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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

› Local governments of all types working to operate more sustainably should be ready to follow a patient process designed to engage the entire community.

› Before any community-wide sustainability effort is launched, a local government should first improve its own practices as a model for what can be done by individuals throughout the community.

› Look to your own community and the imagination and creativity of the people who live in it to develop more sustainable plans, policies, and practices.

A Process for Creating More Sustainable Communities

BREAKING BARRIERS

"I want to protect our community's natural environment. I think most of our town board and a significant number of government staff think it's important … but taking that interest beyond mere words continues to be really tough."

– TOWN PLANNER, UPSTATE NEW YORK

After a talk at a planning conference a few years ago, one of the local planners in attendance made the above statement. Clearly frustrated, he expressed something that sustainability champions in communities across the country are expressing—a "sustainability speak" fatigue. Elected officials and professional staff in communities from New York to Florida to California and beyond are loaded with a passion for sustainability-focused governance but are without a means, approach, or tools to make it happen.

During the past two years, the rhetoric on greening and sustainability has blossomed throughout the United States. Recent surveys have shown that even the U.S. economic crisis has not withered the intentions and interests of a newly aware eco-conscious citizenry.

Yet, for all the publicity and lip service, the amount of real, on-the-ground action toward these goals is still limited. At the community level, sustainability efforts are hampered by common barriers to change that exist in any large group or organization.

Addressing Common Elements of Failure

It's important to recognize that you, as local government managers and practitioners, and others like you are the change agents within your local government, and your goal should be to create a sustainability culture within your community—starting with your own local government as a role model. Where to begin? Start by addressing these eight common failures in environmental organizational change.[1]

Failing to create a sense of urgency. Moving people or communities in a new direction can be a little like moving an iceberg. Effective sustainable community champions find ways to create a sense of urgency. Incorporating the principles of sustainability[2] into local government has to be viewed as a critical part of your community's long-term success and a critical part of each person's job.

It's also critical to secure top leadership support for your sustainability efforts. If employees see upper management or elected leaders treating sustainability as a side issue, then they will too.

Helping residents of a community discover a "sense of place" is one easy way for people to become aware of and begin to re-value the positive aspects of life in their community. What makes living in a particular community special? What do residents really care about?

In Williamston, North Carolina, for example, water has emerged as a central theme. The water conservation imperative (and impending reduction in consumption and groundwater withdrawals) provides a tangible initial focal point for the community.

Williamston is also seeking to reconnect with the Roanoke River, which has much historical significance for the town but in recent years has become disconnected, both literally and figuratively, from life in Williamston. A new rails-to-trails path linking downtown and the riverfront is the first completed step toward reconnecting a town with its river.

Not creating a guiding coalition (team). You can't go it alone. Build a sustainability team by selecting people from all levels and departments—and include the right community members. Be aware of the people in your local government who have an ability to help motivate staff and coordinate government operations.

Partnerships are also of great importance to success in a communitywide endeavor. Such partnerships should include representatives from local government, universities and colleges, environmental organizations, businesses and chambers of commerce, and community and civic organizations.

Broad citizen input and involvement are integral to the success and community ownership of the process. Seek to connect with the people within your community. Invest in forging strong relationships.

This includes purposefully and genuinely engaging the disenfranchised members of a community. Seek the input of those people who are not normally asked what they think; look outside the boundaries of traditional community leaders to include a broad cross section of the community in the process. Maintain a presence in the community by continually building and maintaining those relationships, and make them meaningful.

Underestimating the power of a vision. People want to feel as if they are a part of something bigger than themselves. Create a bigger vision for your community; start with your government operations as the model. Every town or city is located in a watershed. Every facility depends on energy, water, and other natural resources in order to function. Every person on your staff has a family.

Find the connection between the day-to-day actions that people take and the effect that those actions can have on our natural environment and everyday quality of life. Make a connection between the financial health of your community and the money wasted on eco-inefficiency (lights left on, leaking water pipes, waste that could have been recycled).

There are no cookie-cutter communities, and, consequently, no cookie-cutter solutions. Every community is different, and solutions will be too—adapted through flexibility to meet the specific needs and contexts of specific communities.

As a result, as you embark on this process, rely on guiding principles rather than hard-and-fast, concrete rules and steps. Such a principles-based approach, compared with a discrete procedural approach, allows for the necessary flexibility while relying on a guiding framework.

Undercommunicating the vision. After you develop a vision message, make sure that vision is communicated to staff as well as to community residents. You may think that people have heard or read what you're saying, but most environmental messages are undercommunicated. Use posters, regular departmental and public meetings, and perhaps even bonuses or other incentives to reinforce the vision and the role that each individual plays in achieving that vision.

After a community is on board with the basic premise and supports the broad, general ideas of sustainability, residents will say, "Okay, this sounds great. What do we do next?" Be prepared to offer that next step, whether it is an existing program, a defined objective, or any other tangible and measurable tool for action. This framework for action fulfills an inherent need and desire for guidance by the community.

Not addressing obstacles. Most environmental efforts fail in local governments because they are viewed as side issues. Remove these obstacles along the way. It is imperative to generate buy-in from the entire community. By the time citizens gather to create the details of the vision for their community, many of the potential obstacles should already have been addressed.

Success on a communitywide scale requires both top-down (traditional community leaders and local government officials) and bottom-up (grassroots, citizen-based) approaches. Working solely with local officials and other traditional community leaders often results in resentment from the residents of the community—a perception that big brother or the government is pushing something on them.

At the same time, working strictly from a grassroots approach causes concern among community leaders that they are losing control. By working from both ends of this spectrum simultaneously, you open a dialogue within the community and engage a genuine cross section of civic-minded individuals in the effort.

Failing to create short-term wins. Keep your staff motivated throughout any sustainable community planning and visioning process, and maintain your own enthusiasm. Have a long-term vision, but set short-term goals. Meet with your staff and include them in your planning process. Publicize and celebrate those shorter-term successes. Then, set new goals.

Use smaller and simpler objectives as building blocks that culminate in communitywide environmental stewardship and other initiatives such as long-term strategic planning. Establishing milestones within communitywide environmental stewardship efforts creates objectives to reach for, and positively recognizing when those milestones are achieved serves as a strong incentive.

Rewarding such accomplishments generates positive feelings in the community and motivates and encourages continued effort.

Declaring victory too soon. Don't settle for limited results. Remember that the longer-term goal is to create a sustainability culture throughout your community, starting with the local government itself. One or two recycling success stories do not lead to changed culture.

Culture change takes years to accomplish, and the bigger the community, the longer it takes. That's why, in some ways, rural and small communities have an advantage over larger communities in becoming more sustainable.

Create models throughout the process. These places can be demonstrations of sustainability in practice—serving as models for action by others in the community. Models can be sources of

inspiration, ideas, motivation, support, and education.

For instance, a public office space that recycles paper and reduces waste, uses energy-efficient fluorescent lighting, conserves water with low-flow toilets and faucet aerators, and landscapes outdoors with native plant species provides not only a visible demonstration of environmental leadership but also examples that residents can emulate. Residents of the community can visit this space and see environmental stewardship happening in front of their eyes.

Not anchoring changes in the culture. Use projects and performance goals to change behavior, but use management systems, reward programs, and training programs to reinforce and embed that behavior in staff. As an environmental champion, part of your job for ensuring success is managing the environmental culture that you've created.

Final Thoughts

Youth are the future of any community. Teaching children at an early age to value and respect the environment and their community will instill an ethic of environmental stewardship that they will carry into adulthood. Bring youth into your communitywide efforts with meaningful and genuine interaction.

That interaction could involve environmental education programs, environmental stewardship projects in the schools or in the community, or, as Williamston has done, the allocation of a seat on the steering committee for a high school student delegate. Youth are also a back door to the adult residents of a community. Children take their environmental ethic home, and that ethic slowly transfers to and grows within the parents as well.

With the support of top management and elected officials, a team of staff from all levels and departments, a well-communicated vision, a set of achievable short-term goals, and mechanisms to make sustainability "the way we do things around here," you will be on your way to improving the overall environmental, economic, and social fabric of your community.

Be willing to start small while thinking big. Remember that any positive environmental action you and your staff take brings us all that much closer to a more sustainable world—one community at a time. **PM**

END NOTES

1 Adapted from John P. Kotter, Leading Change (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).
2 See, for example, Audubon International's Principles for Sustainability at http://auduboninternational.org/PDFs/Principles%20for%20SRM.pdf.

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