Relational leadership for strategic sustainability: practices and capabilities to advance the design and assessment of sustainable business models

Elizabeth C. Kurucz a, *, Barry A. Colbert b, Florian Lüdeke-Freund c, d, Antony Upward e, Bob Willard f

a College of Business and Economics, University of Guelph, Canada
b School of Business and Economics, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada
c Faculty of Business, Economics & Social Sciences, University of Hamburg, Germany
d Centre for Sustainability Management (CSM), Leuphana University, Germany
e Edward James Consulting, Ltd., Canada
f Sustainability Advantage, Canada

ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore the role of leadership in enabling and accelerating the impact of strategic sustainability initiatives. We do this by first identifying the central integration challenges that strategic sustainability presents through an examination of the five levels of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD). We describe the importance of relational leadership for strategic sustainability, or the ongoing process of meaning making and reflection within a nested system of the biosphere and society. We consider how this approach to leadership might address the relational tensions that continuously present themselves from this central challenge of integration. The primary contribution of this paper is that we have developed a conceptual model of relational leadership for strategic sustainability, grounded in practice, which describes specific practices and capabilities to support the FSSD in achieving its transformational potential. A secondary and related contribution is that we have examined two innovations advancing strategic sustainable organization management; the Strongly Sustainable Business Model Canvas and the Future-Fit Business Benchmark. We consider how these practices and capabilities embody relational leadership for sustainability, and how they help to support and measure success in the FSSD.

1. Introduction

Unprecedented human pressures are tightening the constraints within which societies and organizations operate by invoking rapid and fundamental transformations in the natural systems on which humans depend (Worldwatch, 2014). Population growth, growing water scarcity, threats to food security, diminishing fossil energy resources, and a changing climate are converging and interacting to form a complex, interrelated amalgam of problems: food production and water procurement demand intensive energy inputs; the vast majority of our energy derives from carbon sources whose emissions affect global climate; changes in climate impact food and water security; all of these are further stressed by a burgeoning global human population. Such complex problems can only be confronted through collective transdisciplinary approaches (Lang et al., 2012; Mauser et al., 2013): multi-sector (involving governments, business and civil society), multi-level (local to global), and multi-disciplinary (bringing all relevant social and scientific academic knowledge to bear on the problem definition and solution). However, the important role for

“As long as societal structures do not prevent unsustainable system behavior, increasing pollution and decreasing economic accessibility of natural resources will represent the walls of a funnel and function as systematically harsher constraints on human activities.”

(Robert et al., 2013: 2)
leadership in collective transdisciplinary approaches to sustainability has not been adequately examined. While many understand leadership in a colloquial sense — i.e. there is an urgent situation and leaders out there need to do something — exactly how leaders might best function to catalyze systemic change to address these transdisciplinary issues is not well understood (Crosby and Bryson, 2005).

Within the realm of strategic approaches to sustainability, the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) offers a comprehensive approach to dealing with the systemic nature of the problems faced (Broman and Robert, 2015; Robert et al., 2013). The relationship between the FSSD and the Planetary Boundary Approach (PBA) has recently been explored to identify potential synergies between these approaches. The FSSD is an operational framework that defines robust sustainability principles, whereas the PBA (Griggs et al., 2013; Rockström et al., 2009a,b; Steffen et al., 2015; Whitman et al., 2013) categorizes some essential impacts that have occurred from the violation of these principles. The PBA explores how and when the safe operating space for humanity will be compromised if humans continue to disregard these principles, thus defining ‘the planetary boundaries’. From the FSSD/PBA relationship follows a close-at-hand way of using the two concepts in combination. While the FSSD helps us in outlining challenges, opportunities and prioritized steps towards compliance with the sustainability principles, the PBA concept can be used to inform our priorities in this FSSD process; the more a planetary boundary has already been exceeded, the higher the priority of consequent actions to remove the organization’s contribution to that problem. By combining the sustainability principles and strategic guidelines of the FSSD with the global scale sustainability indicators and tipping points of the PBA, some weaknesses of the PBA may be overcome (Robert et al., 2013). One such shortcoming identified by Robert et al. (2013) is that the PBA does not automatically lead individual sectors or organizations to transform their current approach, and that the FSSD enables such activity by highlighting the risks and rewards that will accrue to enterprises that choose to contribute to global solutions rather than to exacerbate problems. However, despite this business case for enlightened self-interest, uptake of strategic sustainability initiatives is still relatively slow and incremental in nature compared to the mounting urgency of the problems we face. In this paper we contend that it is possible to accelerate and magnify the impact of the strategic sustainability approach by more fully articulating the role of leadership in the FSSD, thus enabling the kind of transformative action that the model indicates is possible. Here we take ‘strategic sustainability’ to mean intention and action that is understood to be fully contextualized and embedded within ecological, social and economic dimensions (Marcus et al., 2010), and is strongly vs. weakly defined (Daly and Cobb, 1989). We elaborate further on these ideas in the paper.

We suggest that the key leadership challenge for sustainability can be understood as one of integration (Lang et al., 2012; Mauser et al., 2013; van Kerkhoff, 2014) — the continuous alignment of multi-stakeholder intention and action with social and ecological imperatives and constraints — and that addressing this challenge requires an ongoing process of reflective practice and collective meaning making among relevant social actors. Relational leadership (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012a) is an emerging construct in the organizational literature that offers potential for us to envision how we might navigate the relational tensions that continuously arise from this central challenge of integration. Relational leadership reflects a move away from viewing leadership at the individual level as a trait or a behaviour, toward understanding leadership as a “collective capacity” (Day, 2000; Drath, 2001) created in the interactions and relationships among people (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012b). The purpose of this article is to conceptually develop the leadership practices and capabilities that comprise relational leadership for sustainability within the context of the five levels of the FSSD/PBA (henceforth called only FSSD, with the understanding that the limits imposed by the Planetary Boundaries Approach are incorporated in the more contemporary iteration of the FSSD).

We do so as follows: first, we will provide a brief overview of the FSSD, describing the specific leadership integration challenges related this framework. We will introduce the phenomenon of relational leadership and will establish the conceptual relevance of this leadership approach for advancing strategic sustainability. Second, we will build a robust understanding of the essential elements of relational leadership for strategic sustainability, establishing the practical significance of this approach. We will do this by drawing insights from the leadership challenges and opportunities experienced by practitioners involved in two emerging strategic sustainability management innovations, both consistent with the FSSD, that together comprise strategic sustainable organization management: the Strongly Sustainable Business Model Canvas (SSBMC), whose proponents are seeking a more integrative approach to business model generation; and the Future-Fit Benchmark (F2B2) management tool which articulates a more integrative approach to establishing organizational assessment procedures focused on enhancing sustainability. We have selected these initiatives because their focus is on integration and thus they help to reveal the importance of relational leadership in their implementation, and to articulate the attendant integration challenges in strategic sustainability efforts. Further, they both address those social structures with the greatest impact on (un-)sustainable development: business organizations. Both SSBMC and F2B2 build on systemic, multi-level and multi-disciplinary approaches to organizational development, offering rich interlinks to the FSSD. The purpose of considering these innovations is twofold; the first informs our development of a conceptual model of relational leadership for strategic sustainability by surfacing leadership challenges in practice, and the second helps us to understand how we might further support and measure success in the FSSD. We will identify relational leadership processes that support strongly sustainable organization management, helping both to guide organizations in effectively addressing existing constraints and also to avoid contributing to the tightening of future limits of the biosphere. Third, we will then reflect on how practical insights from this example of relational leadership for strategic sustainability could translate specifically to the FSSD, and we will conceptually develop the relational leadership practices and capabilities that are useful for advancing transformation in this framework. Finally, we will briefly consider the implications of this paper for future research and practice in the area of relational leadership for strategic sustainability and strategic sustainable development.

2. Role for leadership to advance strategic sustainable development in the FSSD

2.1. Brief overview of the FSSD

The integrated model of the FSSD and PBA builds on the basic structure of the five level FSSD: systems, success, strategic guidelines, actions and tools. This revised framework creates synergies between the two approaches: the FSSD offers basic social and environmental principles for sustainability and guidance for how to strategically and systematically apply them, while the Planetary Boundaries Approach defines the “safe operating space for humanity” (Rockström et al., 2009b) by identifying metrics along nine boundary areas that will preserve conditions for human thriving. The nine boundary areas are assumed to be interdependent,
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