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By **Renee Lertzman, Ph.D.**

What it Means to be Green

The psychology of sustainability, behavior change and why we love our planet—and our cars.

There's no denying it: green has arrived.

The greening of the meeting and event industry may be nascent, but sustainability is certainly no longer fringe. In fact, integrating sustainability into business practices will soon be not only essential, but a leading competitive edge. Once a unique differentiator, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable business offers entirely new opportunities in terms of branding, targeting new customer bases and demonstrating innovation. It's a field of rapid innovation and energy. However, as much as we may “in theory” support sustainability, there often remains a gap between our values, aspirations and actions.

While costs are usually the first line of defense against following through on greener practices, increasing evidence in psychology suggests the picture is more complicated. It is time we think more creatively about what drives change, and specifically innovation. While we may like to think we can separate data (or information) from our emotions, what we know about human nature, neurosciences and the psyche tells us otherwise. The myth of the “information deficit model”—that giving people information would lead to action—has long been dismissed in social sciences. We are a lot more complicated than that, psychologically and socially.

Whether we want to admit it or not, our actions do not always reflect our deepest held values or beliefs. Perhaps another way of putting it is that we are capable of holding contradictions, ambivalence and competing desires.

Key Takeaways

- Sustainability is not only about “going green”—it's about fundamentally rethinking how we live and what we value.
- Too much attention is given to the logistics and tactical aspects of sustainability, out of fear that if we address the “why” people will get turned off, scared or overwhelmed.
- Applying psychological understandings of sustainability can make our work more effective, stronger and lead to greater traction within our organizations and with our clients.
- Sustainability and the changes it represents can cause anxiety, but also provide staff and clients opportunities to share, vent and discuss challenges, barriers and opportunities.
- The lack of behavior or action in response to sustainability does not necessarily mean people don't care or are not concerned; in fact, the opposite may be true.
- The gap between knowing and doing is not so much a gap but rather reflects how complicated and contradictory our desires can be.

There's More to the Story Than Having All of the Information

Think about the last time you visited a zoo or an aquarium. Chances are, you experienced wonder for the colorful creatures swimming or flying or scuttling before you. You may have read little exhibit signs explaining the various threats facing these creatures, or about the impact of climate change. Then, you probably went to the café, ordered lunch for your family and drove home. Nice weekend outing. Does this mean you don't care about the environment?

We continue to believe that information (such as why this is good for us, the damage our current practices cause to the ecosystems upon which we depend, the unintended consequences of industry to wildlife and human health) should be enough to motivate sustainable behavioral and industrial changes. Information is only part of the picture. And not only that, but information about the range of ecological problems we face and will continue to face can be daunting, leading people to shut down, turn away and tune out.

Sustainability's Split Personalities: From Rah-rah to Doom and Gloom

This dilemma has led to (at least) two very

different styles in sustainability today. One can be described as the “happy-happy” approach—make green hot, sexy, fun, game-like and you'll win people over. Stimulate the endorphins and pleasure hormones and we've got some traction. The other approach we tend to equate with “doom-and-gloom”—present the cold, hard facts, make it completely clear what is at stake in our current business-as-usual practices and let the anxiety and fear flow. Surely fear is a predictable motivator for change, right? The reality is that different approaches and styles will be more effective depending on the specific context of the organization, culture and situation. Some may perk up at the mention of games, and others will be moved to action by having a sense of ethical responsibility.

Those in corporate and business settings tend to be doers—focusing on how to get the job done. Thus, sustainable business and corporate responsibility focuses on the “what” and “how.” That is, solutions—boots-on-the-ground tactics. There is nothing wrong with that: We crave and need best practices, case studies and leading innovative technologies, so we can learn from each other and advance our efforts. However, focusing only on positive

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solutions and the sexy side of being green (and indeed, it can be very sexy) is only part of the picture. As much as we want to, we cannot ignore why we are talking about being green in the first place. (Believe me, I know we'd like to skip that part.) Yes, the “why.” The messy parts about human psychology and behavior, how we manage anxiety about potentially scary issues (e.g., climate change), how people respond to change and how to resiliently meet challenges ahead. Believe it or not, part of our brain is registering the “why” and probably craving a strong drink, a marathon of *True Blood* or a few rides on Epcot Center's Glide.

Why Bother with the “Why?”

Research, particularly in the emergent field of environmental psychology, is finding that the “how,” “what” and “why” are interwoven when it comes to CSR and sustainable practice, if we want the results we need—what U.K. researchers Irene Lorenzoni, et al., refer to as the cognitive, affective and behavioral components of “engagement.”

Let's break this down. Why the “why?” The “why” speaks to the human or social aspects of sustainability—how our ways of being and thinking have been extremely good with certain advances, and not so good with others (such as the protection of clean air and water and soil, protection of wildlife and managing climate change risks). Focusing on tactical solutions is critical, but will only get us so far unless we begin to bring in the human solutions—what it means to be green in terms of how we think, work and live. This gets to the heart of the dilemma mentioned above: why we think and feel and do very different things. Rarely does it all line up neatly. We love our cars and flights and pineapples in the winter, we love the heating cranked



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The Myth of Apathy: Engaging People with Sustainability

Check out Dr. Lertzman's WEC session online at MPI's Professional Development OnDemand portal:
www.mpiweb.org/Portal/OnDemand.

What Does This Mean For Us?

There are several ways we can begin to incorporate psychological dimensions of sustainability into our work and practices.

Assume people care. Apathy does not mean a lack of care, concern or engagement. More often, the lack of *pathos* or feeling—what apathy literally means—may actually be the result of caring too much, leading to a sense of overwhelm or cynicism. Reaching out and creating opportunities for engaging in ways people feel safe (rather than using guilt, fear or scare tactics) is key.

Create space for people to safely debrief. Provide space and acknowledgement for how people may actually feel about sustainability or CSR. This does not mean group therapy; it means having a way for people in your team, organization or department to informally and safely talk about these issues and how they impact our lives and work without the need to rush into solutions and problem solving. Don't worry, the solutions will come.

Set a precedent for authenticity. Authenticity in the context of CSR and sustainability is about transparency. Greening your work does not mean changing the essence of who you are or what you are about. It is about recognizing that people fundamentally respond to authentic connection and speaking the truth. Even if the truth contains realities that may be difficult to face.

Draw on the power of social networks and groups. Encourage staff and members to self-organize and draw on the creativity and innovation in the group. Provide contexts for people to come forward and engage on their own terms; this negates the tendency to become a "nanny" or "big brother" and enhances the sense of being part of a solution.

up, the long hot showers and the convenience of disposables. We also may love our rivers and seas, our wetlands and Arctic ices, the idea of our children having a healthy planet to enjoy and discover. This doesn't make us bad or crazy, it makes us human. However, we must find the capacities to support one another in making changes that will, in the long run, benefit all of us.

Recognizing these contradictions is key to understanding how to engage, motivate, mobilize and enact the changes we so deeply need and desire. Simple, eh?

Sustainability Can be a Charged Topic

Sustainability is an emotionally charged topic for many people. It is also about learning to think differently—more systemically and about long-term versus short-term gains. In other words, whether we want to admit it or not, going green is about changing how we feel and think in relation to the world.

Chip Conley, CEO and founder of Joie de Vivre Hospitality, refers to this shift in how we think about both systems and time as karmic capitalism. Conley remarked recently at the Sustainable Brands 2011 conference, "One of the challenges of capitalism is that it's very short-term oriented, especially in public markets. Karma is the opposite of capitalism: it lasts lifetimes. In the business world, when you have [that] perspective, the actions you take have long-term implications, it shifts your thinking."

The key word here is "shift." And shift—or change—represents both great opportunity and loss.

So can a deeper understanding and application of psychology actually help us green the meeting and event industry? It may seem strange, but the answer is yes. In fact, it may be essential. Psychology is a rich resource for helping us appreciate how to navigate the path of change—in this case, from one way of doing and thinking to another. Change management has recognized this for decades, but now it's time to join change management with the new world of sustainable business.

A psychology of sustainability can involve recognizing that going green is about more than changing our light bulbs and making tiny changes; ultimately, it is about reframing how we see ourselves in relation to our work and our broader environment. Psychology also offers unique and emerging understandings of cognitive and affective (or emotional) levers that drive behavior change.

Successful psychologists can inspire the applications: acknowledge the situation, be honest, create a safe space and work together with others for creative solutions.



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Talking: One of the Most Powerful Behavior Change Tools

As Rosemary Randall, U.K.-based psychotherapist and founder of Cambridge Carbon Footprint, has found, often the simple act of bringing people together to talk about their relationship with becoming more carbon-neutral can be quite profound. Randall developed a conversation-based program called "Carbon Conversations" that combined education about carbon reduction and an informal space to chat about what it would mean, for example to drive or fly less, begin shopping more locally or walk more. After hundreds of meetings, Randall observed people may often be pulled in different directions (such as flying to see children in another country) and feel quite frustrated; but in the act of talking with others about it, people could more quickly come to creative solutions. Similar programs are springing up around the U.S., from Portland, Oregon-based Northwest Earth Institute "learning circles" to the enormously successful Personal Sustainability Project social innovation initiative at Walmart.

We all like to focus on the positive aspects of sustainability, which are many. While it may sound surprising, the issue of loss is rarely acknowledged and yet is arguably part of what it means to change—even if the change is positive, beneficial and rewarding. Even changes that are undeniably desirable, such as moving to a new home or taking a new job, involve a loss of what had been before.

With integrating sustainable practices into our lives, we may experience loss,

whether of old and cherished ways of doing things or our identity as individuals or organizations. Randall notes, "When loss remains unspoken, neither grieved nor worked through, then change and adjustment cannot follow. A better understanding of loss might allow it to be brought... into the public; to inform our personal communications... and to suggest alternative support structures that would facilitate [our] work. This in turn would allow positive messages and actions to flourish instead

of being inhibited or idealized." When we focus exclusively on positive messages and actions, we run the risk of overriding the very real reactions and responses we may have to "going green."

While this all may sound touchy-feely and entirely unconnected with sustainability and CSR, what this boils down to is the necessity to both recognize that not everyone will feel ready for the changes sustainability requires and that this does not in any way reflect the level of concern, care or passion one may have for

a cleaner, healthier planet for ourselves and future generations. Rather, it is more likely that people may feel either guilt-tripped into change or overwhelmed. Or angry. Or all of the above. What this also means is that the more we are able to integrate lessons and insights learned from the frontlines of psychology, the more effective we will be in meeting these challenges faster and sooner. **one+**

The Future of Sustainability

MPI has commissioned Leeds Metropolitan University to manage a three-year research study, sponsored by the MPI Foundation and InterContinental Hotels Group, into the importance and value of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability to the meeting and event industry. Visit mpiweb.org/portal/csr to learn about some of the results from the study.

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