

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE WORKFORCE

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"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect." – CHIEF SEATTLE, 1854

People around the world have many common philosophies, and an important one is the concept of **Sustainability**. **Workforce Sustainability** is about attracting and retaining the right people, with the right skills and capabilities, to meet current and future organizational needs. The World Bank has also recognized the importance of sustainability to our global well-being:

"Sustainability is defined as a requirement of our generation to manage the resource base such that the average quality of life that we ensure ourselves can potentially be shared by all future generations. Development is sustainable if it involves a non-decreasing average quality of life."

– GEIR B. ASHEIM, "SUSTAINABILITY," THE WORLD BANK (1994)

In these two very different perspectives we find agreement: natural resources must be used in ways that ensure future generations will have enough to meet their needs, such as managing consumption so that resources aren't used up at a faster rate than they're replenished. Additionally, we must operate within the limits of what nature provides, without causing serious harm to the environment.

The indications are that, traditionally, Indigenous people use natural resources based on a philosophy of stewardship: "only use what is needed." If resources aren't respected, it is thought that the whole community could suffer. It is also believed that it is necessary to give back to the land some of what was taken.

What if Community leadership considered Human Resources practices from the perspective of Sustainability?

"To me, a leader is someone who holds her- or himself accountable for finding potential in people and processes. And so what I think is really important is sustainability."

– BRENE BROWN: SCHOLAR, AUTHOR, RESEARCH PROFESSOR

Effective management of an organization's human resources starts with principles of stewardship and sustainability and puts them into practice. **Workforce Sustainability** means nurturing and cultivating the people that make up the workforce, so that they continue to grow the organization and to grow personally. The result is an enhanced ability to maintain a fully-engaged workforce that optimizes its productivity, leading to successful community initiatives.

Community leadership, including department managers, have three main areas of responsibility regarding the workforce: **attraction**, **productivity**, and **retention**. Each of these areas contributes to sustainability.

ATTRACTION

Prospective new hires are thinking of their own sustainability when considering opportunities. They want to have a job and career that maintain motivation and commitment over the long-term, through opportunities for learning and development. The role of leaders is to maintain open channels of communication with the new employee regarding alignment of the individual's goals with the organization's goals. Using an up-to-date, documented job description to ensure a shared understanding of responsibilities and expectations is essential, yet it continues to be an area that is overlooked in many organizations.

PRODUCTIVITY

Ensuring leaders and employees collaborate on goals, objectives, and measurement of results is key to maintaining productivity. Whether this is done through a formal performance management system or through ongoing conversation depends on the organization's needs and context. It can be easy for a team to become disconnected in today's fast-paced world, with its constant flow of new information and change. People can find it difficult to maintain a sense of balance and harmony in the workplace and in their personal lives, and dis-harmony and dis-ease can result. Ensuring employees are equipped with project planning skills, as well as open and effective communication, is a best practice for improving performance and enhancing productivity.



RETENTION

Retention of productive employees is a key component of HR sustainability. Leaders generally want to recognize high-performance employees who continually add value and are “making a difference” through their contribution to the organization. However, even in these cases recognition can be overlooked. Attention to best practices in employee recognition, including with the compensation and benefits structure, will improve job satisfaction, morale, and employee retention – factors that contribute to sustainability of the community’s current and future well-being.

This idea of using environmental sustainability as a metaphor and model for people management does appear to be an interesting concept, yet perhaps there’s more to it than a simple HR Management 101 approach. Maintaining employee motivation and ensuring employees represent a “sustainable” resource is an ongoing task.

Managing the content and pace of change taking place within the organization and the issues arising from the personal needs and goals of employees are challenges that will always be present. In some communities it seems as though leadership has little time for addressing strategic HR planning due to issues and concerns that require immediate attention. Leadership and the community served need to persevere through difficult times.

We are reminded of the small seedling having initially taken root in a small crevasse in the side of a rocky cliff, struggling daily for nutrients from the sun and for water. As time passes, the seedling grows into a young sapling and eventually into a mature tree, spreading its own seeds – while still anchoring its roots in the rocky cliff. Leadership can look to nature’s example of sustainability through resilience and perseverance.

ISMO HEIKKILA brings over 30 years of financial services experience and an effective ability to communicate to a broad spectrum of issues related to change management, communication planning and financial education.

He works closely with Aboriginal community leadership and human resource professionals to learn about their existing issues and design complimentary communication and change management programs. Ismo is a regular speaker on such matters having spoken at the national conferences of NATOA, CANDO, the Industry Council for Aboriginal Business, the National Indigenous Council of Elders Forum, as well as the AFOA Canada national and regional chapter conferences. Ismo also consults on matters relating to adult learning, financial literacy, and philanthropy.



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WORTHY APPROACH
FOR LEADERSHIP
AND MEMBERSHIP
IN STRUCTURING
A FOUNDATION
FOR LONG-TERM
COMMUNITY
GROWTH.

A CALL TO ACTION:

- » Review your HR policy manuals
- » Analyze your total compensation structure
- » Establish job descriptions
- » Implement performance management standards
- » Enhance communication strategies and tactics
- » Reward and celebrate successes
- » Be a leader and a manager of change

Using the philosophy of sustainability can help community leadership avoid taking its human resources for granted, expecting that employees will thrive without considering wise stewardship of this resource. Having conversations about sustainability with employees, as well as with the entire membership, will help raise awareness and reinforce best practices. Communicating "with" people, and not just "at" people, embraces Workforce Sustainability as a worthy approach for leadership and membership in structuring a foundation for long-term community growth.

"I do not think the measure of a civilization is how tall its buildings of concrete are, but rather how well its people have learned to relate to their environment and fellow man" – SUN BEAR OF THE CHIPPEWA TRIBE



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