

Goodbusiness

Act Two

A human-centred process for driving a new phase of change

Taking stock of the sustainability movement

We've worked in the sustainability industry for over 25 years. We've gone from pushing water uphill to a time where social and environmental issues are an essential part of the mainstream business landscape. And in the last few years, we've seen the momentum around sustainability increasing ever more rapidly. Cultural, consumer and commercial forces are aligning, and businesses are beginning to grasp to grasp the mantle of transformative change.

This phase has given us much to celebrate. A great many of the biggest and most significant organisations in the business world have now set out impressive and ambitious sustainability plans. They have comprehensive frameworks for their impacts and have publicly committed to delivering stretching measurable targets. Whether it's net zero, biodiversity, DEI or fair wages – these organisations have put a flag in the ground of the future. And have remained firm throughout the pummelling of the pandemic, the war and the cost-of-living crisis.

And businesses have for the most part been able to deliver progress against their plans. Annual sustainability reports deliver updates on what they have achieved, while restating their commitment to ambitious future action. This secures their position in ratings and rankings and provides them with a buffer against criticism and intense scrutiny. The sustainability movement has therefore existed in a state of equilibrium: it has created the impact which enables businesses to be able to substantiate their claims and create a positive outward-facing picture to the world which in turn shows it is all working.

We call this Act One of the sustainability movement. We think its days are numbered.

The moment of truth

Most of the major businesses that have mature sustainability strategies along the lines described above have had them in place for a few years – five or fewer. The cycle of change and reporting has been fulfilled during this time.

We're now reaching a point where delivering the change becomes much harder.

Businesses have taken the (relatively) easy steps. They've done things like switching energy suppliers and putting new supplier policies in place and running training sessions on sustainable design.

The actions they need to take next are harder. They require more substantive change, often requiring a rethink of accepted wisdom and organisational lore, and in some cases significant capital expenditure. They require people to make harder decisions, which increases internal challenge around them, and raises the bar for proofs and justifications around the need to make the change and make it now.

At the same time, the buffer put in place by the relative success of their sustainability strategy and action so far is protecting the business from the kind of exposure and criticism that would, in fact, galvanise action and provide part of the rationale internal stakeholders are looking for.

So action, and real substantive change, is stalling. In recent months many clients have come to us saying they can't see how to ensure the business will continue to make progress towards its targets, the timeframe for which gets ever closer. And they also know that as regulation comes in and creates a greater wealth of data for analysts and commentators to examine, the lack of action will be exposed.

The cycle of change and reporting will be broken, and the critics will pour in, pushing unmet targets and failed commitments into the open, and shattering the false security that exists now.

This will create an existential challenge for the sustainability movement. It will have failed to deliver – both in terms of creating the change and progress the world needs, and in terms of protecting the reputation and integrity of companies and brands.

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We need to grasp this challenge by the hand. There is a window of time to act – to galvanise organisations to continue on their journey of change and take the harder and more demanding steps that will enable them to maintain progress.

We need to create an Act Two that delivers transformative change. This is what the sustainability movement – and the world – needs. This is how business remains part of a progressive future.

What this transformative change looks like in practice will be different for every organisation. The context will be different, the challenges will be different and the solutions they need to put in place will be too. So the only way to make change happen is to work on a case by case basis, acting with sensitivity and understanding, to take the pulse of the organisation, understand what needs to happen and bring the questions this raises and the extraordinary difficulty of the decision-making it demands out into the light. This is how we find a way through.

Fundamentally, it is people that are the ultimate engines of change within any organisation. It is people who make the decisions, set budgets and establish the timeframes for capital return. To change organisations, we change the behaviour of the people within them.

So we have developed a human-centred process for delivering a new phase of transformational change. It combines our decades of experience in sustainability with our deep understanding of how to create behaviour change. We speak to stakeholders throughout the organisation in confidence, as peers and collaborators, having deep and open conversations about the reality of their individual experience and conflicting demands. We dig into values and culture, skills and systems, mindsets and accountability. It's a process that uses our tools and know-how, but also our intuition and empathy. We think it could usher in an Act Two that builds the future.

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