



SOBEY SCHOOL  
OF BUSINESS  
at SAINT MARY'S UNIVERSITY

# the workplace review

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DISCOVER, SHARE, TRANSFORM

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# Better Workplaces

*Better Workplaces* is a research initiative of the Sobey School of Business. It is a key focus in our ongoing effort to produce research that has a meaningful impact on the way we do business. The *Better Workplaces* research agenda is aimed at developing insights into the balance of factors that encourage positive organizational outcomes, including improved organizational performance and customer care, employee health and safety, good community-workplace relations, and ethical business practices.

One of the initiatives under the Better Workplaces umbrella is the introduction of this new electronic journal – *The Workplace Review*.

## Mission

The mission of *The Workplace Review* is to become a regional forum where people can explore different perspectives of work.

*The Workplace Review* will emphasize research that is current and relevant, with a high potential for immediate application and impact.

## Scope of the eJournal

*The Workplace Review* showcases the strength of international faculty who are in touch with day-to-day workplace challenges. Drawing upon our diverse community of researchers, from the Sobey School of Business and other Atlantic Canadian universities, the journal will reflect developing issues in the functional specialties of marketing, finance, operations, information systems, economics, accounting, and management. It will address issues such as personnel staffing and selection, human resource management, leadership and coaching, occupational health, industrial relations, spirituality, diversity management, corporate governance and business ethics. The journal will remain flexible enough to incorporate future or emerging issues. All articles will focus on the central theme of the challenges and opportunities surrounding work, working and the workplace, but will not necessarily reflect the views of Saint Mary's University and the Sobey School of Business.



# the workplace review

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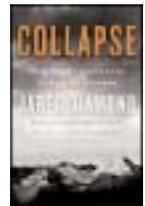
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# Letter *from* the Editor

BY ALBERT J. MILLS

In this issue the book review usefully serves as an overarching theme, namely, “How societies choose to fail or succeed”. Reviewing the book “Collapse”, Hermann Schwind provides us with a detailed account of Jared Diamond’s overview of how different societies either fail or succeed depending on a series of choices made across decision-making bodies, including government and business. Reflecting on the book’s lessons for social sustainability Schwind refuses to be discouraged, arguing there is hope in long-term thinking that takes us well beyond the typical culture of short-term solutions. But, he reflects, “how realistic is this hope?”

Throughout the rest of this issue of the Workplace Review each of four main articles tackles an important element of, what Karen Blotnick reports as, “the long-hours and work-first attitudes” that characterize too many workplaces in Canada. Reviewing the state of workplace stress research in Canada, Blotnick contends that in many ways an emphasis on efficiency and work-first attitudes can be paradoxical, that many of the more efficient Fortune 500 companies report higher levels of job satisfaction.

Business ethics is the second of our key issues and here Shelagh Campbell argues that too much lip service is being paid to the issue and not enough attention to the context in which ethics are practiced. She argues for more workplace training around the issue of ethics to provide an understanding not only of the issues involved but also the context in which they are played out. She ends with a novel suggestion, literally, by suggesting that organizations encourage on-site book clubs. A kind of lunch and learn venue where people can discuss complex ethical ideas with their workplace colleagues.

Our third focus is on spirituality at work. In a far ranging article Margaret McKee takes up the issue of spirituality through a focus on the how people make sense of their workplace realities and of each other. Normally associated with helping people to avoid workplace accidents and disasters, the work of Karl Weick on sensemaking is developed by McKee as a framework for gaining a deeper sense of spirituality at work. This award winning paper<sup>1</sup> takes us through the main social psychological properties of sensemaking, its applications and limitations.

In our fourth and final article Cathy Driscoll takes on the broader issue of ecological sustainability, which, she contends, rests not only on the interdependence between the environment, society, and the economy but also on our ability to incorporate that interdependence in the way we approach social development. Taking us back to Jared Diamond! ○—

1 Best Student Paper, Atlantic Schools of Business, annual conference, 2005

# Business Education: Bridging Work and Ethics.

BY SHELAGH CAMPBELL

From time to time the business community renews its call for examples of practically based research that can be directly applied to the “real world”, and rightly so.

As a case in point, this journal and its theme of building “better workplaces” provides an example of the academic response to this need. However, just the production of relevant research is often insufficient, even when it is rooted in current issues and well known industry benchmarks. This may be due to the lack of sustainability of the proposed model, credibility of the research subjects [1], an inability to replicate the results in other workplaces, or simply the dynamic nature of the business world where applying research has much in common with attempting to herd housecats. How best then, to bridge the potential gap between the academic research regarding the workplace and the effective use of such research?

The business seminar model of training and education continues to be a nexus where business research and day to day practicality mix. If the business seminar was the effective learning experience it is often touted to be, we can imagine that celebrity speakers would be

woefully underemployed and business operations would be optimized, full stop. Rather, we find ourselves continually facing the challenge of translating the learning found in the experiences of others (as well as our own development activities) into meaningful behaviour at work. [2] To this end, I suggest that we consider a model of professional development whose aim is to continually reinforce learning in direct application to workplace behaviours, accomplished through the integration of individual experience with academic research.

Workers often find a training experience rich and rewarding, but the exclusive setting and culture of the training venue is so dissimilar to their workplace that they have difficulty transferring the behaviours, particularly managerial behaviours, to their traditional role. [3] One strategy to address this is “team training”, conducted at the worksite. However, in the case of professionals, this may be problematic as a

“One of the most topical undertakings of current business education, business ethics education, poses a significant challenge in terms of time management for learners.”

considerable source of both collegial support and business standards of practice comes through the professional association. The professional association's role in governing qualifications and admittance to the profession also serves as an important socializing force at work [4], and has potential to reinforce the cognitive and behavioural learning particularly related to business ethics. Thus, training and education for those who are members of a profession has particular challenges and opportunities.

How then to achieve effective professional development? If we understand that business education is an ongoing process, then we have a number of challenges: to determine a range of topics that is relevant to the business person, to present these in a forum conducive to building enduring referent groups across organizations, and to do so such that participants invest in the learning process and continually return for support; in short – the business book club.

Managing an effective business book club is not quite as simple as it might appear on the surface. This is more than a gathering of colleagues who, having just read *Getting to Yes*, enjoy snacks and a chat. A natural grouping of participants may well reinforce the mutual support necessary for participants to

openly share and develop learning strategies for the workplace, but the material in each session must be suitable as well. The appropriate balance of rigorous content with the time taken to prepare for a discussion is an elusive one, even for full time students; the pressures on the full time professional make it even more difficult and critical to achieve. The translation of business ethics from the classroom to the boardroom is an excellent example of this challenge. One of the most topical undertakings of current business education, business ethics education, poses a significant challenge in terms of time management for learners.

Rooted in philosophy, the discussion of ethics at its most discouraging requires repeated re-reading of cumbersome texts; yet at its best it is a stimulating field for reflection which leads to action. William Shaw (2003) has edited a collection of readings on the topic entitled *Ethics at Work: Basic Readings in Business Ethics*. Shaw's work provides an accessible backgrounder on the subject, and positions ethics in a number of specific, diverse business applications. Contained within are two excellent introductory essays, one by Roger Crisp of St. Anne's College, Oxford and the other by J.R. Lucas. These two essays provide not only core concepts, but also illustrate

“Workers often find a training experience rich and rewarding, but the exclusive setting and culture of the training venue is so dissimilar to their workplace, they have difficulty transferring the behaviours...”

opposing viewpoints and are manageable in an evening's read. Once prepared with this background, a group could reasonably prepare for a robust discussion by sampling one or two additional readings from the nine then provided by Shaw, on topics ranging from insider trading to international sweatshops, and including corporate downsizing, manipulative advertising, whistleblowing, and drug testing at work. Designed for a classroom setting, each reading is prefaced by a summary of key points and a section of review and discussion questions follows each essay. This organization of the text well suits the busy business professional as well. There is sufficient diversity in the points of view presented by the authors to ensure a group of five or more could engage in informed debate over the course of a few hours, especially when guided by a facilitator.

The value of a business book club lies in its ability to bring the topical to the attention of participants in a meaningful format, covering material sophisticated enough to generate discussion, and enhancing understanding of its application to the workplace. A regular gathering encourages the networking support of peers across a number of different organization contexts, and enables the transference of learning to reflect a robust, detailed, and relevant analysis of various experiences. When based upon a solid academic foundation, an opportunity exists for meaningful transfer of research and theory to the "real world" of business. ○—

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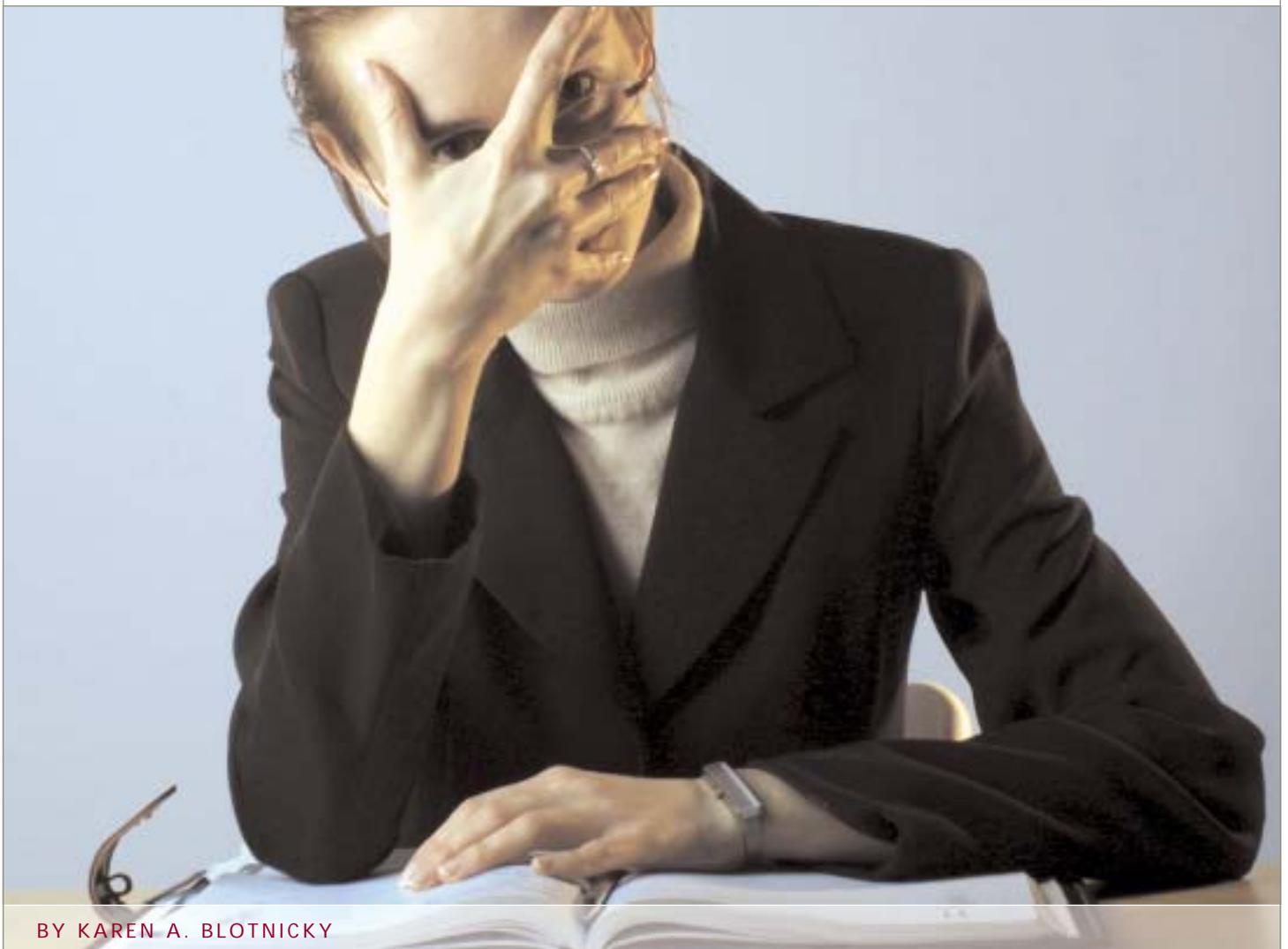
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## Profile:

Shelagh Campbell is a PhD student in the Sobey School of Business at Saint Mary's University. She enjoyed a twenty year management career in the private and public sectors, and has lectured part time at Atlantic Canadian universities since 1994. She holds the national CHRP designation and a Master's in Industrial Relations; her current research investigates collective action among professional workers. Shelagh manages the CMA-Halifax business book club for the professional development arm of the Nova Scotia Society of Certified Management Accountants.

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# Should There be Caution Tape Around the Office Door?



BY KAREN A. BLOTNICKY

Tackling Harmful Stress in the Workplace.

FOR YEARS, MEDICAL RESEARCHERS AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY EXPERTS HAVE BEEN ARGUING THAT WORKPLACE STRESS IS MAKING CANADIANS SICK. THIS ARTICLE REVIEWS THE STATE OF WORKPLACE STRESS IN CANADA AND SUGGESTS WAYS TO REDUCE WORKPLACE STRESS. FIRMS THAT DO NOT TACKLE THE PROBLEM OF WORKPLACE STRESS WILL HAVE DIFFICULTY ATTRACTING AND KEEPING QUALIFIED PEOPLE TO REMAIN COMPETITIVE IN TODAY'S ECONOMY.

## The State of Affairs

In a Kronos study, 1,000 employees complained about having to do more work without being paid to do it. Most had increased job responsibilities over the previous year, but only half were receiving more pay. Three-quarters of those employees were either actively seeking other jobs, or considering doing so. An Opinion Experts poll has discovered that US CEOs seem curiously disconnected from their organizations and their employees. Out of 200 CEOs interviewed, most complained of plummeting employee loyalty while also making plans to reduce health care benefits [1].

These studies show a disconnect between what management is striving to achieve, and what employees are actually experiencing. If the experts are right, managers are slowly poisoning their staff by creating unhealthy workplaces. The ultimate irony is that in a day when legislation has addressed toxic chemicals in the workplace as well as many labour code issues, employees are more stressed out than ever before, and stress is making them sick.

## Workplace Stress and Employee Health

If occupational health committees could police workplace stress, many of our workplaces would be surrounded by yellow caution tape. Workplace stress has been attributed to a variety of managerial problems

including increased staff turnover, poor performance, reduced morale, low job loyalty, and limited innovation. According to Statistics Canada [2] workplace stress leads to greater worry about accidents on the job, an issue that tends to impact male workers more than female workers, and that is exacerbated among shift workers.

But stress has been linked to more than managerial problems. It has been linked to a vast array of physical ailments, some of which include: cardiovascular problems, obesity, breathing difficulties, high blood pressure, skin irritations, back pain, neck pain, headaches, ulcers, fatigue, migraines, and gastrointestinal discomfort.

A variety of psychological disorders have also been linked to workplace stress. Some of these disorders include eating disorders, increased irritation, emotionalism, sleep disorders, anxiety, depression, difficulty concentrating, memory problems, loss of libido, suicidal and homicidal thoughts, loss of self-confidence, and likewise self-esteem.

Conflict in the workplace is also spilling over into the homes of workers, leading to violence and the endangerment of others [3]. A 2004 Toronto study indicated that anger rates had risen 900% in only three years within a study group [4]. Experts estimate that up to 20% of Canadian women who work outside of the home experience anxiety and depression, and nearly four percent of Canadians have panic disorders.

## Financial Implications

Research has shown that the psychological and physical impacts of workplace stress are becoming expensive. Not only are Canadians spending more than ever on drugs to self-medicate, taxpayers are also being hit with the bill. Workplace stress costs the Canadian health care system \$6 billion dollars annually, \$1 billion more than is spent on eldercare [5]. Eliminating work-life conflict has the capacity to greatly reduce emergency medical costs and visits to the doctor. These are important considerations in a socialized medicine system.

Employees seem to be less stressed when they have control over how they do their work, and when they have access to all of the information that they need to do the job right [8]. Stress is also much higher in organizations where superiors use a crisis-management style to motivate staff.

Workplace bullies contribute to workplace stress by pressuring coworkers or subordinates into completing tasks. Lack of understanding of tasks and roles also create stress on the job. Having insufficient resources to do the job is also a stressor, which may greatly impact smaller firms or non-profit organizations [8].



**“Canada has a work culture that often leads employees to buy into long hours and work-first attitudes. These beliefs are major contributing factors to workplace stress.”**

Canadians miss an average of 8.5 days due to illness each year [6]. Loss of productivity due to illness and stress costs Canadians \$33 billion a year, an amount roughly equal to GST revenues [7]. The cost is also hitting workers and their employers with rising insurance premiums. Thirty to forty percent of short-term disability claims are attributable to stress and mental health issues, and insurers expect such claims will grow up to 70% in the next twenty years.

## Managers Create Stressful Workplaces

Recent studies indicate that management plays a fundamental role in creating workplace stress. Key factors contributing to stress in the workplace are managerial style, bullying and focusing on the financial bottom line without considering the human side of the enterprise.

## Culture Contributes to Workplace Stress

For many years, occupational health and safety committees have worked to change organizational cultures to become more safety-oriented. Canada has a work culture that often leads employees to buy into long hours and work-first attitudes. These beliefs are major contributing factors to workplace stress.

Research has shown that most employers relate willingness to work long hours to employee productivity. Employees who complain about wanting to work less, or who desire more time with their families, are often perceived as “wimps” by their peers. As a result of these beliefs, many Canadians lose themselves to demands in the workplace, creating stress in their personal lives.

Changing demographics are creating more problems with work-life balance than ever before. More women are in the workforce, with many juggling family and work responsibilities. In addition, with increased technologies and more healthy lifestyles, many baby boomers are finding themselves in the squeeze of the sandwich generation, caring for both dependent children and elderly relatives. These changes in the family structure have brought increased stress to the lives of employees.

Canadians embrace a culture that blames the victim for his or her own shortcomings. If employees can't handle workplace stress, the inability to do so is usually perceived to be a limitation of their own making. Many believe that if the employees were in better health, more focused, or more organized, they wouldn't have such problems. This causes employees to seek help less frequently for stress-related issues, exacerbating the problem.

This underlying culture is also reflected in legal matters that impact persons suffering from illness or personal problems related to stress. A study in the UK indicated that over half of the firms impacted by such cases did not believe that their employees were actually sick [9]. As a result of such skepticism, many affected employees go on leave or quit their jobs, rather than seek legal remedies that would require proof that their employer was at fault in causing their stress-related illness.

## Effective Ways to Reduce Workplace Stress

There are a variety of things that managers can do to alleviate workplace stress. These involve focusing on management style, motivation, compensation programs, training and resource allocation. Realistic goals and a manageable workload are the first steps in creating a less harmful workplace. By reducing workload to a moderate level, Canadian companies could save \$3 billion in missed time [10]. Shorter work weeks, flexible start and end times, and reasonable

shift work schedules, all provide ways to enhance flexibility, without inflicting hardship on the firm.

Waxler and Higginson [11] argue that one way to eliminate the long-hours culture and to make work more efficient is to simply eliminate unnecessary work. This can be done through proper training and supervision, as well as the appropriate use of technology to streamline tasks. One way of dealing with too much overtime, considered to be a key problem for workers in Atlantic Canada, is to pay for overtime with time off, instead of wages.

Does the adoption of programs to reduce workplace stress pay off for firms whose primary focus is the financial bottom line? The Fortune Magazine list of the Best Companies to Work for in the United States includes firms whose employees show much higher levels of job satisfaction, as well as much greater levels of job loyalty. Yet those firms consistently outperform the S&P 500, indicating that taking care of one's employees first leads to positive financial results.

A ten year study showed that firms that embrace programs related to enhancing employee wellness and reducing workplace stress enjoyed 8.7% sales increase, 13.8% increase in profitability, 3.1% greater profit margins, 6.0% increase in earnings per share, and 10.2% greater overall return on investment [10].

Labour force issues are a critical management consideration for today's organizations. Stressful workplaces will not be able to attract and maintain qualified employees as "Generation Y" workers flood in to replace retiring baby boomers. To deal with this issue, managers should work to reduce workplace stress. 

## Profile:

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FURTHER READING:  
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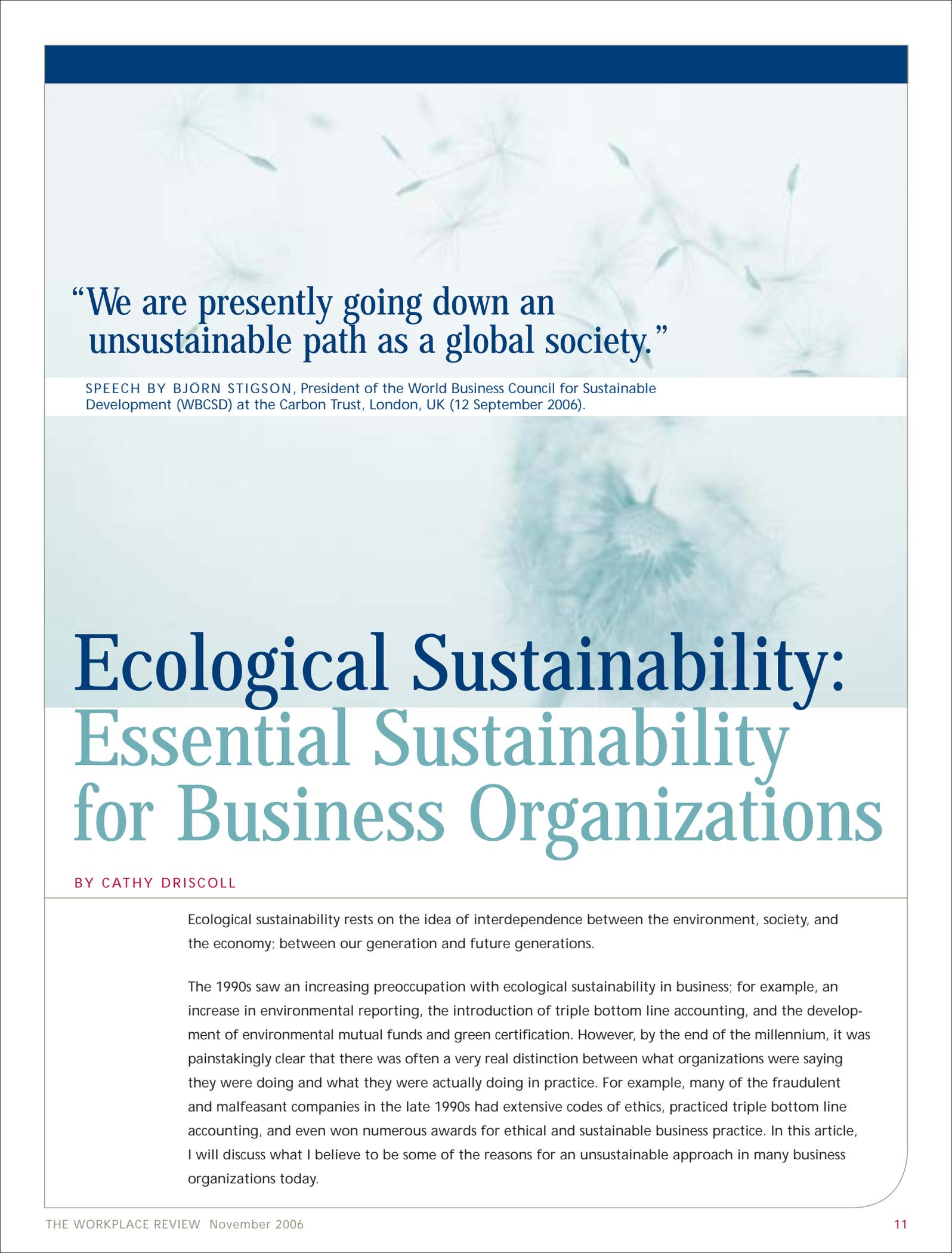
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“We are presently going down an unsustainable path as a global society.”

SPEECH BY BJÖRN STIGSON, President of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) at the Carbon Trust, London, UK (12 September 2006).

# Ecological Sustainability: Essential Sustainability for Business Organizations

BY CATHY DRISCOLL

Ecological sustainability rests on the idea of interdependence between the environment, society, and the economy; between our generation and future generations.

The 1990s saw an increasing preoccupation with ecological sustainability in business; for example, an increase in environmental reporting, the introduction of triple bottom line accounting, and the development of environmental mutual funds and green certification. However, by the end of the millennium, it was painstakingly clear that there was often a very real distinction between what organizations were saying they were doing and what they were actually doing in practice. For example, many of the fraudulent and malfeasant companies in the late 1990s had extensive codes of ethics, practiced triple bottom line accounting, and even won numerous awards for ethical and sustainable business practice. In this article, I will discuss what I believe to be some of the reasons for an unsustainable approach in many business organizations today.



### 1. STRATEGIC MYOPIA AND NARROWLY DEFINED STAKEHOLDERS

In 2006, most managers continue to focus on efficiency and effectiveness in a narrow sense. The concept of stakeholder in public companies remains limited, with the emphasis on the shareholder as well as those who benefit from a high stock price. Our global business environment has increasingly placed emphasis on short-term profit maximization. A study by the Aspen Institute of MBA students provides evidence that management education also focuses on one stakeholder and short term consequences of actions [1], rather than considering the long term impact of business decisions on employees, communities, societies, and ecology. Some of business' impact on nature is obvious, direct, visible, tangible, and proximate spatially and temporally, such as pesticides washing off farmers' fields and killing fish in nearby rivers. However, in some situations, the impact is global, subtle, indirect, less visible, less tangible, and less proximate spatially and temporally, such as the contamination of Canadian Arctic animals from PCBs released in Eastern Europe.

The increase in the number of mergers, acquisitions, and downsizings in North America and Europe over the past decade, along with the recent cases of fraudulent accounting practices among major North American business organizations, provide further evidence of a short-term economic focus. In short, managers continue to be educated, trained, and encouraged to prioritize economic indicators. Although there is evidence that many business organizations are increasingly upholding environmental sustainability as a value, other research has shown that when companies make trade-offs among stakeholders, the natural environment is often placed low on the list. [2]



### 2. VAGUE DEFINITIONS AND FUZZY BOUNDARIES

Sustainability is one of those words, like spirituality, that no one wants to operationalize. However, various interests define it differently to suit their interests or define it so broadly that it becomes a lowest common denominator approach. I remember a conversation I once had with a business executive who referred to the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, as the National Round Table on the Economy and the Environment. When I corrected him, he in turn corrected me and said that the economy always comes first. In addition, different countries, regions, and communities vary with respect to their notion of sustainability. For example, forest management practices such as clearcutting are accepted as sustainable among the public in one country but not in another country. There is no global consensus on a definition of sustainability.

Related to this, it seems that cultural, traditional, spiritual, and other global values related to the natural environment and natural resources are typically discussed and given legitimacy at a national or international level. However, these values are often marginalized at the regional and local level, or closer to the cut-block. At the same time, sustainability as discussed at national and international levels is often too vague and general to have an impact at the local and regional level, hence the lowest common denominator approach mentioned above. [3]



### 3. TOO LITTLE ATTENTION

Society and, in particular, business organizations often focus attention on high profile, large-scale crises, such as the environmental catastrophes of oil and chemical spills, hazardous waste leaks, and industrial

explosions. Although more attention has been given recently to human risks associated with long-term environmental problems such as heat-related deaths in large cities, skin cancer, and super-storms and hurricanes; the “slowly evolving issues” such as global climate change, sick coastlines, biodiversity loss, and endangered species are typically not given a lot of attention by managers.

Environmental management strategies have been developed to consider environmental impact related to waste and pollution in many business organizations, such as 3M’s pollution-prevention-pays program. However ecosystem biodiversity that is critical to the firm’s long-term survival seldom gains managerial attention. This is despite the fact that business organizations depend on local ecosystems, as well as the broader ecosphere, for raw materials, plant, animal, and microbial inputs, and energy. In fact, business organizations exchange more with the natural environment than with any other stakeholder. Some have suggested that business organizations overlook strategic environmental considerations, believing that the global economic system is somehow independent of the Earth’s ecological system. [4]



#### 4. THE ANONYMITY OF A GLOBAL MARKETPLACE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DOWNLOADING

Through the efforts of globalization and information technology, we are driving towards an interconnected economic system, yet we do not realize the interdependence between global ecological systems. Many of the stakeholders in the global marketplace that are affected by business organizations are essentially without a face, including the increasing number of endangered, threatened, and vulnerable species.

In addition, there is environmental downloading, as companies can pass off environmental responsibilities to the Provinces, the Federal Government, customers, suppliers, or other stakeholders. Although environmental NGOs and other environmental representatives are stronger than ever, these environmental stakeholders have not been able to develop enough effective stakeholder relationships with the natural environment to halt or reverse ecological deterioration.



#### 5. FOCUS ON VOLUNTEERISM AND COMPLIANCE

Although some environmental regulations and legal liabilities have become more stringent, most business organizations and industries continue to push for self-regulation and voluntary, market-based approaches to responsible environmental management, such as the development of industry-wide codes and voluntary environmental initiatives. In addition, many industry and environmental management standards such as the ISO 14000 standards are compliance-based.

Therefore, although many business organizations apparently are attempting to green themselves through self-regulation, technological innovation, industry-wide codes, and certifications, these voluntary mechanisms are being implemented slowly, and their record has not been overly successful in halting environmental damage caused by business activity. [5] In addition, it is incredibly difficult to distinguish between public relations greenwashing and substantial commitments to sustainability.

## Implications for Business Organizations

Business organizations have to focus more on an ecologically sustainable approach simply because they cannot be sustainable in a ruined world. For example, sick oceans and sick coastal communities affect tourism and fisheries. Atlantic Canada has felt the impact of the loss of financial resources and livelihood in the fishing industry due to the decline of the cod fishery. The forestry and forest products, oil and gas, and mining industries, among other major industries in Canada, will continue to be under intense scrutiny due to the ecological impacts of these particular sectors.

David Ticoll & Don Tapscott, in their book, *The Naked Corporation: How the Age of Transparency will Revolutionize Business*, suggest that sustainability is one of the new bases for competition, innovation, and cost reduction in business today. [6] In some cases, companies with green reputations have been shown to gain competitive advantages. Business organizations might see additional immediate costs as they act to reduce their impact on, for example, global warming, but in terms of future productivity, tourism, international trade, insurance costs, etc., the potential benefits are huge. However, research is not conclusive that going green necessarily pays, especially in the short run. Nonetheless, many companies have managed to see the economic benefits of a more sustainable approach to business, such as Patagonia and Interface Carpets, and local businesses such as The Trail Shop and P'Lovers environmental stores.

**“Business organizations need to also listen to the perspectives of diverse stakeholders to learn of different standards of moral behaviour related to sustainable business practice.”**

Managers should focus on sustainability because managerial decisions impact other people directly and indirectly. In other words, managers make decisions that potentially improve or worsen human and ecological health. Cape Bretoners in particular are aware of the impact of big industry on their natural environment. The Sydney Tar Ponds is claimed to be the most toxic waste site in North America. Paul Hawken in his book, *The Ecology of Commerce*, suggested that current business systems are causing major ecological and social problems, and therefore, should be involved in solving these problems. [7]

Business organizations need to also listen to the perspectives of diverse stakeholders to learn of different standards of moral behaviour related to sustainable business practice. The integration of Aboriginal, traditional, and spiritual forms of knowledge into stakeholder theory may help management scholars and practitioners to re-evaluate many of the short sighted assumptions that accompany business practice. For example, Indigenous ecological knowledge holds the firm to be a stakeholder of nature rather than the other way around. Rather than our owning the resources of the Earth, traditional ecological knowledge suggests that we borrow it from our ancestors and must protect it for future generations.

Reverend Thomas Berry in his book, *The Dream of the Earth*, suggested that the primary objective of business should be the “integration of human well-being within the context of the well-being of the natural world”. [8] Physicists and biologists are well aware of the connections among systems, and philosophers and theologians have long studied the notion of interconnectedness. Buddhism and native

spirituality emphasize mutual interdependence and interconnectedness of all things. The late Pope John Paul II referred to humanity living an “environmental emergency” and emphasized that protecting the environment is a “moral and spiritual duty”. [9] Managers cannot check their spiritual values and personal integrity at the door when they enter their workplace.

We recognize that the complexity and interconnectedness of global ecosystems make it difficult for managers to determine specific impacts on these systems. And to be fair, many management theories developed during a time when scholars and practitioners were less aware of the interdependence between the firm and the natural environment. Even today, some managers may still not be aware of the impact of their decision-making on both local and global ecological systems. However, as scientific evidence increases and fills more of these gaps in our knowledge, ignorance and scientific uncertainty can no longer be used as excuses for denial or inaction. We need to ask deeper questions about the relationship between business, society, and ecology. Responsiveness and compliance can no longer be equated with responsibility and sustainability. ○—

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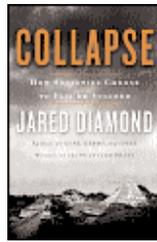
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# reviewing what's HOT what's NOT

BY HERMANN SCHWIND

At its most fundamental level, the book *Collapse*, by Jared Diamond is the story of societies who either have disappeared from the earth, are in the process of declining, or are facing major obstacles in their fight for survival. In short, it raises the question: Why do some societies make disastrous decisions? Through examination of a number of different cases, both from the past and somewhat more contemporary, he offers some insights into how societies make unsustainable decisions. Diamond, a Professor of Geography and Environmental Health Sciences at UCLA, fittingly begins by discussing the U.S. state of Montana, where his parents lived after he was born in Boston.

Diamond chose Montana to serve as his baseline for the other countries he discusses. Montana is not an acute case (i.e., is not in danger of being abandoned) but it has its share of environmental problems. These



REVIEW OF JARED DIAMOND'S: *COLLAPSE. HOW SOCIETIES CHOOSE TO FAIL OR SUCCEED.*

Penguin Books, 2005

*Available at Chapters/Indigo \$29.95*

include low rainfall, combined with high latitude and high altitude, both resulting in a short growing season and crops limited to one annually rather than the two a year possible in areas with longer summers. Furthermore, Montana is distant from suitable markets for its products. All of this means that anything grown in Montana can be grown more cheaply and with higher productivity elsewhere in North America. Sadly, these are not the only challenges Montanan's face.

Montana's fur trade is extinct. Mining, logging, and agriculture are declining in importance because of environmental problems with waste from about 20 000 abandoned metal mines leaking heavy metals into ground waters, rivers, and soil, making them toxic. Clear-cutting of its forests and subsequent soil erosion deprived Montana of much of its top soil; overgrazing and widespread salinization added to the problem, resulting in about one-third of its soil to be in good shape, one-third at risk, and one-third being unusable. So, these and several other problems not mentioned here, caused Montana to decline from one of the richest states to one of the U.S.' poorest.

Diamond suggests the question the people of Montana have to answer is: how do we get out of this mess?

Next, Diamond turns to discuss other cases, such as Easter Island, Pitcairn and Henderson Islands (Polynesia), the Anasazi (New Mexico), Maya (Mexico), Vikings (Orkney, Iceland), and Norse (Greenland), where societies thrived for several centuries, and then disappeared quickly. He shows that the causes for their demise were quite similar: rapid population increase, deforestation, soil erosion, utilization of marginal land, and starvation. Finally, Diamond examines "modern societies" like Rwanda, compares two societies on one island (The Dominican Republic and Haiti) and looks at modern China and Australia.

Rwanda, with a population growth of 3.2%, has one of the highest population densities in Africa (285 pop/km<sup>2</sup>). The quickly growing population could be accommodated only by clearing forests and draining marshes to gain new farmland, shortening fallow periods, and extracting two or three consecutive crops from a field in one year. Even steep hills are now farmed to the crest. Because all land was developed, young people found it

difficult to marry, leave home, acquire a farm, and set up their own household, creating high tensions in families. This situation of chronic and escalating conflict formed the background for the 1994 genocide, which took the lives of an estimated 800 000 Rwandans (Tutsis and Hutus). It is interesting to note that a large proportion of Rwandans killed were large landowners. Diamond emphasizes that while it was not just population density that caused the genocide, it nevertheless was a major contributor to the tragedy.

erosion, loss of soil fertility, sediment loads in the rivers, loss of watershed protection, and decreased rainfall. The contrast between the two countries is also reflected in their national park system. That of Haiti is tiny, consisting of just four parks, threatened by farmers who fell trees to make charcoal, their main source of heating fuel. The DR has one of the largest natural reserves in the Americas, encompassing 32% of the country's land area in 74 parks. Today the DR experiences a problem similar to one the U.S. faces: a large influx

invasive species, overgrazing, river flow cessation, salinization, soil erosion, trash accumulation, and water pollution and shortages. Because of its population and size, and because we share the oceans and the atmosphere, China's environmental problems are bound to spill over to the rest of the world. China is one of the world's most forest-poor countries, with only 0.3 acres of forest per person, compared to a world average of 1.6. Deforestation is the major cause of its soil erosion and floods. Because of its phenomenal economic growth and

“Through examination of a number of different cases, both from the past and somewhat more contemporary, he offers some insights into how societies make unsustainable decisions. ”

Diamond then contrasts two countries which occupy the same island, The Dominican Republic and Haiti. From a plane the border between them is clearly visible, a darker and greener landscape in the east, The Dominican Republic (DR), and a paler and browner Haitian side in the west. As he says: “On the ground, one can stand on the border at many places, face east, and look into pine forest, then turn around, face west , and see nothing except fields almost devoid of trees.” Today, 28% of the DR is still forested, but only 1% of Haiti. The deforestation in Haiti caused soil

of illegal immigrants from Haiti, who flee the desolate quality of life in their own country.

“China, Lurching Giant” is the title Diamond uses to begin this chapter. With its 1.3 billion people, one-fifth of the world's population, and the third largest country, China also has the world's worst environmental problems and they are getting worse. The list includes: air pollution, biodiversity losses, cropland losses, desertification, disappearing wetlands, grassland degradation, and increasing scale and frequency of human-induced natural disasters, to

government policies that favour such growth instead of environmental improvements, all of the above listed problems are likely to get worse instead of better.

Australia is the last country Diamond discusses. The chapter is entitled: “Mining” Australia’ – the quotes around mining pointing to the fact that Australia is not only mining its non-renewable resources of coal, iron, and other minerals, but also resources which normally renew themselves, like forests, fish, and topsoil. These latter resources are overexploited at rates faster than

their renewal rates, with the result that they are declining so fast that they will be depleted even before Australia runs out of its coal and iron reserves. The sad fact is that Australia is the most unproductive continent: the one whose soils have on the average the lowest nutrient levels, the lowest plant growth rates, and the lowest productivity. Because of the extra expenses for fertilizer and fuel costs, Australia's farmers cannot compete against overseas growers. It is cheaper to grow oranges in Brazil and ship orange juice concentrate 8,000 miles to Australia than to buy orange juice produced from Australian citrus trees. The same is true for Canadian pork and bacon. Only in some niche markets are Australian goods competitive: sheep meat, wool, some minerals, wheat, kiwi and wine. All this results in a real doomsday scenario for Australia and, since its politicians and business people seem to be more interested in growth than conservation, it may come true that Australia is following the examples of Easter Island, the Maya, and Anazasi.

In considering why societies make such poor decisions, the query posed by one of Diamond's students ("What was the Easter Islander thinking when he cut down the last tree?") becomes a useful starting point. The answer, as can be expected, is complex. By and large, it is evidence of the failure of group decision making and Diamond offers four categories of reasons for these failures:

1. **FAILURE TO ANTICIPATE.**  
Easter Islanders felled all the trees on their island to transport their gigantic stone statues from the quarry to the coastline. They did not expect that deforestation would result in soil erosion.
2. **FAILING TO PERCEIVE A PROBLEM.**  
In the US Southwest, Australia, Easter Island, and other places newly settled by farmers, it was not recognized that soils were nutrient-poor, with the result that after a few crops agriculture failed.
3. **BUT FAILING TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS.**  
Newfoundland's fishermen harvested millions of tons of cod until it virtually disappeared. Easter Island chiefs and Maya kings accelerated deforestation by building bigger statues and monuments than their rivals.
4. **TRYING TO RESOLVE A PROBLEM, BUT FAILING TO DO SO.**  
Montana spends hundreds of millions of dollars per year to eradicate Leafy Spurge, an introduced weed species, with little success.

By way of conclusion, Diamond offers some hope, but this hope relies heavily on the practice of long-term thinking, a characteristic that few politicians possess. He points to the example of the Tokugawa shoguns who, when realizing that Japan's forests were quickly disappearing, developed long-range plans for reforestation and controlled harvesting. Today Japan is often referred to as the "green archipelago." The appropriateness of the shogun example to contemporary democracies is, however, suspect; one has to remember that the shoguns had absolute power to enact their progressive policies.

In the end, reading Diamond's book is discouraging. Yes, he offers some hope for us... but the question remains: just how realistic is this hope? —

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# Workplace Spirituality:

## Can its Study Help Sustain People and Organizations?

BY MARGARET C. McKEE

INTEREST IN THE TOPIC OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY HAS GROWN SIGNIFICANTLY OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS. [1] ACADEMICS ARE NOW DOING RESEARCH IN THE AREA, MANY BUSINESS SCHOOL MBA PROGRAMS ARE OFFERING COURSES ON THE TOPIC AND THERE ARE LITERALLY HUNDREDS OF BOOKS ON THE SUBJECT. [2] DESPITE ALL THE INTEREST AND STUDY, WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY IS STILL VERY MUCH A DEVELOPING FIELD AND SO THERE IS NO AGREEMENT ON EVEN BASIC ASPECTS SUCH AS A DEFINITION.

In their recently published *Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance*, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz reference some 14 different definitions of the concept, developed between 1975 and 2000. Their own definition is that workplace spirituality is “a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promote employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy.” [1] Other researchers emphasize the need for “the all” to be included in the psychological contract between the organization and its employees in order to acknowledge connections to community, humanity, ecology, compassion and care, selfless work, and integrity. Spirituality in the workplace has also been linked to ethics and values, typically in a way that allows for people to align organizational values to their own particular philosophical or religious roots. [3]

Along with the definitional debate there is also disagreement over how best to study the field of workplace spirituality. Many academics argue that given the nature of the topic that quantitative research approaches – say using surveys – are not suitable [3], while others argue that this very kind of research is needed “quantify” the possible benefits of workplace spirituality in order to make it more “legitimate”. [1] For those viewing spirituality as very much a personal experience, then finding research approaches that allow for a deeper understanding of workplace spirituality from the perspective of the individual would seem to be important.

Still others question the need for a study of spirituality and ask what benefits, if any, it might contribute. In this article, I'd like to discuss how an analytical framework called "sensemaking" – developed by Karl Weick (1995) – might be used and what it might contribute in terms of insights about the workplace spirituality movement.

## Sensemaking as a Vehicle for Making Sense of Workplace Spirituality

In his framework, Karl Weick identified seven properties that he felt could be used to analyze organizations and their members. He did not see his framework as being a set formula for such research, but rather a tool that could be used to guide inquiry. The framework itself consists of seven properties divided into two categories, the first two properties dealing with the "sensing" aspect of sensemaking and the final five dealing with the "making" activities. [4] Let's review each of the properties quickly and then discuss their applicability to studies of workplace spirituality.

### "Sensing" Activities in Sensemaking

**GROUNDING IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION** Weick (1995) describes identity construction as the core preoccupation of sensemaking and as such it is the first property identified in his sequence. He maintains that the process of sensemaking is fuelled by our need as individuals to have an identity and, in particular, an identity that is consistent and positive. He suggests that people are continually redefining their identity as a result of experiences and contact with others.

**CONDUCTED RETROSPECTIVELY** The second element of the "sensing" aspect of Weick's framework is its emphasis on retrospection, or that of looking back. Weick points out that we all spend time and energy thinking about events that have already passed, and trying to make sense of those events retrospectively. This has been described as a kind of "20-20 hindsight." [5]

### "Making" Activities in Sensemaking

Here we move in to the discussion of the second group of properties, those that are concerned with the "making" of that which is sensed" [9]. These properties also provide useful lenses for the study of workplace spirituality.

**ENACTIVE OF SENSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS** In suggesting that people enact their environment, Weick is saying that we create our own reality. He suggests individuals are actively and continually constructing their reality through their actions, this includes drawing lines, establishing categories and coining labels that create new elements of the environments

they inhabit. Once such elements are created they become “tangible, unique, visible, and symbolic” as well as serve as an “obstacle” or “constraint”. [9] So here, people can be said to create their environment and then find themselves to be constrained, or in another sense created, by the very environment they enacted.

**SOCIAL** This fourth property of sensemaking, its social aspect, acknowledges that the process of sensemaking involves others. Weick contends that “sensible meanings tend to be those for which there is social support, consensual validation, and shared relevance.” [9]

**ONGOING** Weick maintains that the process of sensemaking has no beginning or end. The process never stops; sensemaking flows are constant but they can be interrupted by events which “focus and crystallize meanings.” [9]

**FOCUSED ON AND BY EXTRACTED CUES** With this dimension of his framework, Weick is highlighting the fact that as people we very naturally focus on some things and ignore others. We simply cannot notice everything and analyze it to the same degree. Our brains can’t possibly cope with all that activity.

**DRIVEN BY PLAUSIBILITY RATHER THAN ACCURACY** The last property of Weick’s framework recognizes the fact people need to filter and distort information so that they can separate “signal” from “noise”, and not be overwhelmed. [9] Here time is often also an issue – people need to make sense of things of things on the fly – and so there is some trade off of accuracy for speed.

## Strengths of the Sensemaking Framework

As Weick himself suggested some properties of sensemaking are more important than others in the ongoing sensemaking process. In the study of workplace spirituality, those that would seem to be most central are those concerned with identity construction and retrospection. As Ashforth and Pratt point out “the locus of spirituality is necessarily the individual.” [1] Pargament and Mahoney support this view pointing out: “People can selectively filter, block or distort material that threatens their sacred beliefs, practices and values.” [6] Even though we are examining spirituality within a work context, we are still very concerned with the individual’s experience of the phenomenon and how they make sense of it within their work context.

Another obvious strength of the sensemaking heuristic for the study of workplace spirituality is the attention that it accords to shocks. Weick identifies a shock as a “sensemaking occasion” and he identifies two types of such occasions. The first is where there is ambiguity and so people are required to engage in sensemaking because they are confused by a multitude of interpretations. The second instance is where there is uncertainty and here Weick suggests sensemaking is undertaken because people are “ignorant of any interpretations.” [9] In the spirituality literature there is considerable discussion of the factors that have contributed to a renewed interest in spirituality both on an individual level and at a broader group or organizational level, and there are obvious links to such shocks.

At the individual level, the literature describes events such as a life threatening illness, death of a family member, friend or coworker, and financial crisis, as shocks that trigger a profound sensemaking exercise in individuals. From their study, Mitroff and Denton suggest that such a shock is almost a necessity, saying "One factor, however, became clear from the general interviews. A person must experience a severe crisis in order to embark on the search for meaning." [7] And as Pargament and Mahoney discuss, such "crises become spiritually meaningful or even opportunities for growth." [8]

On an organizational level, the sensemaking heuristic has on several occasions been used to make sense of organizational disasters or upheaval. If we consider the substantive changes that have occurred in North American organizations over the last 10 years and the impact on individual employees, one could easily describe the situation as disastrous.

The massive layoffs and reorganizations that occurred in many organizations during the 1980s, 1990s and that have continued into this millennium have been characterized as unprecedented. Citing various sources, academic researchers Tsui and Wu report that between 1984 and 1986 some 600,000 middle and senior managers lost their jobs, and between 1987 and 1991 another five million white collar jobs with Fortune 1000 companies were eliminated. And the cutting has not stopped. Between 2000 and 2003, they report that an additional 2.7 million jobs have been eliminated. [8] When we consider that working conditions for those who have managed to retain positions have also deteriorated, the situation seems even more serious.

Tsui and Wu also suggest that factors such as economic downturns and slow recoveries have created increased competition in the marketplace and put pressure on organizations to increase their productivity. As a result, organizations are reluctant to expand their work forces are looking to their existing work force to do more. There are reports of employees being squeezed, such that where 20 people might have been employed there are now only 15 people doing the work for the same pay. Such massive job cuts and restructurings are said to have had a negative effect on many employees – both in terms of their mental health and their social lives. [9]. It would not be surprising if such events are responsible for triggering people's reassessment of their lives, the role played by work and their ultimate life purpose.[10]

Using sensemaking as a lens to study workplace spirituality then would necessarily involve looking at such organizational events and considering what meanings they convey and emphasize for organizational members. Weick's sensemaking framework could be used to explore how employees have made sense of these dramatic changes in their work environment. Possible research questions include how has having to continue to work under such conditions forced people to somehow reconcile the amount of time and energy they devote to their work? By reinterpreting their work as a "calling" and "finding meaning in their work" are employees just making sense of their long hours work existence so they can maintain that all important consistent, positive identity?

## Limitations of the Sensemaking Framework

Scholars making use of the sensemaking framework have pointed out some of its limitations. Some have noted that one important gap is that Weick's conceptualization does not provide any insight into the role of organizational rules on the sensemaking process. [11] Others point out the perspective does not acknowledge the issues of organizational power and politics, saying that "although it may be true that everyone can be said to engage in the process, it is far from clear that everyone is equal in the process." [12]

In the study of workplace spirituality the power and politics gap is a particularly problematic one. One of the concerns frequently expressed about workplace spirituality is that it will become yet another tool to be used by management to 'control the worker'. It has been suggested there are organizations "some – with or without good intentions – [that] are using spiritual strivings to co-opt the individual." [1] Still others describe workplace spirituality as an attempt to "re-engineer the thought processes of employees." [13]

Another concern – again related to the issue of power and politics - is whether all spiritual perspectives will be given the same consideration within given organizations. As Ashforth and Pratt point out "Organizations are collectives that require their members to mesh to some degree, to share a common culture and perspective: Unbridled individuality in the form of idiosyncratic spiritual journeys is thus a potential threat to the coherence of the organization." [1] From this one can expect that there would be only so much tolerance for organizational acceptance of a variety of spiritual perspectives and that there would be pressure to focus on the religious belief system of the majority. If organizations are not careful, this could lead to exclusion and discrimination against people of varied beliefs.

## Conclusion

In speaking about his sensemaking framework, Weick has acknowledged that "a way of seeing is a way of not seeing." [9] It would seem then that Weick was well aware that a sensemaking perspective has its strengths as well as its shortcomings. Relative to a study of workplace spirituality, I believe that a sensemaking perspective does have its strengths. It can provide insight into how people make sense of their everyday work situations and how they sustain themselves – especially from a spiritual perspective – in situations where everyday work conditions are difficult and even damaging to employees' physical, mental and spiritual health. Use of a sensemaking perspective might also help us to better understand how employees make sense of tragedies – both personal and organizational – and how they are then able to recover and move on from such experiences. Relative to workplace spirituality, I have suggested the framework has two major shortcomings, its lack of consideration of both power and politics. Given the importance of these factors in organizations and the potential for deliberate manipulation of workplace spirituality in

the interest of organizations, I would suggest that on its own the Weickian sensemaking framework would not allow for a complete analysis of workplace spirituality. Given the discussion of the “dark side” of the workplace spirituality movement, Weick’s framework should be used together with the critical, rules-based approach suggested by Helms Mills [11]. In this way, I think scholars will achieve what many are looking for in the workplace spirituality arena; “a way of talking about spirituality in organizations that is critical, analytical, theoretical, and not reductionist.” [14] ○—

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