

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

by
George P. Nassos

Environmental and Social Sustainability Must Be Imbedded in Our Thinking

I recently read a GreenBiz article about Cargill and what this company is doing to prepare all of its employees in understanding the concept of sustainability. Cargill, the giant food and agricultural chemical company, is also the largest private company in the United States. One of its managers who was very knowledgeable in sustainability felt it was time to build the sustainability's profile within the organization. So the company organized a summit and invited employees from across Cargill in a variety of roles — supply chain, procurement, plant managers, finance, IT, sales, marketing, communications, legal, R&D, corporate affairs and government relations. The invitation made it clear that attendees wouldn't just be passive listeners – they would be active participants. One of the goals of the event was to "create champions" throughout the company on sustainability. The summit was so successful that it was even expanded to its supply chain.

If a company is committed to integrate sustainability into its operations, it cannot do it effectively by just assigning the responsibility to a Chief Sustainability Officer or comparable position. As Cargill got employees from all of its departments to understand and thus implement sustainability in the various departments, all companies should follow this pattern. There have been a number of companies that adopted this strategy and have been very successful. One of the first to adopt sustainability was Interface, the largest commercial carpet manufacturer in the U.S. This company was led by Ray Anderson who not only made Interface very sustainable, but he became an international spokesman for environmental sustainability for many years until his recent death. Other companies that have successfully integrated sustainability in its operations by training most of its employees include Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), the large technology integrator primarily for D.O.D., Dow Chemical, and DuPont Chemical, and General Electric.

Another approach to having most of a company's employees understand sustainability in order to integrate it into its operations is for the employees to have learned the concept while in school. But all programs do not offer courses in environmental and social sustainability. If you consider a typical graduate business school, it may offer programs in accounting, finance, marketing, operations, organizational behavior, and most likely an MBA. But should this typical business school also offer courses in sustainability? It could but there is a better approach.

These business schools should follow the example of Cargill and other companies. Rather than offering a course or program on sustainability, they should integrate the concept of sustainability into all of its programs. For example, in a business marketing class there should be modules on developing sustainable products and strategies on how to market/sell them. In a finance class, time should be allotted in discussing the investments and returns on sustainability strategies. How does a company justify making investments in new sustainable products or

systems? Can a company justify investing in a renewable energy systems? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed by financial people. Students learning about operations must understand, for example, the various options for achieving LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification and making buildings truly sustainable in terms of using a sustainable site, materials and resources, energy and atmosphere, indoor environmental quality, water efficiency, and innovation in design. A student in operations would probably want to know something about renewable energy, and this is something that could be covered in a module.

The main point is that sustainability should not be treated as a discipline like accounting, marketing, operations, and finance but rather it should be a concept imbedded in all of the disciplines. In this manner, regardless of the student's major, s/he will have learned all about sustainability and will be in a position to apply it in the working world. Within a short period of time, companies employing graduates from the various business schools will have them finding ways to apply sustainability in their company responsibilities. While I have used business schools as an example, this recommendation can apply to other schools also. Eventually, everyone will be incorporating sustainability in their everyday habits without even thinking about it.