

Discussion Paper

Better Balance: A Psychological Approach to the Problem of Sustainability

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Abstract

This paper presents a new model of sustainability, which proposes that solutions to issues such as climate change and population growth may emerge if businesses seek to better understand and harness the underlying human motivations responsible for driving sustainable and unsustainable behaviour. By drawing on the theories of Lawrence and Nohria (2002) and Seligman (2011, 2012), the authors argue that unsustainable behaviour is a result of imbalances in the achievement of human drives within our societies. The paper then invites the reader to reconsider the purpose of business as helping to achieve psychological balance within individuals, organisations and societies by being: (1) a provider of quality products; (2) a defender of what is important to people; (3) a facilitator of conversations and communities; (4) an educator in the space of sustainable consumption and wellbeing; (5) a co-creator of purpose.

Keywords

sustainability, stakeholder relationships, strategy, purpose, psychology

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Views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the organisations they represent.

Introduction

The massive environmental, social and economic challenges facing the world are well documented: climate change, population growth and increased consumption are said to be creating the perfect storm to challenge the sustainability of human life on this planet (Leach et al, 2012). It seems that the resources and demands on the planet are hopelessly unbalanced, resulting in what is commonly known as a 'three planet lifestyle': one planet consuming the resources that three planets would be required to sustain (Hails, 2006). The proposed solutions are also well documented and range from proactive approaches, such as creating shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and corporate social responsibility (e.g. Elkington, 1997; Brammer, Jackson & Matten, 2012) to reactive solutions, such as legislation and codes of conduct that seek to control corporate and individual behaviour (e.g. the Sarbanes–Oxley Act of 2002). While we respect the integrity, ambition and impact of current interventions, we suggest that they are lacking in one key regard: they miss an in-depth exploration of the root cause of the sustainability problem, which is human behaviour.

A psychological approach to sustainability

Much current debate in the area of sustainability frustratingly focuses on reducing negative symptoms of human behaviour rather than understanding and changing the root causes of it (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013; Grant, 2012). In our approach, we seek to redress this shortfall in current thinking. The key tenet of our proposition is that the world is out of balance because the motivations and therefore the behaviours of people are out of balance. In exploring solutions that work, the prerequisite is to understand the causes rather than the symptoms of this, more simply to achieve a deeper understanding of why and how we are motivated to behave in the way we do. Armed with an understanding of the cause of the problem, we will suggest solutions that business can use to help to restore balance at the level of the individual in the relationships between itself and its wider society (Money et al, 2012). If it is human nature that got us into this mess, then we must look to our humanity to get us out of it.

In order to achieve lasting solutions to the challenges we face, we need to look at sustainability in a different way to achieve a better balance within ourselves and between business and society.

The importance of balancing human drives/motivations

We build on a progressive theory in the field of human motivation, proposed by Lawrence and Nohria (2002) that identifies four human drives, which, when unbalanced, cause harm to individuals but, when balanced, result in individuals flourishing. With the aid of neuro-scientific evidence, Lawrence and Nohria argue that, as human beings, we are driven to:

- Acquire: gain material goods and status commensurate with our aspirations
- Bond: be part of a group that cares for us and gives us identity
- Comprehend: understand the world around us
- Defend: protect the things that are important to us

While the work bears similarities to that of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, it differs in one important way: each one of the drives is seen to compete with the others for dominance, rather than, in the case of Maslow's hierarchy, one building upon the achievement of the other. In their book, *Driven*, Lawrence and Nohria (2002) provide compelling arguments for the importance of balancing these drives at the level of the individual, highlighting examples of individuals who harmed themselves or others because the drives in their lives had become unbalanced, usually because one of these drives became dominant at the expense of the others.

Our thesis is that drive/motivations function not only at the level of the individual, but also at the level of societies, cultures and organisations, resulting in pathologies and patterns of behaviour that lead to sustainable or unsustainable outcomes (Lawrence, 2010; Van Lange, 2000). We therefore extend the study of drives/motivations from the individual level to explore the impact of drives at a societal level. We argue that a balance in drives/motivations in society is equally important and that an imbalance in these essential and potentially disruptive human drives can, when they affect mass populations, lead to significant societal imbalances and cause extreme harm.

For example, we argue that the current lack of environmental and social sustainability of our businesses and societies are a direct result of an imbalance that favours the drive to acquire – a common feature of Western society since the industrial revolution and a trend that is now also common in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) (Ansari et al, 2012). Indeed, while economic success is a vital component, our society seems unbalanced in favour of the drive to acquire money, status and possessions, perhaps because financial currencies are most easily transferable and are used to purchase goods and services that fulfil

many of our needs (Arend, 2013). It is, though, not the only component of healthy, balanced communities in terms of human drives that make us what and who we are as a species and, indeed, what we believe and how we act.

In applying drive theory to the field of sustainability, we are also influenced by the notion of human flourishing from a positive psychology perspective. In particular we draw on the work of Seligman (2011) on approaches to life – which also suggests that a balance of motivation and activities is associated with flourishing (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011 and Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Despite the different philosophical origins of Lawrence and Nohria's (2002) and Seligman's (2011, 2012) work, we see the practical implications of their insights for business as complementary rather than contradictory. In particular, the qualitative and quantitative operationalisation of drive theory as an approach to sustainability in our thinking revealed that the drive to comprehend could be usefully be sub-categorised into comprehending both the 'why' and 'how' of sustainability.

We label the 'why' aspect of comprehending as 'a drive for meaning', which, building on Seligman, is a desire for a purpose bigger than the self. The 'how' of comprehending, we label as a 'drive for learning', essentially a desire to understand how the world works.

Towards a psychology-based model of business sustainability

We argue that organisations could make significant advances in achieving sustainability if they incorporated insights about the foundations of human flourishing and functionality into their purpose and strategy. We argue, therefore, that the purpose of business should be to grow sustainably, and ultimately this can only be achieved by playing an active part in restoring and maintaining a healthy balance among the various drives in our societies. In this way, business can provide an antidote to the excess of imbalance that has occurred through recent human history (Lawrence, 2010).

We present a model that redefines the purpose of business using psychological principles that embraces a wider sense of humanity and invites organisations to consider their role in society in terms of five key dimensions (see Figure 1). As:

- 1) A **provider** of quality products (drive to acquire)
- 2) A **defender** of what is important to people (drive to defend)

- 3) A **facilitator** of conversations and communities (drive to bond)
- 4) An **educator** in the space of sustainable consumption and wellbeing (drive to learn)
- 5) A **co-creator** of purpose (drive to have meaning/purpose)

Importantly, these dimensions, like individual drives, could potentially be of considerable benefit to society and alleviate some of the pressing problems if they were achieved in balance. International business, we argue has the scale, cross-boundary geographic reach and engagement with mass populations of employees, consumers and other stakeholders to help restore the balance in our societies and have a positive impact on the world and how it consumes resources. The benefit for business is that such actions should impact favourably on reputation, build trust and result in long-term business success (Money et al, 2012; Fombrun, 1996). In doing so, we focus on the causes of sustainable and unsustainable behaviour, rather than the reduction of symptoms as most mainstream sustainability models do. This article thereby introduces a novel conceptualisation of sustainability and suggests that businesses could leverage the power of psychology to rethink their purpose for the benefit of themselves and others.

Figure 1: Achieving sustainability through better balance



We believe that presentation of this model could provide a step towards helping business address the seemingly insurmountable challenges of sustainability in a more human way. In

doing so, business could harness human nature for the good of people and the planet, particularly as a route to securing sustained financial success. We warmly welcome collaboration and conversation with other academics and practitioners who would like to extend these ideas in thought and practice.

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