

20 Simple Steps to Sustainability

By Mal Warwick

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Wait. A. Minute.

What does that headline say again? Have I just promised that your enterprise can attain sustainability in 20 easy steps?

You know better, right? You know, don't you, that sustainability is an aspiration, a path, not a truly achievable goal (at least not in today's misbegotten economic system)?

OK, now that we've gotten that out of the way, and you recognize that my headline was merely a sneaky way to attract your attention, allow me to list twenty—yes, 20—simple steps you can take in your business or nonprofit organization that will help nudge you along the road to a sustainable future.

Now, don't get all red in the face if you start reading the list and you see you have to make it pretty far down before there's anything about the environment. This list is adapted from my book, *Values-Driven Business: How to Change the World, Make Money, and Have Fun*, co-authored with Ben Cohen. If you can't understand why I don't equate sustainability with "being green," I suggest you get your hands on a copy of the book.

1. Start by rethinking the *purpose* of your business—and don't tell me your purpose is to make widgets or make money. Widgets, money, and other stuff (including just about all services) are the instruments through which we fulfill our purpose. So, sit down with your employees and representatives of other stakeholder groups such as customers, suppliers, community members, and investors—for a day or two if necessary—and hammer out the vision and mission that articulate the underlying purpose of your business. Write up a list of your values, too—and I don't mean "service, quality, and excellence" or other such corporate claptrap, but genuine human values that resonate deeply within you and your stakeholders.
2. Recognize that you're not the only one in your enterprise who is seeking *meaning* in your life. Your employees are, too (not to mention all your other stakeholders). Check out the hierarchy of human needs developed by psychologist Abraham

Maslow. If you're not already aware of it, he'll help you recognize that the people who work for you will not be freed up to search for their own inner purpose and meaning (much less find it met through your business) unless they feel amply recognized and appreciated for the contributions they make. In fact, if they don't feel acknowledged for what they do on the job, they're likely to look somewhere else for work, increasing your employee turnover and compounding the costs you bear for recruiting and training replacements. So, be sure to institute systematic ways to show your appreciation for your employees. Give them space to shine!

3. One of the most meaningful ways you can give your employees a sense that their contributions are valued and their voices heard is by involving them in *decision-making*. Take them into your confidence. If your workforce is big enough, and if you have a board of directors or a senior management team, invite the non-management employees to elect one or more representatives to the decision-making body. You'll find this helps bring good ideas to the surface, improves communication between you and your employees, and raises the level of trust.
4. Maslow can also teach you, if you need to learn the lesson, that your employees can't seek meaning in life unless their most fundamental need is satisfied: to survive—to feed, clothe, and house themselves and their families and to obtain care for them when they're sick. In fact, employees for which life is a continual struggle to make ends meet are likely to seek second or even third jobs. The stress that comes with overwork and worries about money lead to absenteeism, low productivity, and low morale. Give them a break. Commit to paying a *living wage*, and watch your business thrive! After all, if your most precious asset is human capital, and if you're focused on return on investment, there's hardly any way to attain a higher return than on what you invest in your people.
5. Consider *profit-sharing* as a way to boost morale, increase productivity, and foster a sense of ownership among your employees. Businesses that cut employees in on a share of the action through a meaningful profit-sharing program almost invariably find that turnover drops and profits soar. "Gain-sharing," a variation on the concept that ties employee bonuses to increased productivity, can have a similar effect. But the more democratic the approach—the more that lower-level employees benefit, and the less of the profit that is funneled to senior management—the more effective it is. Profit-sharing can be a win-win proposition.
6. Think about *sharing the wealth* created by your business. Whether you're a sole owner, or a manager or investor with a commanding share of control, there is no better way to provide for your own financial security in the future than by turning

your employees into partners through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan or similar means. Paradoxical? Only if you're impossibly literal-minded. With your employees as fellow owners, you'll quickly find they're focused on profits as much as you are (and maybe even more so!). There's nothing like cutting people in on the action to make them conscious about how their individual actions affect your bottom line. You'll end up making more money. (I did.)

7. Commit your business to the *health and wellness* of its employees (not to mention your own!). Share the burden of healthcare costs with your employees; if feasible, underwrite it entirely. Promote healthy eating and healthy living by providing healthful snacks. Offer options to your employees for such health-promoting activities as membership (or discounts) for fitness clubs and free on-site, annual influenza shots.
8. Build into your core business policies and practices a commitment to *diversity and inclusion*, taking necessary steps to recruit, train, and support employees that represent the full range of ethnic, gender, and racial diversity of your community. In a country where not long from now no single ethnic group will claim a majority, it's essential that your enterprise be ready to serve all your stakeholders in a respectful and sensitive way.
9. Conduct an *environmental and energy audit* of your company's operations, using a third-party auditor. If you can't afford to pay for a professional audit, find another company that's taking aggressive steps to lighten its footprint on the environment, and trade favors: ask them to audit your company, and you audit theirs. Perform such audits periodically so you can monitor your progress.
10. Based on the findings of your environmental and energy audit, draft an *environmental policy statement* and environmental management system that will guide your company's resource use in the future.
11. Heed the 3 Rs and 1 C of contemporary recycling: *reduce, reuse, recycle, and compost*—and involve your customers, too. For example, if you sell products that require replacement, offer your customers an incentive to return the product and packaging to you for reuse when they purchase replacements.
12. When designing new products and considering the materials to be used in them, *plan for the products' full lifetime*, including their manufacturing, transportation, use, and disposal. Ensure that your products are either reusable when reconditioned, returnable to you, or readily biodegradable if they can't be recycled.

13. Take a look around, and *assess your suppliers*, vendors, and strategic partners. Do their labor standards, environmental standards, and levels of community involvement match your own? Are they the best partners you can find to help you run your business in synch with your values? Consider whether you should seek out new suppliers, including more congenial sources of capital, to enable your progress toward sustainability.
14. Find at least one way that you can involve your employees in a high-profile effort to *benefit the community* or communities where you do business. Consider such possibilities as a philanthropic program in which employees decide which of several local nonprofit organizations will receive company funds, or a semi-annual or annual volunteer day, on which all employees will take part in cleaning up a beach, planting trees, or repairing or painting homes for the aged—or both. Community benefit programs are enormously popular with employees. They bolster morale, increase productivity, and foster long-term loyalty.
15. At least once annually, hold an *all-staff meeting* (or a meeting in each work unit or facility) to discuss how the company can improve its performance on the non-financial aspects of your business—the social and environmental factors that go hand-in-hand with financial factors in a triple-bottom-line business. You may be amazed at how readily good ideas come to the surface—ideas that may even lower costs or boost profits while enhancing your company’s ability to serve all its stakeholders.
16. Describe your vision, mission, and values in a flyer or brochure, and in a post on your company’s Web site. Distribute it to all your stakeholders: customers, employees, suppliers, investors, and key community leaders. When you *broadcast the values* that make your business special, you’ll probably be surprised at how much positive feedback you receive—feedback that may result in increased business and other valuable benefits.
17. Once or twice a year, involve your employees, customers, or both in selecting a social or environmental issue of shared concern. *Partner with a nonprofit* organization that’s addressing the issue, and look for ways to benefit it—through cash contributions, matched employee gifts, free or discounted products, loaned professional talent, employee volunteer hours, or promotional inserts in your packages, catalogs, or invoices. If possible, you might also offer unused office space, office equipment, furniture, or other in-kind gifts.

18. Once a month, hold a staff meeting where a leading *local nonprofit organization* may make a brief presentation to familiarize you and your employees with its work. Decide whether to allow them to make a pitch for volunteers, for money, for both, or for neither. As you and your employees gain understanding of the work of the nonprofit sector in your community, and as local nonprofits come to know you better, you will all come to have a heightened understanding of the challenges faced by your local community. Your business' reputation will grow, too.
19. Hold a staff meeting to discuss philanthropy with your employees. Discuss the roles that they, individually and collectively, as well as the company might play in a *philanthropic program*. Seek advice from your local community foundation or, if there is none, from the Council on Foundations.
20. Become a spokesperson for the *triple bottom line*. Contact local news media to offer yourself or your colleagues for interviews by newspapers, on talk radio, or on local TV shows. Post podcasts or videos on your Web site and elsewhere online that highlight the socially and environmentally responsible policies and practices of your company. Host a forum for local businesses to discuss the pros and cons of those policies—or persuade the local Chamber of Commerce to do so. As your business becomes better known as a model for best practices, you will see your recruiting costs decline, and you'll find it easier to bring in new employees who share your values and are committed to joining you in making the world a better place.

You say you're doing all those things? Really? Well, I want to meet you! Drop me a line at mal@malwarwick.com. Or write me even if you're not that far along the way to sustainability. I'll be happy to hear from you.