

Sustainability

It *is* personal

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1. Sustainability: It's...a guiding principle

Today, you probably woke up on an IKEA bed between IKEA cotton sheets, and used any number of their kitchen products to get breakfast fixed. It is also possible that you dressed with something good from H&M. And by the time you enjoyed your orange juice or savoured your coffee, you will have handled and used one or more cartons made by Tetra Pak.

We have highlighted these internationally active companies since they have three key things in common:

1. strong Swedish roots and heritage – the founder of each company was Swedish – and the companies still have a main office in Sweden;
2. they get up close and personal with their customers at that most visceral level of basic needs – shelter, warmth, sustenance and attractiveness
3. Sustainability is a part of their successful business strategy, and of their business operations

Our focus in this article is on their third common characteristic: Sustainability. We shall look briefly at what Sustainability means, at its Wicked nature and at the Personal Responsibility that lies at its core.

Sustainability may influence your decisions on buying from these and other companies, but it probably may not be that high on your list of reasons, even though Sustainability (and Sustainable, as in Sustainable Development) is referred to frequently by business and in the media. If we asked you to explain what Sustainability is, you might be hard pressed to come up with a concise definition, but you would certainly be able to detail some key issues such as environmental damage, resource scarcity, global warming, social inequality and the need for a long-term perspective. Complicated and challenging though the subject is, a definition that focuses on Sustainability as a *process* and not as a goal, is a good start to get to grips with the concept:

“Sustainability is a guiding principle which supports the innovation, creation and fostering of value to fulfill the needs of our stakeholders, wherever present, now and across time.”¹

Sustainability is an ongoing and dynamic process: it is evolutionary, a fact that is recognised by these three companies in their Sustainability or environmental reports (all available on line). They understand that they need innovative approaches to adjust their actions and behaviours to a constantly evolving and changing social, eco and economic environment. And in this, they also understand the importance of their stakeholders (see boxes).

IKEA

“Our new sustainability strategy, “People and Planet Positive”, aims at inspiring millions of customers to live a more sustainable life at home, making IKEA energy and resource independent as well as creating a better life for people and communities. We will continue to publicly share our efforts and results on our way forward.” - Mikael Ohlsson, CEO

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The time scale for Sustainability reaches from the now to the distant future, so you need mental agility to match visionary thinking with the practical demands of the quarterly reporting and short-term goal setting that is currently required of many businesses. On a personal level, you need to consider the time span of your intended engagement and raise your horizons beyond your own existence, beyond your pension plan and even beyond your great grandchildren: our future generations are precious.

2. Sustainability: It's...wicked

Following on from the question on what Sustainability is, if you were then asked to apply Sustainability to yourself, your own business or the organisation you work for, then things might get trickier, depending on where you come on the continuum from regarding Sustainability as an irrelevance (or even a nuisance, getting in the way of the real business) to someone who is inspired to action by the needs of our times and by the imperative of a long term perspective.

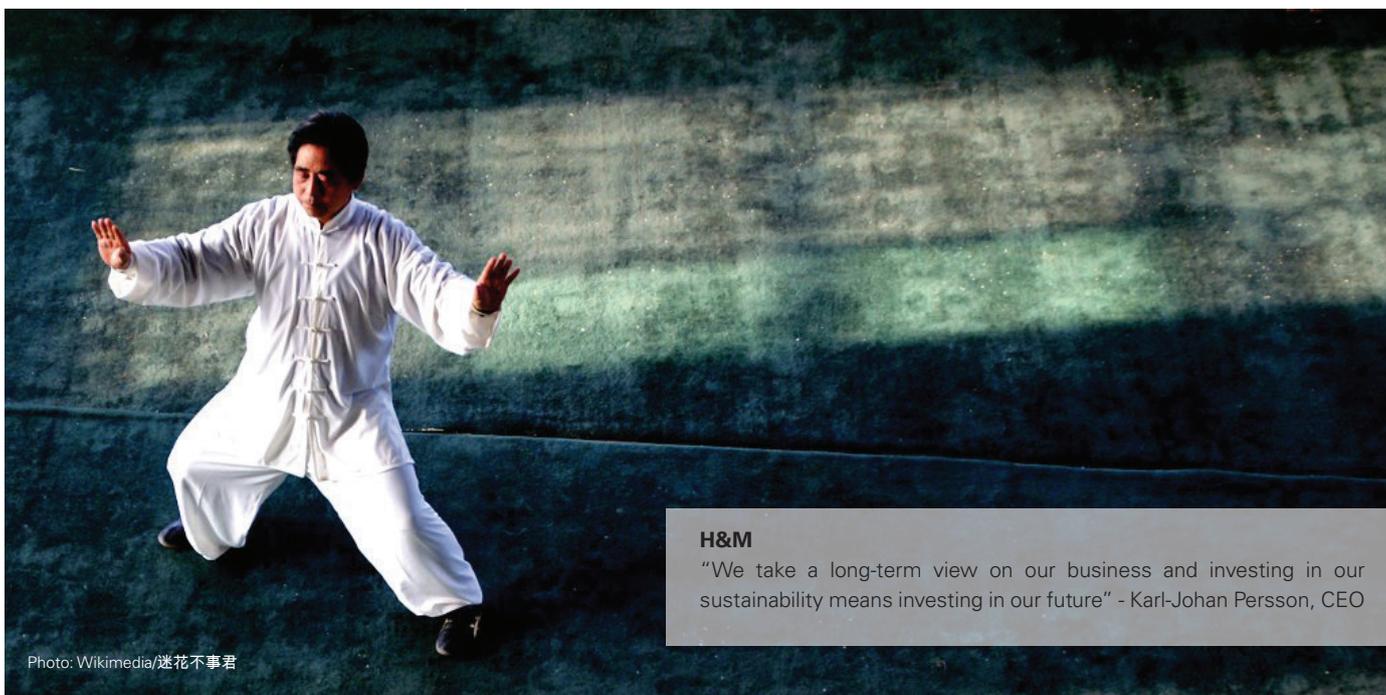
Whatever your view of Sustainability, then "Wicked!" also becomes part of your vocabulary, either in its classic sense of very bad or troublesome, or in its more contemporary meaning of great or masterly. This is because Sustainability has to be treated as a Wicked Problem – and, for us, both meanings of wicked are relevant here. In an excellent Harvard Business Review article "Strategy as a Wicked Problem" (May 2008) John C. Camillus outlines his thesis that a "wicked problem has innumerable causes, is tough to describe and doesn't have a right answer..." which is a perfect way of describing Sustainability from the perspective of a problem or challenge. He also outlines the 10

Properties of Wicked Problems, where the most pertinent for Sustainability are:

- there is no definite formulation: it's not possible to write a well defined statement;
- wicked problems have no stopping rule: the search for solutions never stops;
- there is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem: solutions may generate unexpected consequences;
- every wicked problem is essentially unique: it is without precedent; experience does not help you address it

This is likely to have even the most strong minded of us flipping from despair to euphoria – is this crippling or challenging? Normally our tasks are formulated around specific actions with specific outcomes in view. In following Sustainability, we undertake meaningful work that is continuous, but this engagement has no clear endings. Instead, it allows for the accommodation of a potentially endless number of milestones, which follow the ceaseless evolution of the world around you. Now that is a challenge!

Sustainability really is a Wicked Problem: so what do you do? Given this complexity, Sustainability as a principle is your guide into uncharted territory. The Vikings have a very bad reputation for violence and plundering, yet their culture, voyages of discovery and international trading were extraordinary. We can continue to plunder or we can take another journey. Taking responsibility for our actions is too often seen as a burden: in reality, it is a privilege, as we are enabled to choose our own path.



H&M

"We take a long-term view on our business and investing in our sustainability means investing in our future" - Karl-Johan Persson, CEO

Photo: Wikimedia/迷花不事君

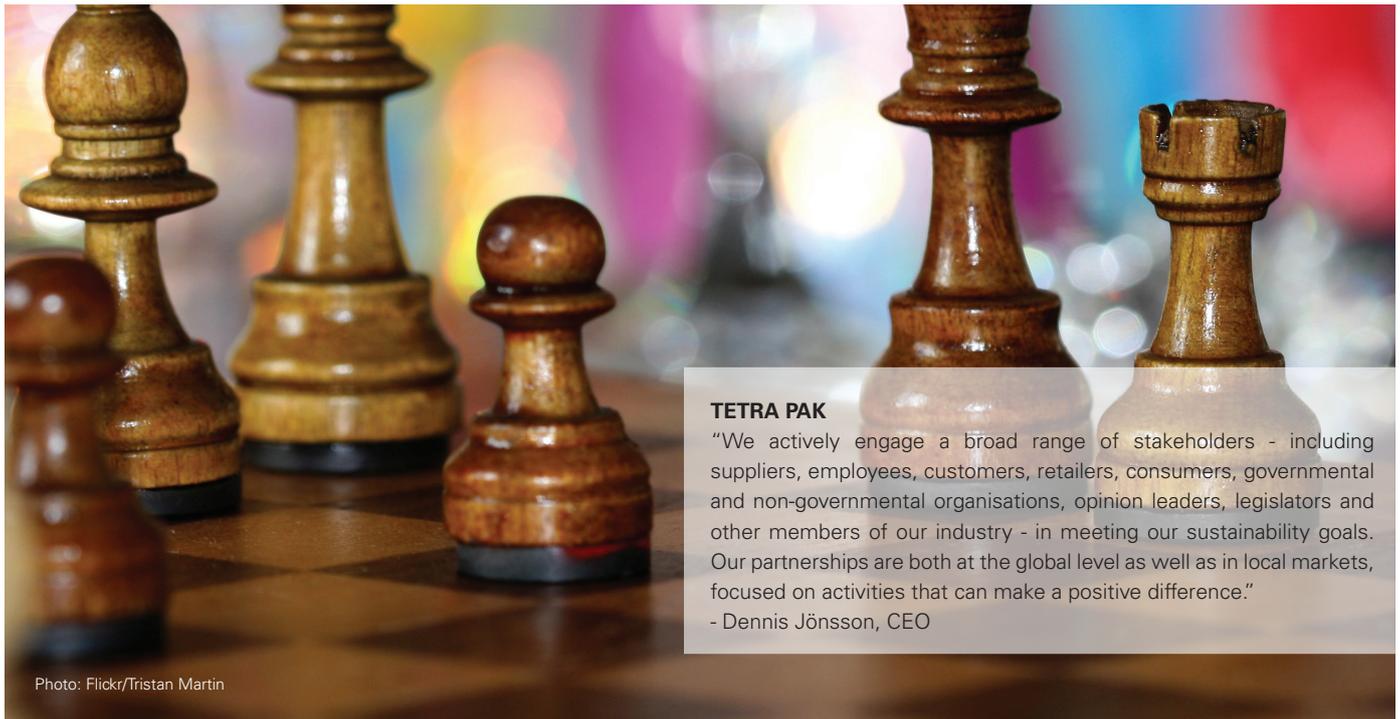


Photo: Flickr/Tristan Martin

TETRA PAK

"We actively engage a broad range of stakeholders - including suppliers, employees, customers, retailers, consumers, governmental and non-governmental organisations, opinion leaders, legislators and other members of our industry - in meeting our sustainability goals. Our partnerships are both at the global level as well as in local markets, focused on activities that can make a positive difference."

- Dennis Jönsson, CEO

3. Sustainability: It's...personal

The leaders of H&M, IKEA and Tetra Pak understand the wholeness that is encompassed by Sustainability. Commercially engaged, they know that profit is a positive word, provided that how their money is made and used follows a properly Sustainable process. They fulfill the needs of their stakeholders – broadly the people and organisations that either affect them or are affected by them (and we include the environment here as well) - making their companies valuable for us all. The Sustainability nourished innovation, which springs from their new business practices, helps make them very resilient and responsible organisations. Sustainability is a guiding principle for these companies and their sustainable behaviour is good for their business. They are showing leadership and they are on the road of Responsibility.

Sustainability is about change and survival. We are one of the most adaptive species on this planet, and our extraordinary mental agility and tool-making ability lend us huge capacity for innovation, allowing us both to react to - and drive - change. Every one of us has this capacity to be a change agent or catalyst for change: a thought provoking article "Change leader, change thyself " (Nate Boaz and Erica Ariel Fox, McKinsey Quarterly, March 2014) posits that, as a business leader, any change you want will not stick unless you change yourself. This is certainly true for the rest of us, as well. It is personal.

As individuals - whether business leaders or not - living Sustainability is easier when you understand that active responsibility is at the heart of Sustainability, and Personal Responsibility pulses at its core. Once you realise this, your next

step is vital: simply take some time and make two lists, one with your Stakeholders - and the other with your core Values. You will need to reflect on and revisit these lists a few times before they take on a polished state, but the act of undertaking this process will give you a new or improved set of bearings to follow. Sustainability for an individual means that you need to take on the responsibility to engage continuously with your own stakeholders, and realign your responsibility compass (your values) for this to be a truly creative and beneficial odyssey, both for yourself and for others.

Sustainability may be a Wicked Problem yet, inside an organisation and in our society, we all must bring new or different ways of doing things to bear on a constant need for change and an adaptability to that change. H&M, IKEA and Tetra Pak already show an innovative, long-term way forward by increasing the impact of Sustainability that makes sense for their businesses and for their stakeholders. They are not alone in their commitment to Sustainability as there are other internationally active companies who have gone even further and completely revolutionised their business models, moving from the old cycle of production and consumption to offering alternative and radical solutions... but that is another chapter in the story.

Right now, each one of us has to accept their responsibility and become a change agent for Sustainability in his or her own right:

"Sustainability is about us; it is personal."² ■

[2] Stephen Morse/Sustainability: A biological perspective (Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 17

