Sustainability is everywhere - what does it mean for us?

“I liked the workshop and I think the results are correct. But let’s be honest, all of this is not new and in the past years we’ve done this with flip charts or index cards for what seem like a dozen times. It lacks sustainability for me.”

“Sustainability in change processes has a strategic and an operational dimension.”

Does this sound familiar? Again and again there is frustration in organisations which can name all the right issues but seem to fail to effectively implement them. At the same time everyone talks about sustainability till the cows come home.

Sustainability initially focuses on two concepts:

- the principle that we cannot use more than can be regenerated or regrown.
- a longer lasting impact

In the current use of language the term sustainability has become quite diffuse because of over-usage. It is being interpreted in countless ways, in the ethical-normative context or related to economic success, to name only a few, and it can be used as opposing position to short-term thinking or as knockout argument.

Sustainability in change processes

Dealing with change is also subject to sustainability. This term is essential in the representation of change management consultants. Essentially, two aspects or dimensions of sustainability in change processes have to be looked at: one that is more strategic and one more operational.

“Sustainability has become a vague term with a wide range of interpretation.”

In the organisational environment the extent and speed of stimuli for change are ever-increasing. In order to deal with this successfully in the competitive environment, the long-term and strategic development of an organisation's ability to change is needed (see article “Developing Capacity for Change - There is no Alternative to Securing Competitiveness”).

More widespread at the employee level is an understanding of sustainability that is short-term and more operational, to make change visible by “taking it to the streets”.

A few practical examples: We discuss new company values and how to treat each other.

- We discuss new company values and how to treat each other. But how do we implement this? How can we make appreciation and trust visible?
- Time and again there are conflicts between departments, but despite multiple approaches we cannot resolve them. How can we make progress in this case?
• Do we have a clear process description? Why is there repeatedly a lack of clarity about individual responsibilities?
• We have clarified which information from the system is needed and when. Why is the flow of information not working?
• We have described our meeting culture and communicated it to everybody. Why is nobody following it?

“All these questions have in common a lack of understanding how despite good preliminary work, awareness, and common sense the implementation of agreements does not happen.

The secret of commitment
Commitment leads to sustainability. This might sound simple and too generic, however, in contrast to the term sustainability commitment is much easier to grasp.

A definition first:
• commitment is a social behaviour between humans
• commitment describes the consistency, perseverance and steadfastness of a person who will stand by a pledge or declaration of intent (summarised as “promise”) given to another person or persons, even under adverse conditions. It will either be pursued until realised or explicity revoked. It is for many an essential requirement for fair and correct interactions with each other and implies reliability.

The first part of the definition makes the major point. While sustainability as a term is not relevant to action, commitment refers to exchange and interaction. The second part illustrates the core elements of commitment:

1. Reaching clear agreements including consequences
Possible traps encountered in practice: loose agreements, arrangements with unclear or ambiguous accountabilities, “sham agreements” that were created under pressure, undocumented agreements, failing to specify consequences.

Ideally, agreements are being accepted by all participants, they contain clear

“A rule is pointless if those who don’t observe the rules suffer no consequences.”

tasks, responsibilities and time frames and are documented in writing. The consequences of implementation or non-implementation of the agreed upon tasks have been clarified and made transparent for all participants.

2. Continuous follow-up of the agreements with regard to the implementation or achievements of objectives
It often happens that there is no or only sporadic follow-up. Many good excuses for the non-implementation are being accepted or put up with, continuous follow-up is being dismissed as nit-picking.

Ideally, the implementation of tasks will
be checked within the periods that were agreed on. Difficulties with time or other issues will be questioned constructively and if needed agreements adapted or new ones made.

3. Carrying out consequences, both positive and negative
This is often where it becomes difficult. Even if consequences were stated they were not observed; employees do not get adequately rewarded for desired behaviour or achieved objectives, failure to achieve or wrongdoings are not being sanctioned. This not only encourages an attitude of “never mind” or “see: nothing happens” in those who are not supporting the change, it also discourages those who exert themselves. And above all it undermines the integrity and the trust in leadership.

A rule is pointless if those who don't observe the rules suffer no consequences. The ideal is to act consistently, encouraging performance and desired behaviour, discouraging undesired behaviour. These actions should be visible within the organisation and demonstrated by management.

This is of general importance and particularly relevant when dealing with change processes and the understandable resistance to change. Then sustainability will happen.

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