporations alone can't do it; academic institutions alone can't do it; and neither can individuals do it alone. We all have to accept change and protect the environment.