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The art of systems thinking in driving sustainable transformation

Changing systems, and helping multiple stakeholders find a common vision, requires expertise and a deft touch

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Systems thinking may represent the next phase in the evolution of sustainability, but it is not an arena for corporations to enter lightly.

While collaboration may offer the best opportunity for scaling up change, it is far from easy and requires a certain skill set, including a sense of humility and sensitivity, that seemingly all-powerful corporations are often not well versed in.

So I thought it would be good to outline some of the essential ingredients for a successful systems change programme.

I give the credit for these guidelines to two women I met at the SXSW Eco conference in Austin, Texas; Sarah Severn, director of stakeholder mobilisation at Nike, and Darcy Winslow, managing

partner at the Academy for Systemic Change.

But, before looking at what works, let's first understand what such an approach has to offer.

The idea is catching on fast that no single company, NGO or government can bring about the scale of environmental, social and economic change that is essential if we are to deal with the many challenges the world is facing.

More than that, there is an increasing recognition that the inter-dependency of our globalised society means that there needs to be co-ordination across all parts of the system we are trying to change.

Renewable energy is an example of this, showing that, without a stable long-term supportive regulatory structure, companies will not risk capital investments that require a payback of many years, however good the technology on offer.

It's true that companies have been moving in the direction of a more collaborative approach for some time but have concentrated either on partnerships with individual NGOs, or in pre-competitive sector alliances such as the Consumer Goods Forum.

The confidence gained from these collaborations has laid the foundation to go to the next level. So what are the key ingredients in making whole systems change work?

Clear mapping

It may seem obvious, but, on the most basic level, it is vital to ensure that representatives of all the stakeholders are included at the very beginning of the process and everyone has an equal seat at the table.

As important is a clear mapping of what the system actually is and how each part correlates to the others. This is something that needs to be undertaken by experienced system experts and takes a considerable time and many iterations to get right.

Winslow who formerly worked at Nike, brought in systems mappers to the sports giant in 2000, to create a constellation that ranged from suppliers through to customers, investors and governments. It also included elements such as looking at the company's dependence on natural resources, environmental impacts and the implications for its business model.

"As you go deep, you find interconnections you did not even know existed," she said. "Taking the time upfront to create these maps is very important. You need to have a skilled system mapper in the room as they can create the context. You cannot do it on your own."

Severn, who is currently working on a systems change programme to eliminate hazardous chemicals from supply chains and products, agrees: "System maps are a tool for dialogue and once that happens around a common perspective, it becomes a lot easier. Without a map, it just becomes arguments in pieces rather than the system as a whole.

"Creating a map has stimulated a lot of dialogue and helped create a shared vision so everyone can come together and take action in their own parts of the system."

Working as a whole

I had personal experience of this when I helped manage a three-year cross-functional change management programme at the Guardian a number of years ago.

We mapped 34 separate processes, such as printing, finance and marketing, and then ran a series of meetings with all the staff from across the whole organisation who had a connection to each of those activities.

What we discovered was that employees had tended to judge and blame their colleagues in other departments for anything that went wrong. But this changed once they sat together and recognised that the problems were largely structural, rather than people "not doing their job properly".

Key to the success of multi-stakeholder meetings, therefore, is a sense of trust. At the most basic level, this means the creation of a common language, but crucially everyone needs to feel that they can be winners.

If the representatives from any part of the system enter discussions feeling they are not valued, that decisions have already been made, or that they may lose from the negotiations, then it is likely that little progress can be made.

Thinking differently

Another important ingredient to generating meaningful change is moving away from a position of what "should" be done and what everyone may feel guilty about not doing, to developing a vision of a positive future.

That is a key psychological learning because it immediately moves people beyond short-term thinking inside the box and encourages a reframing of the issues.

Severn says: "If you look at the whole system, you realise the barriers are in our minds. What moves that forward is a willingness to change behaviours and come together to collaborate on win win solutions."

Winslow agrees: "People tend to come from a problem-solving methodology and then go back to their silos. We need to come from a creative orientation, more possibility driven. We need to flip it around to discussing what is the future we want to create and get people into a different space."

So what else? Any change programme needs not only to be supported at the very top of the company but also include what Winslow says are the heroes in any organisation - for example, the product designers in Nike or the engineers within a technology company like Intel.

She says: "This can't reside within the CSR office. It has to be at the heart of the business. You also need to include those employees who may have no formal power but huge influence and can rally the troops."

Beyond this, it is vital to recognise the importance of cultural differences between organisations because it is often in this area that collaborations fall apart.

And, lastly, it is important not to forget the role of storytelling and to be open to including a spiritual dimension, neither of which companies are traditionally comfortable with.

"You need a compelling narrative, to build up case studies and create stories around it," says Winslow, "most people respond to storytelling."

"We should also ask a series of broad questions, such as what do we want to sustain, because what we love is what we will conserve."

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