

Preface

About 35 years ago, I had the fortune to work for a subsidiary of an American chemical company that was located in Cologne, Germany. While experiencing many great times during the three years I lived in Europe, there were a few that stood out because of their impact on the natural environment and energy efficiency. Here are three that I will never forget.

1. I was walking to the subway and had to take the escalator to the lower level. When I arrived for the first time, I was disappointed that the escalator was not operating. So I did what I would normally do under such a circumstance – walk down the stationary escalator. As soon as I took the first step to walk down, the escalator started and continued to operate until I reached my destination. With no one else on the escalator, it stopped when I got off. There was a pressure switch under the first step that activated the motor. That really made sense.
2. I was participating in a business meeting at a high-rise office building in the La Defense suburb of Paris. Sitting in a conference room on about the 40th floor with nothing but windows on the outside wall, I couldn't help but notice that from time to time the lights would go off and later come back on. After witnessing this occurrence two or three times, I asked the hosts if they were having problems with their electrical supply. I was embarrassed to learn that light sensors controlled the need for artificial light when the sunlight was insufficient. This activity on that day was due to a partly cloudy day.
3. I lived in an apartment building two blocks from the Rhine River and about six or seven kilometers south of the city center where my office was located. My commute to the office was by driving on a four-lane boulevard along the river. About every kilometer or less were intersections with stoplights to allow traffic to enter or exit the boulevard. In

addition to these traffic lights at the intersections, digital signals existed on the boulevard about midway between the intersections. These digital signals would indicate what speed the cars should travel in order to arrive at the next intersection with a green light. This system provided several benefits like reduced fuel consumption, reduced emissions, reduced congestion, and reduced stress. I am not sure how many years this system was in operation prior to my experiencing it. But it surely made sense.

After working for the chemical company for 16 years, I returned to the U.S. and joined an environmental company for the next 15 years. A combination of my experiences in Europe and Germany, in particular, along with the environmental company convinced me that this was a field of great interest. I then decided to enter the academic field and combine my chemical and environmental background with my business background (also have an MBA) and teach at a graduate business school. I wanted to offer students a combination of teaching theory as well as my business experiences in the real world. I was fortunate to learn that the Illinois Institute of Technology – Stuart School of Business had just developed a new program – MS in Environmental Management, and the dean was looking for a director of the program. This was a great fit for both the school and me.

During my first year at the school in 1997, I attended a conference sponsored by the World Resources Institute focusing on environmental and social sustainability. About 150 people attended this annual conference with about 70% from academia and the balance from the business and government sectors. I had never heard of this topic, but I found it extremely interesting. The following year I attended the conference again, and after this second experience I was convinced that sustainability was very, very important. During the next academic year, I introduced sustainability into the capstone course I was teaching and renamed it “Business

Strategy: The Sustainable Enterprise”. Over the next few years, I introduced the sustainability concept in other courses and shortly thereafter changed the program name to MS in Environmental Management and Sustainability. This program was eventually ranked No. 11 in the world by the Beyond Grey Pinstripes biennial survey.

I became so interested in sustainable strategies that I researched the topic on a continuous basis and added new strategies and case studies to the course almost every year/ Since about 80% of the students were working professionals – part-time students – the final exam for the course was actually a project. Each student was challenged to apply one of the sustainable strategies to their workplace and show how it would enhance the company, a subsidiary or a strategic business unit (SBU) in terms of environmental integrity, social equity and economic viability. If it didn’t, I didn’t want to hear about it. The full-time students had the option to select a publicly held company or create a new one based on the sustainable strategy.

In addition to researching for new strategies, I was also interested in books about sustainability. Over the past ten years, I did not come across any book that dealt with the various sustainable strategies I was teaching. I am convinced that sustainability should not be a discipline in a business school like marketing, accounting, finance, or organizational behavior, but rather should be imbedded in all the appropriate courses. All graduates of a business school should have an understanding of the sustainability concept and its benefits. This book was written to enhance business programs at any or all business schools. It can also be used as the basis for a course on sustainability or as a reference to cover the topic in one or two modules of any other business course.

This does not mean that the book has been written only for business schools. Small- and medium-sized companies as well as large corporations will certainly benefit from the contents of this book. In addition, government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGO) will also benefit by adopting selective strategies. Just as I am convinced that sustainability should not be a discipline in a business school, it should not be the responsibility of an individual or department in a company or organization. Sustainability should be imbedded in the culture of the organization so everyone can work together to achieve their goal of operating as a truly sustainable company.

While reading many books on sustainability, one that can be considered a classic is “The Limits to Growth” written in 1972 by Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, and Jergen Randers⁽¹⁾. They used a computer model to simulate the consequence of interactions between the Earth's and human systems to predict the state of our environment through the year 2100. In 2004, the authors wrote “Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update”⁽²⁾ as a review of the computer model. They showed that the actual data relates very closely to the model’s prediction, and if the real data continues to follow the model, the world may be heading to a collapse. This was followed with a 40-year anniversary meeting of experts leading to another paper published in Smithsonian Magazine⁽³⁾. A graph⁽⁴⁾ showing what has happened during these 30+ years has been reproduced on the cover of this book because it reflects another inspiration to write this book.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Nikos Avlonas, CEO and Founder of the Center for Sustainability and Excellence, an organization that trains and consults in the sustainability field. His expertise is in the measurement of sustainability metrics that are used to determine how well the organization is performing and in the reporting of its activities.

Consequently, it made sense to join forces and write a book about the strategies, measurements, reporting, and communicating.

George P. Nassos – 2013

References

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