

SUSTAINABLE – FOR WHOM?

By Ed Morler. MBA, PhD.

Just what is it that we are trying to sustain? For whom? Too often, innocently or not, we are sustaining the status quo of vested interests who are the very people who generated the “unsustainable” behaviors/results.

We despair at the destruction of the rain forests. We mourn the loss of habitat and the waste of energy and resources. We justly criticize the self-interests or lack of courage of those CEOs who spike quarterly income growth to maintain their bonuses and position at the cost of long-term sustainability.

However, it is we, the public, who are also pressuring them to do so. It is our own behavior that contributes to and/or allows the conditions in which we find ourselves whether it be global warming or economic chaos. We, as well as those blatantly responsible, need to be more cognizant of the consequences of our own self-centered expectations/demands. We need be more critically aware and discerning of what our “representatives” are supporting and passing “on our behalf.” From afar we ask why isn’t something being done? But it is our own continuing irresponsible “passing the buck,” that has created or allowed the perfect economic/environmental storm we currently experience.

As long as we continue to avoid owning our underlying irresponsibility, no matter how many symptoms we “fix,” our crises will inevitably grow. How much bigger a crisis do we need before we wake up, grow up and confront this chronic foundational and causative problem. Not acting so is an undeniable statement of our lack of integrity. Until we do so, all our noble efforts and good deeds unfortunately will have little substantive impact.

The primary reason change is so difficult, either individually or organizationally, is that associated with any change is always some degree of confusion, doubt and fear. Rather than face those, we tend to stay with the familiar even when we know it is dysfunctional and needs to change. How often do we deal with a problematic situation when it is still manageable? Too often, real change only occurs when the non-confronted issues reach crisis and simply can no longer be avoided. All human generated crises are the result of irresponsible and thus self-centered behavior.

By our continuing lack of responsible involvement, the only thing we do sustain is crisis. As long as we only address the symptoms of the crisis and not its cause, i.e. our own irresponsibility/immaturity/lack of integrity, the crises will only morph and grow larger.

The Enron crisis apparently was not big enough to generate mechanisms leading to an increase in *actual* corporate responsibility. The compliance regulations, i.e., the “fixes,” wound up being little more than superficial and very costly political ploys that effectively avoided confronting and dealing with the lack of integrity - hence, our much larger current crisis.

THE WRONG ARGUMENT

Unfortunately, we live in a culture where contributing actual value is rarely a real objective, much less a priority. Dealing with crises only on the symptom level (“fixing”) is too often a means to repress/hide/avoid dealing with the underlying lack of integrity.

Rather than confront that, the politicians and the “fat cats” of vested interests purposefully misdirect our attention by instilling fear of something, i.e., big versus small, regulation versus non-regulation, liberal vs. conservative or capitalism vs. socialism. The exaggerated rhetoric of either side is always limiting and panders to the insecurities of a marginally responsible public.

Government, laws and regulations do have their place and can contribute to the greater good - *provided* they are based on a *mature, i.e.*, rational, responsible assessment and balanced application of programs/services that *actually add value*. Sharing different perspectives can be helpful, and each, depending on time and context, may have a contribution to a constructive balance. For example, the argument is not whether regulations are good or bad, but how much is needed to maintain and contribute to a responsible society.

The tired and continuing arguments of whether it is the inefficiencies of too much government/regulation or the abuse that occur with not enough does not and never has addressed the *critical, foundational* issue – the presence or absence of integrity, causative to all behavior.

When integrity is lacking, policies, procedures and philosophies are inevitably corrupted. The correlation of integrity and emotional maturity is direct. One does not exist without the other. See *The Leadership Integrity Challenge: Assessing and Facilitating Emotional Maturity*.

Certainly, policies, procedures and philosophies need to be discussed and addressed but always with the awareness that, as important as they can be, they are junior to doing so from a foundation of emotional maturity and integrity. Without this maturity, the inevitable corruption of whatever the existing program, policy, or philosophy creates arguments for its opposite. It keeps the pendulum swinging from one inefficient extreme to the other, stifling any real resolution and ensuring more and larger crises. **How “sustainable” is that?**

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