

The Sustainability Dilemma Manager – What does it need to successfully implement Corporate Sustainability Strategies?

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Summary: Companies are still lacking to successfully implement Corporate Sustainability Strategies.¹ Besides other implementation barriers decision makers come across multifaceted sustainability dilemmas to be decided on during implementation. Consequently their personal competences become even more important.² Recent empirical research sheds some light on them.

Sustainable development becomes more and more an integral part of our daily life and companies are willing to incorporate sustainability into their daily business.³ Research shows that companies are still lacking to successfully implement it.⁴ The most important barriers to implementing sustainability are the complexity of implementing it across functions, the lack of skills & knowledge of the middle-senior management as well as competing strategic priorities.⁵ Many of the latter are owed to conflicting economic rationalities (efficiency vs. sustainability) and conflicts between the dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental and social aspects).⁶

Given the complex nature of sustainability, dilemmas⁷ are the rule rather than the exception. For example when the target of higher social or ecological supply chain standards collides with the goal of low production costs (efficiency) or the target of low priced sourcing clashes with long-term and / or local sourcing aims. For that reason decision makers come across various sustainability dilemmas to be decided on when implementing sustainability strategies. Given that people feel uncomfortable when being confronted with conflicts they often ignore them. As a result decision maker's competences play a crucial role in identifying, accepting and coping with dilemmas and in the end in successfully implementing sustainability strategies.⁸

The focus of a present study at the Leuphana University Lüneburg lies on the occurring dilemmas and the necessary competences for solving those. Within a two step Delphi approach⁹ around 80 sustainability managers and sustainability consultants were surveyed in 2012 and 2013 in Germany.¹⁰

Results show that dilemmas appear frequently¹¹ when implementing sustainability strategies. To successfully cope with sustainability dilemmas persistency / patience, credibility, communication skills and systemic / holistic thinking are the most important competences. When comparing the perspectives results differ from managers to consultants – especially regarding the perceived stage of the sustainability strategy integration.

Drawing conclusions from the results the following aspects are to be considered:

- actively identifying and monitoring dilemmas
- systematically training the managers involved in sustainability decisions
- providing the necessary surrounding conditions within the company (e.g. board support)
- awareness of the differing internal and external perspectives on the state of implementation.¹²

¹ Vgl. Schaltegger et. al (2012), S. 11.; vgl. Accenture/ United Nations Global Compact (2010), S. 20.

² Vgl. Müller-Christ (2010), S. 283.

³ Vgl. Accenture (2011), S. 1.

⁴ Vgl. Schaltegger et. al (2012), S. 11.; vgl. Accenture/ United Nations Global Compact (2010), S. 20.

⁵ Vgl. Accenture/United Nations Global Compact (2010), S. 14 und 34.

⁶ Vgl. Müller-Christ (2008), S. 4.

⁷ A dilemma is a situation that requires a choice between two targets that are or seem equally (un)favorable and which both need to be fulfilled in the long-term.

⁸ Vgl. Müller-Christ (2010), S. 283.

⁹ 1 step: qualitative interviews with 10 experts; 2 step: quantitative online survey with 78 experts.

¹⁰ Vgl. Juretzek (2014).

¹¹ i.e. at least a number of times per month

¹² Vgl. Juretzek (2014).