

3 P's of Organizational Sustainability

Every organization is going to run into roadblocks. Many organizations anticipate those obstacles and handle them with ease. But sometimes, nothing you try seems to get the company back on track.

You've tried all the latest and greatest techniques. You're doing everything 'right.' But none of those endeavors seem to stick, and the result is an organization slowly pulling off course, unable to respond to market changes and struggling to remain competitive. Thus, the organization is becoming unsustainable.

That leads to the biggest question: What can you do about it?

Creating a new plan for the journey ahead

Organizational sustainability is a journey. It requires taking the long view, with careful planning and organized effort every step of the way. To put it simply, creating organizational sustainability is much like planning out an epic road trip – you've got a destination, a great vehicle, and a reliable route.

The destination is where you want to be. It's the pot at the end of the rainbow, so to speak. That's your purpose.

Then you look at what it takes to get there. You need a solid, reliable vehicle. It needs to be versatile enough to transverse whatever might be in your path on the way to the destination. Those are the people behind the trip, the employees and managers and even consumers who make the wheels turn.

Finally, you figure out the route. That's how you get there, the roadmap to success. That roadmap offers a variety of options, so you take the time to choose the best one. That's the day-to-day process that gets you from point A to point B.

Purpose. People. Process. That's what you need to get to where you want to be. Let's dive into each one to figure out where you stand on the journey to success.

Purpose: Where Are You Going?

Any organization that wants to sustain itself must have a clearly identified and communicated purpose. While purpose is typically defined in an organization's mission statement, sometimes management's actions don't align with that determination of purpose.

For example, a medical facility that has various areas with quite a bit of autonomy might find that their overall purposes don't match. One part of the organization might view their purpose as bringing in revenue, while another part views their purpose as patient service. Yet another part might view their primary purpose as training the next generation of doctors and nurses.

While each of these purposes is important, if each part of the organization pursues their version of the purpose without a larger view on how it relates to the primary mission, conflicts can arise between departments. This leaves leaders in a quandary about how to prioritize and manage expectations.

If any organization is going to move forward decisively and be around for the long haul, the mission must pull everyone together. That purpose must be clearly defined, cascading all the way from the top down. The guidance passed down from management must reflect it. It must be visible in the metrics used to manage the organization so that there does not appear to be a conflict. And finally, it must be well-communicated to every person, from those who sit on the board to employees on the floor; or in the case of a non-profit organization, the volunteers who show up for a few hours each week.

People: Your Greatest Asset

This is where the rubber meets the road – people are what actually make the wheels turn. One of the biggest mistakes an organization makes is treating people as a resource. It's a mistake ingrained in many organizational cultures, especially since workers get a paycheck to be there – the exchange of money and benefits for services leads to a certain expectation.

In a non-profit organization, where most individuals are volunteers, the vibe is very different. The non-profit knows their people must feel valued, because they can leave at any time. They are not receiving any sort of compensation for their time spent there.

How could that non-profit mindset change the business world? In a non-profit organization, people are members, yet in a company they are employees. To be truly sustainable as a company, employees need to feel more like members.

Plenty of companies believe they invest in their people. They send them to training seminars. They take the time to teach them to be better at their jobs. They even bring in a few fun events from time to time to ease the busy workday. All these efforts aim to make people more productive at work. But what creates a sustainable organization is not training people to be better at their jobs, but helping them feel more like members. What about a training class in empathetic communications? It's about creating a culture of support, one that encourages your people to be better *people*, in every sense of the word.

It's a dual bottom line. By placing people at the same level of importance as profit, things begin to change. That car starts to move faster toward the destination. The bumps in the road get smoothed out. The plans become sharper, more attainable. Most companies see their purpose as making money, but if they also view their purpose as developing their people to be a part of the company's success, it leads to improvement on both bottom lines: The people and the profit.

Yes, it takes a long time to see results. And it might feel strange at first, because let's be honest: employee development is part of the typical work approach, but developing people on the personal side has never been much of a priority. By creating a culture where people feel value and respect, where they can be themselves and let their individual light shine, they are much more likely to throw themselves into the company – because now, it's not just a paycheck. They *believe* in it.

Processes: The Roadmap to Success

And that brings us to the third P of organizational sustainability: Process. That's the roadmap of the organization. It's the path that guides you from mission to milestone.

A process is necessary for anything an organization does more than once. Ideally, the process works the same way each time with a clear and concise method that doesn't rely on any individual's personally-held or 'tribal' knowledge. A formal process makes it easier to determine the root cause of problems by limiting the potential for variations due to personal practice. Once identified, solutions can be readily implemented. Having a process also allows a company to put metrics in place that measure the effectiveness of their day-to-day work.

The ideal roadmap is one of solid processes, where everyone participates at the appropriate level. Without a map, everyone will likely get there in their own time. Some will know the way and get there quickly. Others will know the way, but plan a few stops or a detour because of their personal preference. And then there will be those who are new and do not know the way; they will ask for directions and may not get accurate feedback.

The best process will eliminate the guesswork and provide everyone with the proper way to get from point A to point B – and then expect them to do just that.

But just as with that roadmap that gets you to where you need to be, consistency is key. If management doesn't insist that each person follow the process in the same way each time, you run the risk of allowing the wrong type of culture to pervade. In most organizations, there are a handful of people who turn into 'firefighters' who sidestep existing methods to get the job done, no matter what. These celebrated workplace heroes pick up the slack to meet quick deadlines and impossible requests. Yet they run the risk of burn-out and demotivation, a situation that leads to an unsustainable model. Solid processes and adherence will help to avoid this.

In many cases, leadership will believe they have identified a specific process that needs improvement, when in fact it is just one aspect of a larger, overall process that requires attention. For instance, a distribution center might decide to focus on a sorting machine that operates at a slower pace than those at other centers. The fact may be that, although this machine is not running optimally, it already runs at a pace that exceeds that of other steps in the process. Speeding it up to beat the performance of other centers doesn't help the overall process of getting goods out the door. A process should be looked at from end-to-end and measured as such.

Another example of this is the use of IT solutions to fix a broken process in business operations. When something goes wrong, the kneejerk reaction may be to call IT to automate it. But if those IT solutions are not integrated into a functioning process for everyone, it only frustrates those involved. Now they have to deal with a broken process and learn a new software system. It can be a waste of time and money.

All these conflicts make it difficult to know where your operation is going, when you will get there, how many people will see it through to the end, and in fact, whether you get there at all.

The key is to create consistent, reliable and scalable processes. Processes hold an organization accountable to everyone; shareholders, employees, management, and even the public. It is vitally important for everyone to be on board with the processes put in place, as this will ensure smooth

transactions and ease of understanding. It will help get everyone to the same point, at the same time, with the same purpose in mind. To do this, you must involve as many people as possible in your process development and not just plug in a solution. And, once implemented, you must communicate to everyone in the process how their steps are performing and how that ties into the overall process effectiveness and efficiency.

A View of Organizational Sustainability in Action

Sometimes it helps to see a real-world example of organizational sustainability. Here's what happened in a large package sorting and distribution center when they evaluated their processes and took a more sustainable approach.

The purpose of the organization was to get process packages as quickly as possible. Each person in the packaging and distribution center understood their job was to do their best at executing their specific role. But as each person was measured only on the performance of their own step, there was no view of the impact it had on the larger aspect of the business.

The overall communication of the purpose was clear, as everyone who worked there knew what the center did. However, the alignment of that purpose did not trickle down into how each team was managed. The tasks each employee performed were treated as stand-alone processes. While they each knew they were part of the overall purpose, they had no idea how their individual performances directly impacted the "throughput" of the center.

And on top of that, management treated the employees as resources that could only be relied on to do their individual tasks – there was no expectation or encouragement for employees to move into other areas. Leadership felt the employees could not understand and wouldn't care about anything more than their individual roles.

As the organization struggled to improve its performance to remain competitive, they realized they had to bring alignment between purpose, processes and people. The first step was a key shift from looking at their operation as a series of independent processes to viewing it as one continuous process flow that aligned with their purpose.

Next, leadership had to change their mindset about the way they viewed their people. The employees were included in developing the flow of the process and making improvements. Metrics were developed that aligned with the purpose and represented the efficiency of the entire process. As employees were trained in how to understand these metrics and empowered to make decisions, the distribution center saw their performance soar beyond their expectations.

In the end, the people understood how their role in the process impacted the purpose and they felt ownership and pride in their accomplishments. The result? A business that ran much more smoothly, employees who were much happier, and of course, a healthier bottom line.

Creating the Plan that Achieves Results

If you've realized you need to make some changes to ensure your organization is sustainable, the next step is to make a plan. First, confirm that your organization is clear in its purpose and the way it

communicates that purpose. Ask individuals at all levels what their impression of their purpose is and how that ties to the organization's purpose.

Next, take a look at your people and how you refer to them. Are they more than resources? Do they feel like employees or members?

And finally, are your processes clearly defined and consistently utilized? Do you have a lot of 'firefighters' in your organization?

As you identify opportunities for improvement, be careful how you delegate responsibility of each of these 3 P's. Purpose is typically defined at the top, so that is usually not a problem. The responsibility to develop people is frequently handed over to Human Resources. The responsibility to improve processes is correspondingly handed over to Operations. While there are success stories, few organizations have sufficient time and expertise to tackle these aspects on their own. Due to organizational constraints, they might not be able to consider the interdependent aspects that lie outside their area. They typically end up close to where they started, facing employees that now have a negative view on the promise of change.

Don't overlook the potential value of bringing in consultants. When it comes to the heavy lifting of vision, culture and process change, they bring an objective view, a wealth of experience and unique skills that will help you get results faster. Great consultants can help your organization develop the necessary three-pronged approach to success by offering proven ways to develop purpose, people and processes.

Finally, it's important to remember the three P's of organizational sustainability are equal to each other. Without purpose, the venture has no direction. Without people, it's impossible to get started and maintain momentum. And with no strong processes in place, nothing will ever really get done.