

# You can't just take, you gotta give something back

By [Caroline Lowings](#)

23 Feb 2013

What does sustainability mean and what does it require?

My dad used to say, "you can't just take take take, you gotta give something back!" At the time he was referring to my (lack of) maintenance and care for my Volkswagen Beetle, but I often think of it as my first lesson in sustainability... about looking beyond the present moment and considering the longer term. In the case of my Beetle, and my dad's wise warnings, it was not only about getting from A to B that specific day by squeezing all I could out of the old girl, but about proactively keeping my vehicle on the road into the future, which of course meant immediate pains for me of doing without a new dress or time spent with friends in order to work and save to service the car. But I was all about instant gratification in those days, so the poor Beetle suffered along quite faithfully, with my dad coming to the rescue from time to time with his car sense and sage counsel.



In organisations, this story can be likened to the need to put strategies in place that may not give immediate returns, but will ensure the business continues performing and thriving over the long term. But what exactly does the term 'sustainability' mean?

Sustainability has two key interconnected connotations, namely:

- 1) Ability to continue for some time, and
- 2) Not making excessive use of resources.

There are a variety of synonyms that can be considered in both these contexts, such as keep going, keep up, look after, appreciate, cultivate, encourage, develop, value, esteem, and flourish. Antonyms may be neglect, waste, overexert, take for granted, exploit, regress, stagnate and burnout. I think it is important to consider these antonyms as they spell out quite clearly the "what not to do". I also thought the meaning of sustenance may be valid here, which is the process of making something continue, or in the case of my Beetle - the fuel and durability for the journey.



**Now let's piece together a quilt of snippets, stories and strategies that builds on these connotations of sustainability:**

## The value of volunteerism

I read an interview in the Sunday Times yesterday with Ruth Lewin, Head of Corporate Sustainability for Discovery. She was speaking on the company's volunteer programme and how it can be linked to employee engagement and enriched business performance. She articulated how real sustainability lies in a longer term strategy of building partnerships and promoting a culture of connectedness. She advocated the benefits of a "socially engaged and connected" workforce, who are concerned with improving business performance within the greater context of "a thriving and stable society". Ruth also explored the transformative effects of making volunteerism an appraised business imperative within the workplace, such as employee and leadership development, fostering shared aims, and improved staff collaborations.

## The value of connectedness and engagement

An excerpt from Wikipedia on the topic of [Community of practice](#) suggests four areas of organisational performance that can be affected by promoting, like Discovery, such a culture of connectedness:



- Decreasing the learning curve of new employees
- Responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries
- Reducing rework and preventing "reinvention of the wheel"
- Spawning new ideas for products and services

While Amy Rees Anderson, a contributor on Forbes.com advocates that "[great employees](#)" carry value that simply cannot be replaced, such as:

- Deep institutional knowledge of the organisation
- Extensive product, systems, and process knowledge
- Client [relationships](#) that have been built over many years
- Experience on what has worked and what hasn't, and
- Camaraderie and influence with their co-workers."

I would think, for sustainability, that organisations are making sincere moves to actively esteem, look after and develop this value, and also to appreciate and cultivate the capacity and conditions that make performance and innovation flourish.

## Taking a strategic approach

Sizwe Nxasana's presentation at the [Making CSI Matter Conference](#) in 2012 resonated with what Ruth has to say. Sizwe is the CEO of the FirstRand Group, and advised companies to take a strategic approach to CSI. He stressed the importance and urgency of doing things for the right reasons and with broader participation in mind. Sizwe recognised that we can no longer only consider the shareholders of the company in our practices and conduct, but are required to evaluate and transform business in line with issues and interests that affect all stakeholders, namely customers, employees and society. He laid emphasis on requiring a different mind-set when it comes to CSI and advised breaking out of working competitively and in "our little corners". He advocated opening up the dialogue with other businesses and government to start win-win partnerships, where business can easily pilot new ideas and innovation, while government funding could be used to replicate innovations that are beneficial to addressing societal issues.

## Telling the story of who we are

In an interview on [leadership lessons](#), Dave Barger, CEO and president of the American company JetBlue Airways, shared his insights on social responsibility or as he prefers "citizenship", and concurred with Ruth and Sizwe's sentiments: "No company is an island anymore...sustainability, [supporting education](#) and improving environmental footprint are efforts and virtues with a clear return. We absolutely get something out of it. We are better able to attract great talent, because we want people on the team who see the world the way we do. People are more likely to choose a company that aligns with their values, so being in the community is the best way to attract new customers. Ultimately, we want a relationship with the community; we aren't chasing the next transaction". He goes on to say that "our efforts reflect our DNA - telling the story of who we are as a company, what we value, and how we look at the world."



## Linking to branding

Dave's slant on citizenship helps us to see the clear link between sustainability and branding. In a [10XBusinessCoaching](#) video on YouTube, branding is described as "the sum total of everything you do. A promise wrapped up in an experience of doing business with you, or being touched by your business". It's becoming clearer to me that sustainability cannot be farmed out to that motley corner of the business that dot's their i's with little hearts, but rather needs to be a core focus area -

weaved into the fabric of the brand and organisational structure for it to be truly authentic and valued. It cannot be bolted on as an afterthought, or perceived as an altruistic peripheral transaction.

## Minding your business

Similarly when it comes to implementations of business and organisational change, more and more of this strategic sustainability thinking needs to become increasingly rooted in the "way we do things round here". And consistently asking: Will this change solution provide the real answers that we need to enable longer-term sustainability and organisational results? But all this requires [reflection](#) on whether we really esteem that people, planet and community are our business and whether this belief is congruent with our organisation's positioning and personality, or is it merely a means to an end to remain King III compliant, to impartially gain BBBEE points without really getting involved or to promote the appearance of good corporate citizenship; and, as Sizwe says, spend more resources on publicising how much good we are doing, than on the actual doing.

## Requires a shift

In considering the example of my VW Beetle, no amount of paying lip-service to my dad's warning could have ensured sustainability if not supported by real conviction to shift my focus and take a different approach. But the concept of foregoing a new outfit or saying no to a night out with friends in lieu of something as intangible as a car service, was completely foreign and somewhat disruptive to me. Perhaps you feel the same about [change management](#), employee engagement, caring for the environment or giving back to communities? Perhaps these don't seem like tangible business imperatives? But, you'll need to make the shift and challenge this type of thinking before you get behind or worse - breakdown on the side of the road. Also consider whether there are gaps between strategic purpose and tactical activities? Perhaps your sustainability intentions are good and the vision narrative congruent, but there is a rift in the execution.



On that note, we need to learn not to get too attached to ideas, projects and investments to such an extent that we cannot let them go if need be. Sometimes we might be quite far down the line when we realise that the approach, work or projects that we are busy with are not quite right and we need to change tactics, but we feel compelled to defend and justify the investment already made. And as a result, end up spending more money and resources on the wrong things, while missing out on valuable learning - because we cannot learn from the mistakes that we refuse to admit in the first place. When we realise the long term systemic impact we are aiming for, we need to allow space for mistakes, disruption, innovation, reflection and even resistance - because these are clear indicators that things are starting to happen, and change means progress.

Consider what John Mason says: "Playing it safe is probably the most unsafe thing in the world. You cannot stand still. You must go 'forward. Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values. Your growth depends on your willingness to experience change".

And as my dad said - You can't just take take take, you gotta give something back! And now it's evident that giving back is more than transactional, it's a holistic way of doing business.

Need help with your [strategic reflection](#) and planning? [Contact me](#)

## References:

<http://csimatters.co.za/csi-insights/sizwe-nxasana-at-making-csi-matter-2012/>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/rahimkanani/2012/10/04/5-leadership-lessons-from-jetblues-president-and-ceo/>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/amyanderson/2013/02/13/great-employees-are-not-replaceable/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0mfDnNlxAo&list=UUV0ijn6gvz4uBB8LWYGpn1A>

- Reflective practice

<http://www.slideshare.net/DawnWesterberg>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community\\_of\\_practice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice)

Sunday Times newspaper. Money & Careers Section. Interview with Ruth Lewin. 17 February 2013.

Mason, J. You can do it even if others say you can't. 2003. Spire, 2008.

Soanes, C. with Hawker, S. Compact Oxford English Dictionary for students. 2005. Oxford University Press. 2006.

## ABOUT CAROLINE LOWINGS

Caroline Lowings is the principal consultant at Change Story, a Gauteng-based consultancy providing focused change management and strategic planning services to clients. View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>