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Sustainability as Organizational Strategy

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Synonyms

[Accountability](#); [Administration](#); [Ethics](#); [Integrity](#);
[Leadership](#); [Management](#); [Organizations](#); [Resilience](#); [Strategy](#); [Sustainability](#)

Definition

Sustainability as organizational strategy is applied in both the public and private sector organizations as a set of concrete efforts to reduce the negative impacts on the environment and the society as a whole from the operational activities in service provision and product creation.

Introduction

Sustainability is defined through the set of active and efficient actions undertaken by organizations to positively impact societal issues, foster economic development and growth, reduce adverse environmental consequences, and

improve overall governance, including accountability and transparency of operations. Over the past two decades, sustainability planning became an integral part of organizational strategies and strategic planning efforts. In private sector, sustainability is often utilized to supplement the strategic plan under the guise of corporate social responsibility or corporate responsibility. Cities and counties employ sustainability as an enabling and a multifaceted approach to the betterment of communities and improvement of operational efficiency. One of the overall goals is to provide for more accountability and transparency of service delivery.

In principle, organizations are engaged in sustainability with multiple benefits to the society as a whole, encapsulated through their ability to reduce adverse impacts from their operation on the environment and the society as a whole. Through active decision making and practical applications of sustainability, and developing succinct measures and objectives, organizational leadership designs an operational paradigm for the organization, while strengthening the core resiliency and adaptability to societal and environmental threats and opportunities. Fiscal constraints and the impact of a global economy on local governance and the ability to deliver outcomes are significant disruptions. Local governments engaged in sustainability can adapt, transform, and accept discontinuities as they continue to provide services without interruptions. In a crisis, sustainability-related efforts become an

opportunity and a tool for local governments as then they need to change their priorities, reporting, measuring, and outcomes of the budget process.

The New Normal: Strategic Management and Sustainability Planning

As the societal pressure shift, organizations use sustainability in pursuit of long-term strategic goals and an attempt to reduce the adverse environmental impacts from activities related to service delivery or production. While the strains differ from one sector to another, the external and internal pressures are exemplified through the struggles that local governments face. For example, Martin et al. (2012) and Ammons et al. (2012) discussed the new normal for local governments and observed pressures pulling resources in multiple directions. This shifting of priorities and challenges facing organizations is consistent with the processes presented in sustainability planning. Ideally, organizations will use both strategic and sustainability plans or a sustainability plan with strategic management steps in the process.

Strategic management is a never-ending process, combining strategic planning and leadership with other management processes. As noted in Alibašić (2017), sustainability planning is “a set of effective and efficient actions taken by an organization, through good governance, to ensure the economic stability, growth, and financial success, with the most positive societal outcome and the least negative environmental impact” (p. 37). As such, in sustainability planning, organizations must take into consideration all four pillars of sustainability and integrate them effectively into their long-term goals and objectives. Leadership is critical to sustainability planning and implementation, as noted by Strand’s (2014) review of corporate efforts to implement sustainability and the role that staff dedicated to sustainability play in the implementation of sustainability programs and opportunities.

In response to rapid changes occurring in the surrounding environment, an organizational

leadership uses strategic management and sustainability planning. Koteen (1997) saw the strategic management as nonstatic, dynamic approach to addressing external and internal obstacles and for embracing opportunities. Strategic management is thus observed as a changing, progressive, and driving force applying to every level of organizational governance. Moreover, the strategic planning provides a methodology for organizations to address challenges and obstacles, and to plan for varying circumstances. Finally, Switzer (2008) offered the following definition of strategic thinking, as one involving “emerging trends, identifying whether or not they represent opportunities or threats to the organization, and developing an organizational response to take advantage of the potential opportunity or mitigate the threat” (p. 32).

Similar to sustainability planning, strategic management requires an overview of where the organizations are currently in their governance, their structural deficiencies, system approach to operations, and desired short-term and long-term outcomes. Concurrent to their sustainability planning, organizations may be deploying strategic planning following specific steps in the process as they seek to achieve certain goals and objectives. Answering particular strategic questions will conclusively lead to a change and step ahead in targeted efforts to meet mission, vision goals, and strategies. While historical crises, such as financial recessions, resource shortages, are cyclical in nature, new challenges and opportunities in modern era, including but not limited to changing trends in transportation modes, communication methods including the rise of social media, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity to name a few present nascent organizations with far more significant risk and challenges than in the past. Strategic management initiatives serve as guidance for administrators to navigate end-goals and predefined objectives.

Sustainability Planning

Sustainability planning became a panacea for many organizations, seeking the long-term

planning from an environmental, social, economic, and governance perspective, in a systematic and purposefully defined, interconnected realm of issues and responsibilities. As a relatively new concept, sustainability planning and strategic sustainability, there is a direct correlation between the strategic management practices. The difference is the sustainability planning and the focus Triple Bottom Line (TBL) or the expanded pillars of sustainability, the Quadruple Bottom Line. Similar to strategic management, sustainability planning processes are replicated from one sector to another. Sustainability planning may be defined as a set of initiatives, in a relatively designated space and time, which provides for long terms vision, planning, and implementation using a set of interconnected areas of concerns for the organizations, including but not limited to governance, economic growth and development, social impacts, and environmental concerns (Alibašić 2017).

Sustainability planning in local governments relates to the fact that organizations are interested not only in the issues of economic, social, and environmental significance but also are involved in the best and most efficient governance of the agency (Alibašić 2017). Furthermore, Alibašić (2017) posited and defined the Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) “as the organizational capacity to embed and incorporate a set of definitive policies and programs to address economic, social, environmental, and governance aspects of sustainability, whereas governance, is defined through fiscal responsibility and resilience, community engagement for efficient service delivery, transparency, and accountability” (p. 41). Slavin (2011) posited the governance to be one of the critical elements of sustainable cities that include the design and management of operation with the lowest possible carbon footprint.

Sustainability planning design in local governments, including social, environmental, and ecological balance in mind, may be applied to any public service or private sector organizations. Moreover, Coyle (2011) highlighted the relevance of a low-carbon built environment in a resilient and sustainable community and the essential role organizations play in meeting the custodian

role of resources. Elements of organizations using sustainability planning include a compact and bounded development pattern, a supporting system, including economic, energy, water, natural environment, transportation, and robust waste system. Such systems are not resource-dependent and are renewable resource-based, flexible, efficient, resistant, and durable. The primary focus of organizations with sustainability planning in place is the improved conservation and efficiency measures. The imperative of nascent organizations is seeking a balance between natural resources consumed and regenerated and potentially reused and repurposed (Fogel 2016).

The Learning Organizations and Sustainability Planning

A learning organization, sustainability, and the priorities of a strategic manager are intertwined conceptually. Garvin (1993) proposed that organizational leadership must be committed to experimenting, transforming, learning, and solving problems systematically rather than implementing programs and policies alone (Garvin 1993). Ismail et al. (2014) furthered the notion of learning organizations suggesting that especially prominent organizations must use experimentation in their operations. Creating a learning and sustainable organization is an imperative the strategic manager. An essential element of good governance is the organization accountability towards stakeholders, accessibility, transparency, and ultimately the ability to transform (Alibašić 2017). The concepts of transformation, learning, and adaptability can be found in the learning; transformative organizations focused on sustainability. Garvin’s (1993) view on systemic approach to problem-solving, including experimentation, is in line with Ismail et al. (2014) view of exponential organizations and the necessary for experimentation toward transformation. The emphasis placed on learning and flexibility is imperative to the longevity of the organizations. Furthermore, the learning organizations are concerned in promoting accountability

in operations and ethical service delivery and production.

Measuring Sustainability Efforts

The concept of sustainability-related measurements is often emphasized through the use of Triple Bottom Line (TBL) and the corresponding indicators in the environmental, social, and economic platforms. The nature of indicators is to provide a snapshot of measure over a period with the benchmark data to track the end goals for comparison purposes. While Bell and Morse (2008) explained the sustainability indicators and indices, Ramos and Caeiro (2009) evaluated the performance of sustainability indicators. Alibašić (2017) challenged the existing approach to sustainability measurements, the static nature of the Triple Bottom Line, and the use of indicators in sustainability reports.

In addition to economic, social, and environmental implications, the Quadruple Bottom Line adds dimension to sustainability by focusing on governance. While most organizations use sustainability indicators in their reporting and have a separate sustainability plan from a strategic plan, there are examples of organizations using targets in sustainability plans and reporting and using sustainability plans as strategic plans. The performance monitoring, feedback, reporting, and reassessment or revision in strategic and sustainability planning are utilized in sustainable organizations for constant input for robust. Strategic and sustainability planning go beyond finding a solution to a problem and lead to the development of new ideas to confront an organizational threat, weakness, and challenges.

Conclusion

Sustainability planning is the ability of organizations to create a state of an efficient and flexible system where all factors of its functions and operations can be sustained. A sustainable organization is designed to be resilient economically,

environmentally, socially, remaining viable through time and the variations in governing structure ensuring accountability, transparency, and organizational integrity. While sustainability planning differs from strategic planning inasmuch as the emphasis of sustainability planning is expanded beyond the financial and economic bottom line, the two are interconnected and interdependent.

Cross-References

- ▶ Leadership
- ▶ Management
- ▶ Organizational Theory
- ▶ Resilience
- ▶ Sustainability

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