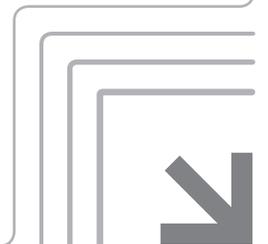


# Leadership Sustainability

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**DAVE ULRICH AND NORM SMALLWOOD**



Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood

Most of us who are interested in developing leadership have been here. We have taught a leadership development course with the latest principles of effective leadership; we have coached an aspiring leader about how to interpret and use 360 feedback; or we have reviewed an organization's leadership development plans with the board or executive committee. Implicit in these and similar conversations and forums are the noble desires that principles become practices, that data turns into action, and that plans become realities.

One of our favorite cartoons shows a group of turkeys that attend a two-day training program to learn how to fly. They learn the principles of aerodynamics, and they practice flying in the morning, afternoon, and evening. They learn to fly with the wind and against it, over mountains and plains, and together and solo. At the end of the two days, they all walk home.

Frequently our desires for improved leadership are dashed against the headwinds of making change last. We can orchestrate leadership events like training and coaching where individuals learn why they should lead and what they should do to be better leaders. We often find that the greater challenge is how to turn these events into an on-going pattern of desired behavior which we call leadership sustainability.

The concept of sustainability comes from considering the context of the organization. Leadership sustainability is not just what the leader does, but how others are impacted by the leader's actions. We judge ourselves by our intentions but others judge us by our behaviors. Leadership sustainability has to show up not only in personal intentions, but also in observable behaviors. Environmental sustainability is about caring for the earth's resources by reducing our carbon footprint. Leadership sustainability is about caring for the organization's resources by adapting and changing leadership patterns so that they are consistent with shifting requirements. Social sustainability is giving back to the community through corporate social responsibility initiatives. Leadership sustainability occurs when leaders take personal responsibility to ensure that they do what they say they will do. Corporate sustainability is a long-term commitment to changing the

world in which we live and work. Leadership sustainability is a lasting and durable commitment to personal change.

Leadership sustainability matters. We are part of a community of academics and practitioners who have articulated why leadership matters and what good leadership looks like. In our work on Leadership Code and Leadership Brand, we have articulated both the basic rules of leadership (shape the future, make things happen, engage today's talent, build the next generation, invest in yourself) and the differentiators that will distinguish leaders by turning customer expectations into leadership actions. We have spent most of our effort on the why and what of leadership. But, we still struggle with the how of leadership. How will well-intentioned leaders actually do what they intend? How will leaders turn their personal learning into desired actions and results? How will leaders change their own and others' minds, hands, feet, and hearts to get things done? How will organizations make investments in leadership development that have the desired long term results? In brief, how do we build leadership sustainability?

We should re-emphasize that if leaders don't have a strong sense of why they should change or if they don't have a clear sense of what they should change to, leadership sustainability does not matter. But, once leaders accept why they should change and understand what they should change to, we must deal with how to make sure leadership change happen.

To figure out how to build leadership sustainability, we have reviewed and synthesized the literature to identify principles of sustainable change. Some exemplar books are noted below:

## **Making Change Happen**

- Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007).
- James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross, and Carlo C. DiClemente, *Changing for Good: A Revolutionary Six-Stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward* (New York: Avon Books, 1994).
- Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton, *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

## **Influence/Persuasion**

- Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York: Collins Business Essentials, 2007).
- Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991).

## **Changing Habits**

- James Claiborn and Cherry Pedrick, *The Habit Change Workbook: How to Break Bad Habits and Form Good Ones* (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2001).
- M.J. Ryan, *This Year I Will . . . : How to Finally Change a Habit, or Make a Dream Come True* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006).
- Mark F. Weinstein, *Habitually Great: Master Your Habits, Own Your Destiny* (Charleston, South Carolina: Booksurge LLC, 2008).
- Jack D. Hodge, *The Power of Habit: Harnessing the Power to Establish Routines that Guarantee Success in Business and Life* (Bloomington, Indiana: Authorhouse, 2003).
- Debbie Macomber, *Changing Habits* (St. Louis, Missouri: MIRA, 2010).

## **Self Discipline (Self-help Books)**

- Brian Tracy, *No Excuses!: The Power of Self-Discipline* (New York: Vanguard Press, 2010).
- Dalai Lama, *Becoming Enlightened* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2009).
- Jim Randel, *The Skinny on Willpower: How to Develop Self Discipline* (Westport, Connecticut: RAND Publishing, 2009).
- Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005).
- Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fireside, 2003).

## **Leadership Derailment**

- David L. Dotlich and Peter C. Cairo, *Why CEOs Fail: The 11 Behaviors That Can Derail Your Climb to the Top—and How to Manage Them* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
- Sydney Finkelstein, *Why Smart Executives Fail: And What You Can Learn from Their Mistakes* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
- Tim Irwin, *Derailed: Five Lessons Learned from Catastrophic Failures of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2009).
- Adrian Turnham, *The Elephant in the Boardroom: The Cause of Leadership Derailment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

## **Leadership Development**

- Ellen Van Velsor, Cynthia D. McCauley, and Marian N. Ruderman, *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

- Morgan McCall, Michael M. Lombardo, and Ann M. Morrison, *Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).
- Morgan W. McCall Jr., *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998).

From these diverse yet related literatures, we have culled seven leadership practices that instill sustainability:

## **SIMPLICITY**

Simplicity means that the leaders focuses on a few key behaviors that have high impact on the most important issues. The world is increasingly complex as technology makes global events local news. Leaders have to cope with complexity not only in the world around them, but in their personal leadership style. Most leaders can create to-do lists of things they should change. But they get overwhelmed when they try to change them all at once. Leadership sustainability requires that we find simplicity in the face of complexity and replace concept clutter with simple resolve. It entails prioritizing on the behaviors that matter most, shifting from analytics with data to action with determination, framing complex phenomenon into simple patterns, and sequencing change.

## **TIME**

We often ask leaders we coach to tell us their priorities, which most can do. Then we ask them to review their calendar for the last 30 or 90 days and show us how much time they spent on these priorities. Leaders put their desired behaviors into their calendar and this shows up in how they spend their time. Employees see what leaders do more than listen to what they say. Leadership sustainability shows up in who we spend time with, what issues we spend time on, where we spend our time, and how we spend our time. When leaders invest their time as carefully as their money, they are more likely to make change happen.

## **ACCOUNTABLE**

A cycle of cynicism occurs when leaders announce wonderful aspiration statements (vision, mission, strategy), but fail to deliver. Over time, this cycle of failure breaks down trust and erodes commitment. Leadership sustainability requires accountability where leaders take personal responsibility for making sure that they do what they say. Accountability increases when leaders assign personal commitments from others and follow up on those commitments. Over time, sustainable leadership is when the leader's agenda becomes the personal agenda of others.

## RESOURCES

Leaders dedicate resources in order to support their desired changes with coaching and infrastructure. Resourcing implies institutionalizing. Steve Kerr, former Chief Learning Officer at GE and Goldman Sachs, makes the clever observation that a training challenge is to make an unnatural act (e.g., listening to others) in an unnatural place (a training program) a natural act in a natural place. Coaching and HR practices create part of the infrastructure of sustainability. Marshall Goldsmith found that when leaders have on-going coaching, they are much more likely to enact desired behavioral change. We have found that a mix of self-coaching, expert-coaching, peer-coaching, and boss-coaching can be woven together to resource sustained change. HR practices can define and create an organization's culture. Selection, promotion, career development, succession planning, performance reviews, communication, policies, and organization design may be also aligned to support leadership change.

## TRACKING

The maxims are true: we get what we inspect, not what we expect; people do what they are rewarded for; and you shouldn't reward one thing while hoping for a different outcome. Leaders must measure their behavior and results in specific ways. Unless desired leadership behaviors and changes are operationalized, quantified, and tracked, they are nice to do, but not likely to be done. Effective metrics for leadership behavior need to be transparent, easy to measure, timely, and tied to consequences. Leadership sustainability may be woven into existing scorecards and may become its own scorecard to ensure that leaders monitor how they are doing.

## MELIORATE

Leaders meliorate when they improve by learning from mistakes and failures, and demonstrating resilience. Change is not linear. We don't often start at point A and end up in a logical and smooth progression to point Z. Most of the time, we try, fail (or succeed), try again, fail again, and so forth. When we learn from each attempt, the outcomes we intend will

eventually come to pass. Leadership sustainability requires that leaders master the principles of learning: to experiment frequently, to reflect always, to become resilient, to face failure, to not be calloused to success, and to improvise continually.

## EMOTION

Leaders who ensure sustainability have a personal passion and emotion for the changes they need to make. Sustained change resides not just in the head with an intellectual agenda, but also within the heart with a strong emotional agenda. Action without passion will not long endure, nor will passion without action. Leaders ensure emotion by drawing on their deeper values and finding meaning in the work that they do. Leadership sustainability occurs when leaders not only know but feel what they should do to improve. This passion increases when leaders see their desired changes as part of their personal identity and purpose, when their changes will shape their relationships with others, and when their changes will shift the culture of their work setting.

The mnemonic for these seven principles spell START ME. We think this is apt because sustainability starts with me. These seven practices turn hope into reality. When I apply the principles, I become a better leader—one who gets things done and knows how to make them stick.

We are sure that we have not captured everything that will increase leadership sustainability, but these seven principles inform both personal efforts to be a better leader and organization investments to build better leadership. When leadership training occurs, the impact increases when participants attend to these seven factors as they anticipate how to turn learning into action. When an aspiring leader receives 360 feedback, the personal action plan will be more sustainable when a leader applies these factors. When an organization's leadership development plan is reviewed, executives increase confidence that leadership investments will have payback when they rigorously apply the seven principles.

Leaders matter. Leadership matters more. Leadership sustainability matters most.

# About the Authors

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Dave has consulted and done research with over half of the Fortune 200. Dave was the editor of the *Human Resource Management Journal* 1990 to 1999, has served on the editorial board of four other journals, is on the Board of Directors for Herman Miller, is a Fellow in the National Academy of Human Resources, and is co-founder of the Michigan Human Resource Partnership



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Norm is a recognized authority in developing businesses and their leaders to deliver results and increase value. His current work relates to increasing business value by building organization, strategic HR and leadership capabilities that measurably impact market value.

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