

Tapping into Grassroots Employee Energy

Create a Space for Bold Ideas

Thursday, October 21, 2010 – 9:30 - 11:00am

Speakers

- >> **Stephanie Garrett**, Senior CSR Advisor, CBSR (Moderator)
- Stephanie Bertels**, Assistant Professor, Simon Fraser University
- >> **Tom Ewart**, Managing Director, Network for Business Sustainability
- >> **Chris Miller**, Manager of Corporate Consciousness, Seventh Generation
- >> **David Robitaille**, Director, Corporate Citizenship & Corporate Affairs, IBM Canada Ltd.
- >> **Barbara Turley-McIntyre**, Director of Sustainability & Corporate Citizenship, The Co-operators Group Limited

Key Messages

- >> We need to understand the practices that effectively embed sustainability within an organization.
- >> Talented and motivated employees are key and the right talent can be hard to find.
- >> Both failures and mistakes are important for learning and growth.
- >> Transparency is an important tool for building relationships within your corporate community as well as with your consumers.

Worth Repeating

“Your employees are your ambassadors and intrinsically tell the story of your company.”

- Barbara Turley-McIntyre, Director of Sustainability and Corporate Citizenship, The Co-operators Group Limited

“Think systemically; sustainability flows from the top down and the bottom up”

-Chris Miller, Manager of Corporate Consciousness, Seventh Generation

Summary

Stephanie Bertels opened the discussion with a brief overview of her research project; an analysis of the key practices currently being used to embed the principles of sustainability within an organization. Her research spanned 13,000 academic articles. She identified 60 potential practices for embedding sustainability and presented them in a 2x2 framework. She noted that while there was a great deal of literature on effective practices, there was very little covering what doesn't work; a gap that she found both interesting and significant. Her research report will be available in November at www.nbs.net.

Barbara Turley-McIntyre spoke to the importance of key talent. She says there is a “talent war out there” and that retaining, recruiting and motivating talented employees is a tough challenge. She noted that 94% of The Co-operators staff sees the organization as socially and environmentally responsible. Another challenge in the move towards embedding sustainability, she says, is that change is slow. She relies on staff awards and training through videos and presentations, intranet postings, and online learning courses, which over half the organization’s staff have taken to date. Finally, she shared an example about how a relationship with a long-time supplier had been severed after it had refused to adopt sustainability practices.

Chris Miller spoke about how Seventh Generation embeds sustainability into the DNA of their culture. Miller says that it’s important to “think systemically, sustainability flows from the top down and the bottom up” and how some of the company’s most impactful projects came from ideas voluntarily suggested by staff. Miller pointed out the importance of transparency, which he identified as one of the most effective ways to build relationships within the Seventh Generation community and with their customers. Miller described one situation that occurred during the financial downturn where Seventh Generation’s product decision did not align with their corporate culture and vision. Community and employee reaction caused them to re-think their decision. He highlighted that “we as a community learn more from our mistakes than our successes...” Later in the Q&A, Miller also made the point that it is much easier to build relationships in a small community like Vermont; tight knit communities play a key role in creating a culture of collaboration, which is why some of the bigger, global companies need to work harder to achieve similar results.

David Robitaille says the time to discuss the topic of employee engagement couldn’t be better and explained that IBM is currently running an employee foundation campaign involving 18,000 people, working towards the common goal of supporting the communities in which IBM operates. Robitaille spent the majority of his time describing the “IBM Service Corps” program, loosely based on the concept of the Peace Corps; teams of employees from a wide range of functional backgrounds are assigned to 6-month projects in countries on the ‘cusp of development’ such as Brazil, Vietnam and Romania. The program not only exposes employees to social and environmental challenges but also immerses participants in intercultural exchanges and intercultural collaboration; a dimension of the program, which Robitaille says, is very valuable. Due to the success of the program, IBM decided to launch an executive program with smaller teams and shorter projects. One of the challenges IBM faces in terms of employee engagement is the mobility of IBM employees; as a truly global company in structure, employees often spend little time in one office and clients are all over the world, often never stepping foot in an IBM office. Finding creative ways to bring employees together and make them feel part of the larger team is critical – Community engagement is an ideal way to achieve this.