

SYSTEMS THINKING SUPPORTS SUSTAINABILITY

BY BILL CONLEY

Sustainability isn't just a buzz in the business world today. It is a steady, deep thrum that permeates every profession and every industry. It has had a most pronounced effect in the facility management world. In order for a sustainable program at the facility level to have viability and ultimate value, the precepts of the program must be extended beyond the department to take hold throughout the organization that it serves. A comprehensive system needs to be put into place and a business case needs to be made to illustrate how doing good can make money.

Let's, for the moment, forget about climate change, drought conditions and the depletion of natural resources and focus on the most pertinent benefit of sustainable actions to professionals trying to succeed in business. For shareholders, sustainability means a long-term (sustained), profitable company in which to invest. For corporate executives, it means contributions to the bottom line, innovation, competitive advantage and a positive image. For facility managers, it means streamlined operations, increased efficiency, customer satisfaction and cost savings.

So let's temporarily set aside the people and planet aspects of the triple bottom line and focus on the big hook: profit.

To make money, a system is needed. In the movies, the heroes always have a system. To win in Vegas, a person has to have a system. Or, conversely, if someone wants to win big, he/she has to beat the system. It seems when profits are mentioned, the key common denominator tends to be a system.

What's to say this concept is different in business or real-life responsibilities? Having a good system and adhering to it, working within it and through it, offers a number of benefits. The better it is devised and followed, the more proportionate the rewards.

Common sense dictates that any objective haphazardly approached has a minimal chance of being reached. And, although Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Society is always taken by surprise at any new example of common sense," in the facility management world common sense is conspicuous in its presence. FMs typically have both feet on the ground and their heads on swivels; they don't miss much and they know how to act. For facilities professionals, putting a system together makes perfect (common) sense.

Sustainability can create value by maximizing the positive social, environmental and economic effects of activities, while minimizing adverse impacts throughout the entire closed-loop cycle of an organization's value system. The critical state of the current environmental, economic and social system is further reinforced by increasing complexity, velocity and uncertainty. Despite the popularity and trendiness of sustainability, there are yet few good models of successful sustainable development. These interconnected, complex sustainability challenges need to be captured in a practical and solution-based approach.

Systems

A system is a set of rules, an arrangement of things or a group of related items that

work toward a common goal. Facility managers are used to looking at the big picture; of viewing organizational operations and departmental functions holistically. The magic is to take this a step forward; beyond treating those specific needs derived from an overall view and actually making everything work together.

Systems thinking is a trans-disciplinary ability to see interrelationships rather than processes, for seeing patterns rather than individual snapshots. It is a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and dynamics that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline provides the ability to change systems more effectively, and to act more in tune with the natural processes of the environment and the economic world.

Systems thinkers frame problems in terms of behavior over time, instead of focusing on particular events. Instead of microscopic, they strive for macroscopic, seeing beyond details to the context of relationships in which they are embedded. This concept can be effectively used by facility managers to address sustainability challenges.

In any system, no matter how tightly constructed, there will be variables. When the path of a variable is followed, causal loops will be found in the system. Causal loops are an important learning tool in systems thinking and show how some variables can continuously reinforce or balance one another. For instance, if energy efficiency increases, resource use decreases. Unhindered by resource availability, business activity grows and more investments are made in efficiency; thus these variables beget a reinforcing loop.

Since efficiency is often touted as the most basic, low-cost or no-cost solution of sustainability strategy, understanding the concept and recognizing its appearance can lead to further beneficial developments.

Through systems thinking, an FM has the capacity to build initiatives that accomplish triple bottom line benefits, especially sustainable economic

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development. This can lead to creating socially responsible businesses and accelerating their growth and their impact by establishing sustainable protocols that are integrated throughout the whole organization. By collaborating and coordinating with various departments and the C-suite, FMs can implement systems that will empower organizations pursuing social transformation.

Somewhere to start

Progressive facility managers have figured out how to make money by doing good. There is still confusion and conflict within business, government activism and academia when it comes to sustainability and the profit motive. The hard, cold financial reality for any organization is “no money, no mission.” Fortunately, facility managers are in an ideal position to prove that sustainable operations and actions can lead to financial benefits.

Determining how to start sustainability activities can be an enormous challenge — one which facility managers are perfectly positioned to meet. Specialists tend to view sustainability through the lens of their specialty. Because they filter the discipline through their own paradigms, it is easy for them to get started off on the wrong foot by missing opportunities and wasting resources on missteps generated by single-focus agenda.

FMs are generalists not encumbered by artificial or educational bias. The broad scope of the FM profession lends itself to a more comprehensive approach to a sustainability system. Of the five business functions of corporate sustainability, two of them, efficiency and compliance, fall directly into the bailiwick of FM. Managing those efforts successfully sets the stage for systematic program management. This, in turn, leads to competitive advantages through transparency and resultant increased revenues.

Through this perspective, FMs can create opportunities for greater understanding

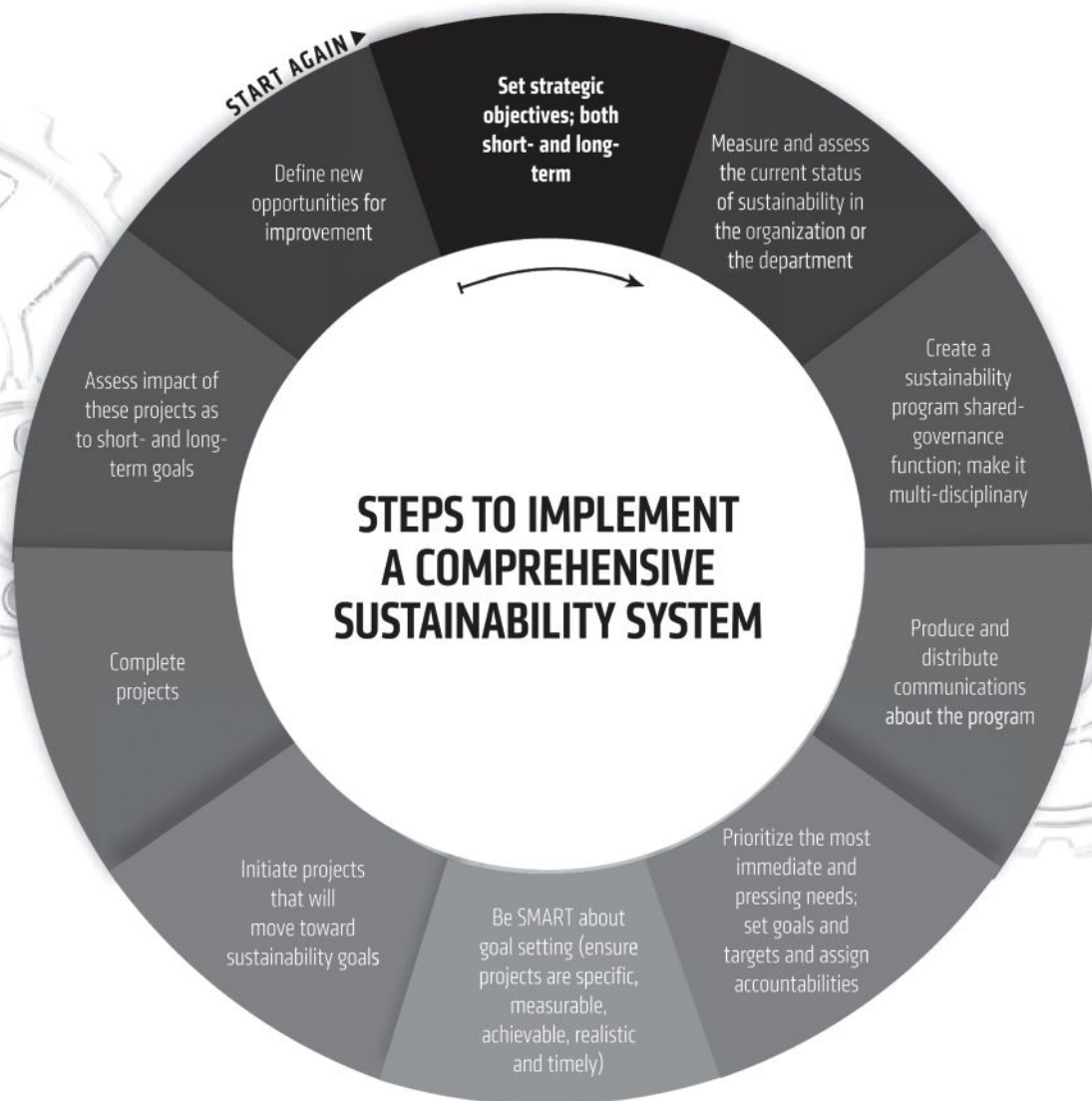
and collaboration among all groups promoting sustainability, as well as fostering innovation and acceleration in the achievement of common objectives. Explained correctly, a sustainability system that involves all parties will lead to a better understanding of how successful operations can be managed. This will help employees who tend to judge and blame their colleagues in other departments for flawed work begin to recognize and understand problems that are largely structural, rather than performance related.

The key to the success of multi-stakeholder endeavors, therefore, is a sense of trust. If the representatives from any part of the system get the feeling they are not valued, that decisions have already been made or that they may lose in negotiations, then it is likely that little progress can be made. At the most basic level, this means the creation of a common goal, such as sustainability, with proven results where everyone feels that they can be winners. Knowledge and empowerment at all levels is crucial to a smoothly running system.

Another important ingredient to generating meaningful change is moving away from a position of what should be done and what everyone may feel guilty about not doing, to developing a vision of a positive future and discussing what can be done. There are limitations within every industry, every organization and every process. Striving to reach realistic goals will go a long way toward ensuring long-term achievement.

That is a key to psychological learning because it immediately moves people beyond short-term thinking inside the box and encourages a reframing of the issues. Engendering of creative thought and innovation is a natural outcome of this process.

An FM can identify, prioritize and effectively meet an organization’s most pressing sustainability needs through a contemporary management system that links strategic intentions to daily administrative and operational



STEPS TO IMPLEMENT A COMPREHENSIVE SUSTAINABILITY SYSTEM

activities. Based on the Plan, Do, Study, Act model, the following sequence of steps can be taken to implement such a comprehensive sustainability system:

- Set strategic objectives; both short- and long-term
- Measure and assess the current status of sustainability in the organization or the department
- Create a sustainability program shared-governance function; make it multi-disciplinary
- Produce and distribute communications about the program
- Prioritize the most immediate and pressing needs; set goals and targets and assign accountabilities
- Be SMART about goal setting (ensure projects are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely)
- Initiate projects that will move toward sustainability goals
- Complete projects
- Assess impact of these projects as to short- and long-term goals
- Define new opportunities for improvement
- Start again
- Who will be responsible for the successful completion of the work?
- What goals will these projects accomplish and are they important to the overall scheme of things?
- When will they start and when will they finish?
- Where will the necessary resources be acquired?
- How will the work be done and assessed?

Incorporating the journalistic formula of “who, what, when, where, why and how,” the process can be further defined and refined.

There are steps of sustainable development which FMAs can lead directly and which will show cost benefits. By engaging and educating management

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and staff at all levels, they can set up volunteer programs, up to and including an in-house sustainability committee, within the facility to help with reducing, reusing, recycling and rethinking of material use and to serve as ambassadors of sustainability.

Life cycle-focused operating standards, targets, benchmarking and performance measurements can be implemented to increase efficiency. Environmental and sustainability goals can be created and implemented based on the operations that are controlled within the department. Energy management, water conservation and direct/indirect greenhouse gas management conserve natural resources, which saves money.

Life cycle assessments of products and services to which they ascribe can be performed by ensuring that vendors and providers understand the importance of supplying and verifying green products and services, managing those resources and cutting costs. Waste management policies mitigate landfill effects and protect those natural resources while minimizing dollars spent on waste transport and disposal.

Tangentially, these practices help with compliance issues, saving fees and penalties. All of these cost-saving techniques lead to the positive internal and external transparency measures that can be optimized through continual communication, education and stakeholder involvement, which leads to more business.

Bottom line

Sustainability is a grassroots-level initiative. Even though senior management in the C-suite may be getting a clue that this is important for their organization, many times they are at a loss as to how such a system can be implemented and managed. It does help to have the program mandated and approved by senior management,

identifying the FM as the champion of the cause. However, sometimes the FM needs to act as an insurgent, disrupting the status quo in the effort to affect positive change.

Through facility operations, programs can be instituted that can serve as a model for the rest of the organization as well as bring about cost savings, both short- and long-term, that will provide money to further the mission. FMs can achieve the desired objectives as they pertain to profits throughout the entire closed-loop life cycles of services with least cost, effort and risk. It can't be done overnight, but it can be done.

Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it achieves. Having an FM at the helm is almost a requisite for success. Utilizing proven leadership skills to enhance and improve processes, maximize existing infrastructure and empower personnel to take action on behalf of their company and their quality of life, an FM can not only contribute to the bottom line, but help increase it exponentially. And, though the focus may seem to be all about the money, a sustainability system will still benefit the people and planet components of the environmental triumvirate; making for a fairly solid business case. **FMJ**



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