

THE DANCE OF SUSTAINABILITY

*And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance
I hope you dance. — Sanders and Sillers¹*

THERE IS A QUIET REVOLUTION occurring in boardrooms, design studios, factories, and government agencies across North America and around the industrial world. This revolution has the promise and potential of eclipsing any industrial or commercial revolution before it. It comes with many names, such as sustainable development, sustainability, The Natural Step, biomimicry, natural capitalism, ecological footprint, Factor 10, ecological design, corporate social responsibility, and many others. The promise is that humankind will finally attain that long-dreamed state of global prosperity, creativity, harmony with nature, freedom, security, and peace that is our highest aspiration. The danger is that this benign revolution is not emerging rapidly enough to forestall the needless tragedies of want and destitution, poverty, starvation, and warfare that result around the world from an unconsciously “take-make-waste” socio-economic system. So while the trajectory of the sustainability revolution is filled with promise, the velocity and eventual outcome of this revolution is uncertain.

Now is the time, perhaps more than any other in all of human history, when people from every corner of the globe and from every walk of life are being called to take a stand for a bountiful future of opportunity for all humanity. It is not sufficient that revolutionaries emerge from the destitution of impoverished third-world countries. This time in history calls for sustainability revolutionaries in pinstripe suits on Wall Street, for sustainability revolutionaries with computers and periodic tables in laboratories and classrooms, for sustainability revolutionaries in sales, marketing, advertising, and public relations.

It calls for the ordinary person who believes in the possibility of creating an extraordinary world.

Lance Armstrong, three-time winner of the world's most grueling athletic event — the Tour de France — has become one of our heroes. Lance is an outstanding athlete, yet more than this, he is a man whose life story inspires hope and reminds us to value what is most precious and irreplaceable: life. In his book, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*,² Lance tells the story of defeating his most formidable opponent — cancer — and, in the process, his discovery of who he really is and can be. At the age of 25, Lance learned that he had testicular cancer and that it had spread throughout his body. One day he was invulnerable, a world-class athlete training for the Tour de France, rationalizing away his symptoms until one day they became undeniable. At that point, all of Lance's focus and energy turned to running the only race that really matters: the race for his life.

At the outset of his book, Lance writes:

Death is not exactly cocktail party conversation, I know, and neither is cancer, or brain surgery, or matters below the waist. But I'm not here to make a lot of conversation. I want to tell the truth.³

The truth he tells is about an ordinary man — by his own admission, by no means a saint — who performs the extraordinary in his struggle for life itself.

Like Lance, in our book and work, we strive to tell the truth — in our case the truth about the body corporate and finding pathways to a healthy and prosperous future. We find that sustainability is not exactly cocktail party conversation either; but the truth is, our global society is heading in an unsustainable direction ultimately leading to the impoverishment of us all — every one of us is involved and affected, none of us can escape the corruption of the global biosphere. The evidence for this statement is accumulating rapidly and is widely available, some of which we'll discuss in the second part of chapter 2. Yet for a variety of reasons, perhaps out of ignorance or the false comfort of denial, collectively we are not heeding the warning signs.

So why do we feel hope? For one important reason: we have had the privilege of working with and witnessing ordinary folks accomplishing

extraordinary feats. They work in corporations, government agencies, and non-profit organizations that are striving to “do the right thing” in the fast-paced, demanding, and often confusing and contradictory world of the early 21st century. We do not pretend, nor do they, that these organizations are perfect, that they have all or even the best of answers, or even that they always know all the right questions to ask when it comes to sustainability. But we know firsthand that these individuals, and the organizations in which they work, are applying their best creative and managerial thinking to the challenge and task of sustainable development. It is a daunting task. We liken their experience to the challenge of dancing with a tiger.

Why dancing with the tiger? The tiger is truly the lord of its realm. A deadly predator of exquisite beauty, it is cunning, stealthy, and capable of instantaneous and lethal response when threatened or when hunting for prey. The tiger is at the top of its food chain. Yet despite its ferocity and success as a predator, the future of the tiger is in serious jeopardy. Extinction looms, as the global population of these magnificent creatures has fallen from an estimated 100,000 tigers in the wild at the beginning of the 20th century to approximately 5,000 remaining at the beginning of the 21st century. The tiger is fierce, tough, and competitive, yet completely unaware, and at the mercy, of the complex human-made forces that are cumulatively and persistently contributing to its extinction: degradation and loss of its habitat and cruel death at the hands of poachers harvesting its body for human use.

The modern industrial system is like the tiger. This capitalist, market-based, industrial economy has become the most powerful, innovative, and formidable force ever unleashed by the mind of man — it has become the dominant system in the complex web of global societies, cultures and economies. Today’s multinational corporations are the leading players in this realm. Yet the real foundation for this entire web, the Earth’s natural capital, is everywhere, and often invisibly, under attack: not at the hands of another species, but at our own hands. Natural capital — those resources, living systems and ecosystem services that provide such essentials of life as rich topsoil, pure air and water that are ultimately the source of all wealth — is being rapidly and seriously eroded by the very means of success that have brought the modern industrial system to its current position of global dominance.

Like those of the tiger, our systems of survival are under siege, and frighteningly few of our modern institutions seem aware of this fact or acknowledge the role they play, and the responsibility they hold, in creating this reality or in finding solutions. The organizations that are becoming more aware are also becoming the leaders in the movement toward sustainable development and corporate social and environmental responsibility. We believe these organizations are not only the competitors that will be best positioned for their own long-term survival, but they can also be a source of innovation and solutions for the future we so urgently need to create.

The business strategies being utilized by most corporate tigers today are like those characterized by the ill-fated Maginot Line created by the French prior to World War II. This was a line of massive, heavily armed fortresses built by the French between 1929 and 1940 along their borders with Germany and Italy. Intended to prevent the Nazi military forces from making a land assault on the French Republic, this massive undertaking, like a modern day Great Wall of China, lulled the French people into a false sense of security — one that helped lead to their easy defeat when new circumstances presented themselves. The Maginot Line was designed perfectly for the previous war, but failed utterly to be effective in securing the French against the new tactics and technology of mobile armored warfare and attack-aircraft employed by the Nazis at the beginning of World War II. Similarly, from the perspective of sustainability, most corporations and governments today are focused on a relationship with the natural world and global society that is outdated and obsolete.

Just as the French failed to perceive a new kind of threat to their security that was surreptitiously taking shape against them, and as Lance failed to give attention to the warning signs that threatened his health, so the vast majority of modern corporations, governments, and municipalities fundamentally fail to perceive the threat inherent in carrying on business in the current paradigm, the mode of business characterized by author Paul Hawken as the “take-make-waste” system of commerce. We live with false security born of a lack of awareness or of denial, believing that the strategies that have served us thus far will continue to ensure our success simply because they have worked in the past. But as Einstein’s dictum warns us: we cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them. We need to shift paradigms, and we need individuals, teams

and organizations that are willing to engage in the dance that such a shift entails.

The truth is, if we continue along our current course — the contamination of our global food and water supplies, the chemical transformation of the very air that we breathe through the release of pollutants and greenhouse gases, the rising levels of cancer and other immune system-related diseases through the release of toxic synthetic chemicals into the biosphere — we will sow, albeit unconsciously, the seeds of our own destruction. Yet there is another truth we need to face: while this is happening on a wider ecological scale, our organizations, and the individuals within them, are caught in their own complex survival game.

Obsessed by the tyranny of the financial markets, driven to relentlessly increase sales and profits quarter by quarter, forced to match every competitor's advance with an equal or greater advance of their own, determined to seize market share from adversaries like a tiger snatching prey from the jaws of another, today's corporations leave the actions needed to ensure long-term survival to someone else. The problems are once again deferred to someone else's watch. It is as though our leading institutions, both commercial and governmental, are afflicted with a kind of myopia, a tyranny of today's urgencies, that prevents them from taking a long-term view of their own best interests and those of the society that they serve and in which they are so intrinsically intertwined.

Fortunately, there are exceptions to this unconscious and ultimately self-destructive behavior, and it is often the lone individual, or a small teams of individuals, who are stirring the beast from within. Often working deep within the corporation or government organization under the radar, these agents of change are striving to raise the consciousness of their organizations and to pioneer a new and fundamentally more sustainable way of doing business. They are choosing to dance with the tigers of the global industrial system, of the industry in which they are located, and often of the very organizations that employ them.

This book is about the creative and groundbreaking work being performed by some of these individuals and teams. Their stories exemplify the innovative steps of pathfinders, those individuals who take one step after another through a demanding, sometimes dangerous, and often exciting jungle in order to develop better products,

processes and practices that are more compatible with the living systems on which we utterly depend.

Just as Lance Armstrong made the decision to choose life, so must each of us. This book contains stories of people who have made that choice and who are working to influence the long-term sustainability of their institutions — both commercial and governmental — and of our society. In our previous book, *The Natural Step for Business*,⁴ we describe the innovation and organizational learning of four very progressive corporations, two of them publicly traded, which are pioneers in the growing movement toward corporate responsibility and sustainable development. In the present volume, we focus on the transformative work of individuals and teams in four leading entities — two well-known multinational corporations, one global consulting firm, and one internationally renowned resort community — each an icon in its respective domain.

These four organizations are very different from each other, yet each is respected worldwide as the leader in its field: Nike, one of the most recognized brands and the leading sports and fitness company; Starbucks, the leading specialty coffee retailer that has revolutionized its industry; CH2M HILL, a great leading professional services firm with a substantial environmental engineering practice; and the resort municipality of Whistler, British Columbia, internationally acclaimed as the premier mountain resort community in North America.

As advisors on sustainable business practices and corporate responsibility working directly with the sustainability innovators and pathfinders within these organizations, we were able to share their triumphs and frustrations, come to understand their motivations, observe their behavior, and witness the challenges of their roles as internal change agents for sustainable development and greater corporate responsibility. It was through this experience that the metaphor “dancing with the tiger” arose. How does one dance with the tiger? You do it carefully, skillfully, courageously, in tune to the same music, and advancing step by natural step.

While dance comes in many forms, the dance of moving sustainability forward in organizations and communities requires both clever choreography and deft footwork. You need to synchronize your planning and performance with your partner in such a way that you move sustainability forward without getting attacked or devoured. Sometimes you need to take one step back in order to take two steps

forward. As a choreographer, you need to lead others by being a few beats ahead of them, but not so far ahead that they cannot see where you are going. You need to understand the capabilities and limitations of those individuals and systems you work with in this dance. In other words, the dance of sustainability is not a solo performance. It is a dance you do in relationship with the tiger whether that tiger is your company, community, or the very market economy itself.

This is no small challenge. So why would you want to engage in a dance with a force that would as soon eat you as dance with you? For those individuals whose stories we tell in this book, the underlying reason is simply that our common future depends upon it — the future success and prosperity of our organizations and communities, the future well-being of our children and grandchildren, and the future possibilities of humankind and countless other species.

In *The Natural Step for Business*, we suggested that humanity is now engaged in a challenge of evolutionary proportions. We further suggested that ecological factors must become integral to our understanding of what it means to be successful in the organizations of the 21st century. Men and women in their roles in corporations, governments and non-governmental organizations, and as citizens, householders, and parents, are challenged to become conscious of the evolutionary role that our organizations and communities play in the future of the human race and life as we know it. We are all called upon to move beyond blame and to take responsibility for the conscious evolution of our human systems. We need to begin holding ourselves, and others, accountable for contributing to a more sustainable direction for humanity.

The individuals, organizations and communities featured in this book choose to dance with the tiger because it is a monumentally important task and challenge. Ultimately, it is the most vital, and many would say, the most exciting dance of all. This is the definitive dance of change: the transformation of the global system from one that is on an unsustainable trajectory to global misery and a fortress world, to one that leads the way to a vibrant, healthy, secure and prosperous future for all humanity. The purpose of this dance is not to change the tiger's stripes. The purpose is to inoculate the tiger with a new idea known as "sustainability" in order to ensure its future health, so that it can express its power, leadership, influence and creative energy in new, enlivening, and more sustainable ways.

It is our privilege to tell the stories of skillful performers — choreographers and dancers in the guise of employees innovating more sustainable practices on the production line, baristas in cappuccino bars selling fair trade coffee and saving coffee grounds for compost, municipal planners creating comprehensive sustainability plans, engineers designing closed-loop manufacturing systems — who are dancing with a force that holds promise and sometimes risk for them personally and for their organizations. These choreographers and dancers perform this dance in a variety of ways and for a range of reasons, but they share the following traits:

- They are aware that the health of global economic, ecological, and social systems is integrally interconnected and interdependent.
- They realize that sound business, strategy, and management decisions — whether implemented for financial profit, social profit or in a government agency — ignore the realities of these interconnections and interdependencies at their peril.
- They operate with an expanded sense of social responsibility that is based on the belief that “doing the right thing” needs to be a deep-seated core value of any citizen, community or organization in the 21st century if we are to create a vibrant and prosperous future, and that integrating more sustainable practices *is* the right thing to do.
- They take personal responsibility for the conscious evolution of their organizations and communities in a more enduring and sustainable direction.

The following chapters invite you to join us as witnesses to the dance, and hopefully will inspire you to take up the dance yourself or add new steps to your existing repertoire.

In chapter 2 we explore the choreography of sustainability: how the dance of sustainability is put together. This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, we examine some of the insights that arise when we use systems thinking to understand the nature of sustainability; we outline a step-by-step strategic planning model for moving an organization toward more sustainable practices; and we look at how various approaches and strategies to sustainability and the growing array of tools, actions, metrics, and monitoring and reporting systems for sustainability, fit together in a complementary set to help organizations improve their sustainability performance. We also provide examples of

how these approaches, strategies, actions, tools, and measuring and reporting systems are being used in diverse organizations. In the second part, we explore some of the symptoms: the warning signs that provide us with vital information about the state of health of our current global systems. Some readers will already be familiar with the details of these symptoms and may want to skip this section. If you do not have this familiarity, we urge you to look at the material and explore the sources we cite for more information.

In chapter 3 we introduce the main stories that we tell in this book, stories from Nike, Starbucks, Whistler and CH2M HILL, stories of the many individuals, teams, and departments engaged in this path-breaking work of sustainable development. We also explore the dynamics of the transformative change in which they are engaged: how new ideas and concepts spread and take hold in organizations (innovation diffusion), how change agents identify which steps to take in their dance (finding leverage in the system), and where to intervene in the system for the most profound results (prioritizing action).

In chapters 4 through 7 we take an in-depth look at the sustainability experiences of three global corporations, Nike, Starbucks, and CH2M HILL, and one community, Whistler. Each is a tiger in its own domain. None of the corporations in this book is now functioning in an ecologically or socially sustainable manner. None could pretend to do so. However, we focus on the many people, policies, and practices within these companies that support and encourage an authentic quest to integrate sustainability into their operations.

The chapter on Whistler, British Columbia, North America's premier four-season mountain resort community, provides insights into the experience of how a community can consciously choose to make ecological, social, and economic sustainability the foundation stones for its future well-being and prosperity despite the seeming paradox inherent within the concept of being a "sustainable destination resort." We recount the experience of several key organizations: the Resort Municipality of Whistler (the municipal government), Whistler/Blackcomb Ski Resorts, (a division of Intrawest, North America's leading developer of four-season, village-centered mountain resorts), the Fairmont Chateau Whistler (Whistler's icon flagship hotel), Tourism Whistler (the global marketing board for the resort), and AWARE (the Association of Whistler Area Residents for the

Environment, a community environmental activist organization), and we tell the stories of some of the individuals who are leading the dance, and inviting others in the community to join.

In chapter 8 we summarize some key sustainability themes, lessons, and insights that emerged for us as a result of working with these and other organizations. We focus on six themes that have emerged from our work with the organizations featured in this book as well as those in *The Natural Step for Business*; explore four dynamics that we have observed that influence the velocity and direction of change in organizations; and provide examples of steps that some additional organizations have taken toward instituting more sustainable practices.

In chapter 9 we look to the future and discuss critical issues of sustainable development and social and environmental responsibility for today's organizations. We consider some of the clear benefits experienced by organizations today as they authentically engage and experiment with sustainability in their operations, and consider these as guideposts on our way to creating the kind of world that we would want to bequeath to our children and the generations to follow.

In the appendix we include some basic background on The Natural Step framework for sustainability and the basic science upon which that framework is built.⁵

As you read the stories in the following chapters, remember that sustainability is a journey. We recognize that the organizations featured in this book are still at the beginning steps of this journey. They are not perfect. They have a long way to go, as we all do. However, we can say for certain that there *are* people operating within each of these organizations who understand how important this work is and who are genuinely making a difference in many ways in which the organizations conduct their affairs. We also ask you to remember that ultimately we are all walking in the tiger's realm. Even if we choose not to dance directly with the tiger, if we choose to confront the tiger in other ways, at the end of the day we are all engaged in the same dance as the tiger — the dance of sustainability and survival.

Finally, we offer this excerpt from a popular song written by Mark D. Sanders and Tia Sillers and performed by LeeAnn Womack that captures some of our own sentiment and the spirit we hope you find in the stories you are about to read:

*I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance
Never settle for the path of least resistance
Livin' might mean takin' chances but they're worth
takin'
Lovin' might be a mistake but it's worth makin'
Don't let some hell-bent heart leave you bitter
When you come close to sellin' out reconsider
Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance
I hope you dance. . .⁶*

Even if it means dancing with the tiger.