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Sustainability, With a Capital “S”

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We haven’t talked about sustainability for a while now. Last time we tackled the topic was last November, when we ranted a bit about the “[Triple Bottom Line](#)” in the context of our series of articles focused on Business Community Centers. We encourage you to go back and read that one once you are finished here; we rather liked it.

However, certain events in recent days (63 days and counting at this writing, to be exact) have made everyone painfully aware of how the issues of environmental impacts, business performance, and community impacts interact. Can you say “BP oil spill”?

In addition, we’ve included a companion article this month (below) by Ted Ritter that addresses specifically how these ideas relate to present-day facilities management.

Millions of gallons of crude oil have been turned loose into a fragile, pristine estuary. \$20 billion in cash has been removed from the bottom line (and that may not be enough). The suspension of dividends to shareholders. The near structural collapse of an entire way of life and vibrant culture. Well, if those events don’t bring together the inter-relationship of economy, environment, and community in your minds, nothing will.

We don’t want to make this so much a rant as a thought provoker. Businesses, to be truly Sustainable (and that’s where the big “S” comes in) must consider, plan for—and yes, even anticipate—the cross impacts of all of these issues. We’ve recently had the pleasure of working with some clients who pushed us to help them include environmental impact analyses in their strategic real estate location decisions. “If we locate over there what’s the environmental impact as opposed to being over here?” That’s new.

Now take that one step further and start asking what the Triple Bottom Line impact would be on the community where you are thinking about locating. Can you imagine an organization thinking through that process when deciding on whether to “off-shore” a particular business operation? We are convinced that day has arrived.

Let us give you an example of just how a business could go through that process (BP, are you listening?). There are a number of “community sustainability assessment” tools already available. Just do a Google search: you’ll come up with about 1,660,000 results in 0.27 seconds. The one we are most fond of was developed by the [Global Ecovillage Network](#) and is downloadable for free at <http://gen.ecovillage.org/activities/csa/English/>.

This Community Sustainability Assessment is a prime example of the type of baseline assessment that can be done in a matter of hours with local support. Once you’ve done that, scenario analysis can help you re-analyze the data assuming your business moves into that community. Can you imagine the reception local officials would give you if you laid out the case for how positively your company will impact their sustainability?

Wow, it’s about so much more than jobs, although those are certainly important (but not if the environmental impact exceeds the jobs impact). We have used this particular tool in a few communities, and we’ve always found the results very informative. Basically, sustainability is an area in which most officials and community leaders don’t even know what questions to ask. So this kind of assessment can be incredibly practical and helpful.

We want to make a point here before we are branded as a couple of air-headed tree huggers. This topic is about business. It is about *your* business doing what it needs to do today so it will still be around 100 years from now, and still be ahead of its competition in terms of cost structure, customer loyalty, and product leadership.

The final word won’t be in yet for BP by the time we go to press (or for any time in the foreseeable future, for that matter), but needing to set aside more than one year’s profits (\$14 billion in 2009 for BP) will obviously damage the viability of any business. Not to mention the [50% decline in market capitalization](#) and the [downgrading of BP’s debt](#) that accompanied the disaster.

Has your company done any strategic scenario planning that includes anticipation of similar events befalling you? That’s the big “S.” It’s just as critical to plan for unlikely events with massive consequences as it is those highly predictable things (like inflation or a labor shortage) that really don’t change things all that much.

Sustainability is all about including this type of thinking in your planning process—and developing tactical solutions to problems not yet recognized. Sure wish that had happened in the Gulf of Mexico. Walrusess?? Come on.

Okay, we’ve laid out a business case, once again, for why economics, environment, and community come together—why they **must** be seen as indivisible parts of a bigger whole. We’ve based our analysis on a case study (albeit very brief) of a current event and suggested some “can use tomorrow” tools that will help you move towards Sustainability.

Now let’s get back down to Earth. Last year we helped create a book called *Cut it Out!* with the support and help of the International Facilities Management (IFMA) Foundation. See [this link](#) for the IFMA press release about the book and how to order a copy for yourself.

One of the key ideas in that book is that environmental impacts and how they relate to business can be viewed on several levels. What we have been talking about here is the macro-community level. But the same logic can be applied at the campus level, the building level, and even within the parts of a building. It’s sort of like peeling back the proverbial onion layer by layer.

[Please send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of the newsletter. We look forward to learning from you.

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