

LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY: 10 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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WHEN LEADERS AT EVERY LEVEL AND PAY-GRADE BEGIN TO ACT AS CHANGE AGENTS, SYSTEM-WIDE TRANSFORMATION AND COST-SAVINGS SPIRAL UPWARD FOR MAXIMUM EFFECT.

Federal agencies are stewards of the nation's resources. As federal employees, we are required to provide leadership in environmental, energy, and economic performance. So, how ironic is it that no matter how green we feel, sustainability mandates, environmental reporting, and emissions inventories fill us with dread? We know our own work is part of a broader system, but how do we use this leadership opportunity to redefine success in meaningful and long-lasting ways? How do we weigh our leadership role with respect to our sense of practicality, achieving greater performance on tighter budgets?

The approach often used to implement sustainability mandates entails cutting-and-pasting new jargon into old initiatives. Sustainability, however, is about more than simply installing technological fixes. It is

Sustainability means to “create and maintain conditions, under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony that permits fulfilling of social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations.”

-Executive Order 13514: Federal Leadership in Environmental, Energy and Economic Performance, October 5, 2009

about changing values toward both the use of and care of natural resources. We need to invest in re-thinking, re-framing, energizing, and translating not only our technological fixes, but also our leadership.

Leaders striving for sustainability must keep three things in mind:

- 1) *Leaders* exist at every level and within every discipline of the organization,
- 2) *Leadership* allows us to grow initiatives that enrich our workplace and better align agency behaviors with intentions, and
- 3) *Leadership* is about integrating actions into our everyday business, not simply motivating people to do more.

A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

“A system is a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time.” —D. Meadows

Sustainability presents complex issues and challenges that cannot be viewed individually or solved with existing methods. A *systems approach* can provide context that enables greater changes to happen and connections to

Principles for Federal Sustainability Leaders:

1. *Vision Boldly*
2. *Monitor with Meaning*
3. *Lift the Consumption Curtain*
4. *Top Down from Bottom Up*
5. *Prod, Probe, Point*
6. *System Design with Nature*
7. *Right-Size Interventions*
8. *Hook It Up*
9. *Practice, Practice, Practice...Then Take Note!*
10. *Embrace the Chaos*

become apparent. Changing outcomes (i.e., reaching zero waste or increasing fleet fuel economy) requires actions to change systems' elements, the interconnections among them, or, more likely, both.

Systems thinking helps the manager, scientist, and change agent within us more clearly anticipate, identify, understand, and react to opportunities and challenges as they arise.

We offer a list of principles informed by systems thinking which are intended to help leaders throughout an organization seek

deeper levels of change and take action in new ways. This list resulted from the collective experience of five practitioners over the course of their careers with various federal agencies.

TEN PRINCIPLES FOR LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY

1. VISION BOLDLY

“Leaders with vision use the gap between their vision and the reality of how things are as a motivating force.” —Sustainability Institute.

A *vision* concentrates on the future and outlines what the organization wants to be, or how it wants the world in which it operates to be. With vision, one must boldly declare a direction even if it is one no one else has taken. Vision is critical to leading by example. It is a source of inspiration, and supports the emergence of clear decision-making criteria. Choices for next steps become more obvious because activities either align with and support a vision, or they don't.

2. MONITOR WITH MEANING

Solutions to complex problems are best measured by metrics that provide the right feedback to the right part of the system at the right time. Monitoring with meaning acknowledges that the *why*, *how* and *when* are often more important than the *what*. This includes fostering measures of success that serve to correct the course, provide timely feedback to the right people, and track our learning process. Behavior change may be its own indicator, perhaps

difficult to measure but worthy of noticing, reporting, and celebrating. Dissecting the *why*, *how* and *when* of specific successes or challenges can reveal inconsistencies, shedding light on what needs to be reworked or reinforced within the system or closing gaps between the measure itself and the sought-after outcomes.

3. LIFT THE CONSUMPTION CURTAIN

We are often inclined to categorize sustainability efforts by impact category (i.e., energy, water, waste). A true systems perspective will reveal interconnectivity and help us question our assumptions about categorization. Every purchase we make in executing our mission has an associated impact that frequently seems to be obscured behind a giant curtain (like the one in *The Wizard of Oz*). For example, many energy sources and purchased goods have exceptionally high water footprints which would never be seen if we focused on only one impact category. We must lift the consumption curtain to examine scenarios and consequences. As tempting as it is to assign a technical expert to reduce our consumption in a particular impact category, taking the time instead to uncover connections between various resource areas may lead to larger and more meaningful changes.

4. TOP DOWN FROM BOTTOM UP

Innovation occurs at all levels in the organization. Innovators lead the way by creating change that aligns the current situation with the opportunities they see. They create inventive, place-based solutions to sustainability issues providing the resilience needed to face

contemporary challenges, such as that of a changing climate.

Resilient agencies take advantage of emergent possibilities with actions and attitudes that value, nurture, and grow innovators, regardless of pay grade or organizational location. Feedback that ties innovative ideas to the agency's mission helps innovators understand how their efforts make a difference at levels even broader than they had considered. Bottom-up innovation is happening within many agencies through a localized 'green team' approach. Consistent affirmation, expressions of thanks, and excitement are all **cost-free** ways that top-down support can catalyze enthusiasm and resourcefulness, and hone focus for system-wide benefits. Of course, offering funding and resources to support such place-based, bottom-up innovation, in conjunction with these cost-free methods, goes a long way to support and build connected, system-wide approaches.

5. PROD, PROBE, POINT

Leverage points are places within a system where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything. In a complex system, we may not be able to predict specific outcomes, but certain kinds of interactions are more likely to result in movement towards sustainability than others.

Systems tend toward remaining the same. The deeper the change initiated, the stronger this tendency. Leaders have an innate sense for deep, long-lasting change, monitoring and balancing it with the fast and sometimes more apparent changes.

Effective leaders are on constant lookout for effective leverage points. They also do what's necessary to assist the system through transitions that arise when leverage points are activated. When leverage points are not apparent, a *systems* review can allow needed time for critical information and opportunities to emerge. Ultimately, you must be looking for effective leverage points or you'll never see them.

6. SYSTEM DESIGN WITH NATURE

We are all familiar with examples of energy conservation, waste reduction and social organization which are not working. Where might we look for working models and examples?

The Earth's natural systems offer some positive, inspiring examples. *Biomimicry* is an approach which uses nature as model, mentor, and measure to help us understand how natural systems retain their resilience by adapting, changing and evolving new solutions in the face of adversity.

Ecology-based design principles, such as those articulated by the science of *biomimicry*, can provide an overarching framework for sustainability.

7. RIGHT-SIZE INTERVENTIONS

A sustainability mindset underscores the need to not just identify resources but also understand the surrounding conditions in order to make sure new models and approaches fit the place and culture. Leaders for sustainability seek an understanding of context. They know that for their work to endure, strategies must be locally

attuned and responsive to the realities of place-based natural and human resources at that moment in time. This objective is often at odds with a government-wide approach to rules and mandates. Although a government-wide approach may have communication, implementation, and monitoring benefits, but has shortcomings in appropriateness of place. A "one size fits all" approach doesn't always achieve the benefits we seek.

The trick is to connect local examples to the larger mission through illustrating the spectrum of solutions, and celebrating the creativity and ingenious use of local inspiration to meet system-wide goals. Framing this pursuit in terms of the broader objective and then drawing the connection to other contexts, scales, and places, can support continuity while also cultivating right-sized, place-based solutions.

8. HOOK IT UP

Sustainability is not an endeavor to undertake by oneself. Rather it requires the building of a 'base camp' that capitalizes on the *oomph* in a group which is stirred by a common sense of purpose. A base camp filled with partners and collaborators who foster productive interactions, networking and information exchange is invaluable to tipping a system in a sustainable direction.

It takes time to build successful internal and external collaborations. Strategic networking addresses issues collectively in ways that we may not have ever had the skill, expertise or resources to address on our own. Inviting cross-

boundary, interdisciplinary and cross-sector social innovators to the table, whether their points of view appear in line with ours or not, can offer valuable sources of information about trends, potential leverage points and new directions.

Sustainability leaders take the time to understand the limitations of their own organization, seek out collaborators—partners to build a supportive base camp—and value what others contribute. They remind themselves that sustainability is a race that can only be won through a collective effort.

9. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE... THEN TAKE NOTE!

Leaders furthering sustainability inherently understand that adaptation, resilience and improvement occur through experimentation, learning, feedback, and ongoing reflection.

Reporting, discussing, learning from failures and successes, and giving credit while not assigning blame, are all critical to this process. Reflective and analytical time can be as valuable to overall outcome as the initial action itself. A management system that supports these things and schedules regular course adjustments can be a powerful tool for this process.

Accomplished sustainability leaders are lifelong learners. They celebrate the 'oops' as much as the wins. They understand that when working in complex systems, taking the leap of faith, trying something out, and then stopping to look in retrospect is critical. They create a work environment where this interaction between reflection and

implementation isn't just safe, it's imperative to progress.

10. EMBRACE THE CHAOS

Often, implementing new mandates and directions leads to 'realignment' or 'reorganization.' While we may regard these changes and associated flux with apprehension, they are also sources of great opportunity. Some of our most dynamic sustainability leaders have been overheard to say, "I've always thrived in times of chaos."

In both natural and human systems, the rules continuously change and evolve, requiring new ways of doing business. Disasters, for instance, destroy both natural and human structures, but they also release trapped resources such as energy, time, money, and talent. A fundamental reframing of problems and problem-solving

activities is needed to foster sustainable solutions.

Powerful leaders seek and create conditions within organizations that are conducive to social innovation and cultural shifts. They build upon what is working and grasp new opportunities under changing conditions wherever they exist, when trapped resources become unlocked and leverage points are revealed.

TO CONCLUDE

Embracing the chaos that follows when systems change is a courageous venture not for the faint of heart.

Sustainability requires more than a mechanical adoption of new policy requirements. It necessitates addressing deeper layers of organizational change to support new, robust, flexible and empowering human approaches.

Based on our own experiences, we offer our list in hope that it will be as empowering and mobilizing for other sustainability leaders at all organizational levels as it has been for us. Striving for a more sustainable approach isn't easy. Attempting to embrace the work that comes with true long-lasting leadership for improvement in environmental, energy and economic performance is no small challenge. We encourage you, wherever you sit in your own organizational system, to pick a principle that speaks to you and jump with both feet into the gap between how things are today and your most powerful vision of how you'd like them to be in the future. Relish the chaos, and take a breather when you need to. Go. Get out there. "Dance with the system." —D. Meadows

For Further Reading:

USFS Sustainable Operations Website

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Sustainability Institute - <http://www.sustainer.org/fellows/index.html>

About The Sustainable Operations Western Collective

The SOWC was chartered in 2009, by Forest Service Regions, R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, and the Rocky Mountain Research Station. The mission of this group is to pool resources, staffing and strategy to target and reduce energy, water, and material footprints of operations, and waste production and emissions from fleet. Through pooling experimentation and case-study efforts, learning can be more quickly applied across the West, and propagated across the nation and in other partners and sister agencies.

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