

**Using a Facilitated Workshop Method  
To Jump-Start Implementing  
Sustainability Initiatives**

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## Introduction

According to Laszlo and Laszlo, “Sustainability Management is the creative and responsible stewardship of resources - human, natural, and financial – to generate stakeholder value while contributing to the well-being of current and future generations of all beings.” (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2005) This definition of sustainability encompasses much more than any traditional definition.

This work will show that within organizations there is a demand for sustainability initiatives, as defined by Laszlo and Laszlo, and that facilitated workshops are highly effective to jump-start and implement sustainability improvements. We suggest collaborating with organizations using a facilitated workshop method in alignment with understanding where an organization is on the continuum of “eco-awareness to eco-efficiency to eco-effectiveness.”

The authors of this paper held a one-day Eco-efficiency Brainstorming Workshop, focused on reducing resource consumption, energy use, pollution, and wastes at an international consumer products Midwest manufacturing plant. We will reference the process used and results obtained in order to show that facilitated workshops are highly effective in jump-starting and implementing sustainability improvements in organizations.

## Organizations Undertaking Sustainability Initiatives

Many large corporations are undertaking sustainability initiatives. BP is joining forces with the Environmental Defense Fund in reducing carbon dioxide pollution. Ford Motors is manufacturing a hybrid sports utility vehicle. Corporations such as Dow Chemical and DuPont have begun manufacturing compostable bio-based plastics while McDonald’s, Sony, and Coca Cola have all begun using bio-based plastics in product development.

(<http://www.insulair.com/home/200311cupcupandaway.pdf>) Starbucks recently gained approval from the Food & Drug Administration to use recycled content in hot beverage cups. ([http://www.lohasjournal.com/app/cda/nbp\\_cda.php?command=Article&articleId=5121&categoryId=](http://www.lohasjournal.com/app/cda/nbp_cda.php?command=Article&articleId=5121&categoryId=))

According to Nattress and Altomare in *The Natural Step for Business*, there is a learning curve for undertaking sustainability initiatives, as illustrated in Figure 1.

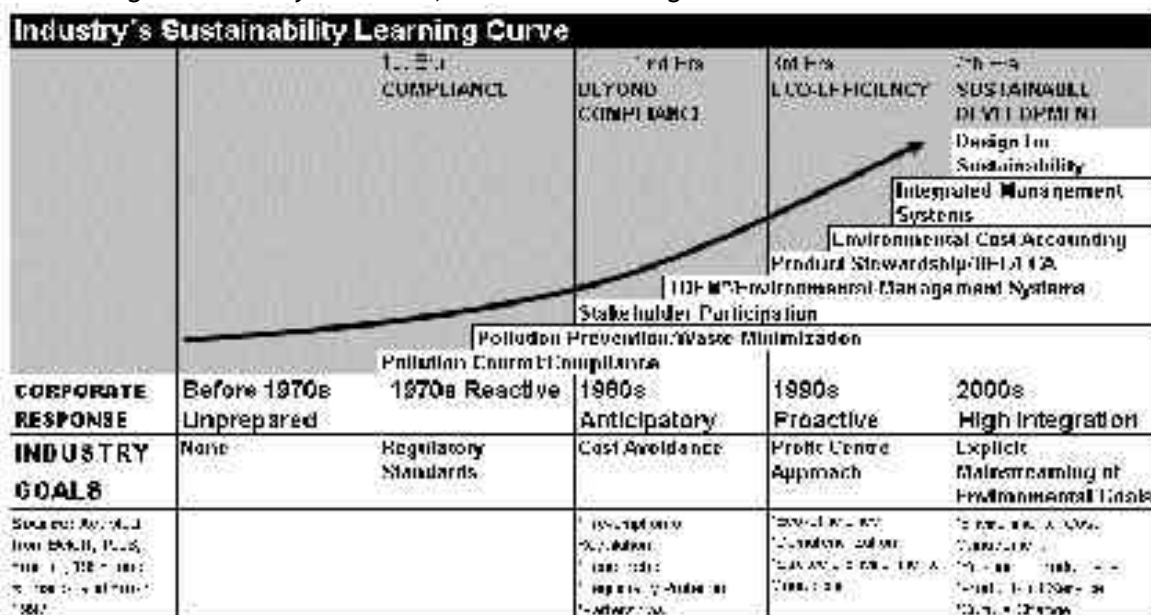


Figure 1 (Natrass and Altomare, 1999, pg 16)

Corporations are increasingly looking to sustainable management initiatives to provide cost savings (73%), enhanced reputation (90%), and competitive advantage (75%). (Price Waterhouse Coopers Sustainability Survey 2002) The cost savings of sustainable innovations are likely to ensue and serve as a motivating factor for corporations to implement advances in sustainability. It is important to identify how to implement such changes effectively and efficiently.

### How Do Organizations Implement Change?

Organizations frequently have difficulty implementing ideas into a clear and effective course of action. Good ideas often never materialize due to ineffective follow-up and many organizations find the planning process to be a slow and arduous task.

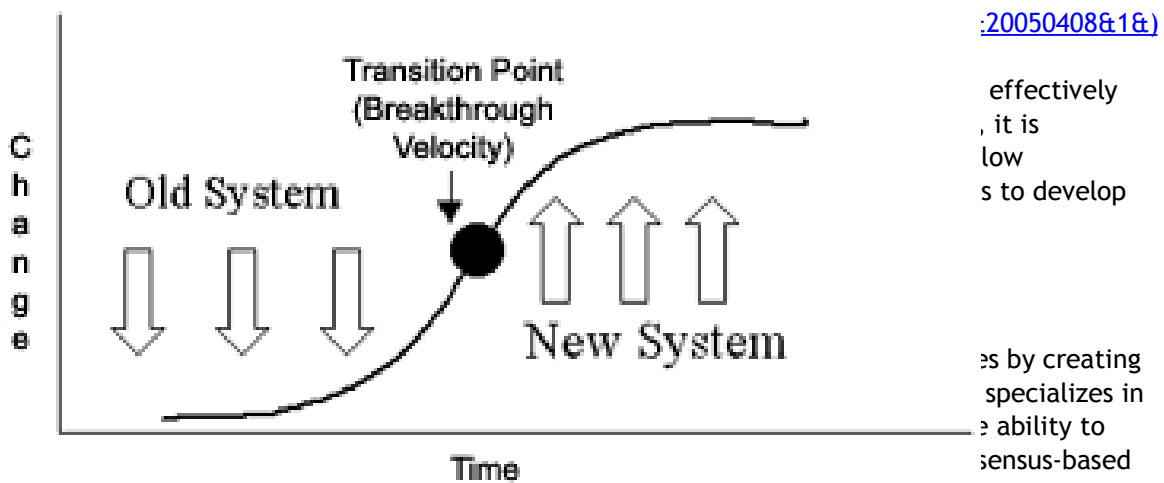


Figure 2

ants and allows each person to contribute. Such workshops have all the key players come together for collective brainstorming and allow everyone to be on the same page. (<http://www.bteinc.net/pages/605775/index.htm>) The success of workshops depends on the facilitator's intuitive and explicit awareness of the group process as the facilitator creates the structure needed for groups to be creative and productive. Sustainable initiatives, in particular, are dependent on innovative, "out of the box" thinking. As quoted from Albert Einstein, "a problem cannot be solved by the same thinking that created it," and according to competitive advantage guru Michael Porter, "environmental regulation does not ...lead to innovation and competitiveness or to higher productivity for all companies. Only those companies that innovate successfully will win." (Porter & van der Linde, 2003)

Several of the participants of the Midwest manufacturing plant Eco-efficiency Workshop expressed concern in pre-workshop interviews about planning being put off until the end of the year, great ideas not being implemented, and lack of time dedicated to the planning process. These very common issues highlight why a facilitated workshop can produce such groundbreaking results.

Numerous organizations have benefited from facilitated workshops, including non-profits, small companies, and large corporations. Workshops can help organizations achieve results more

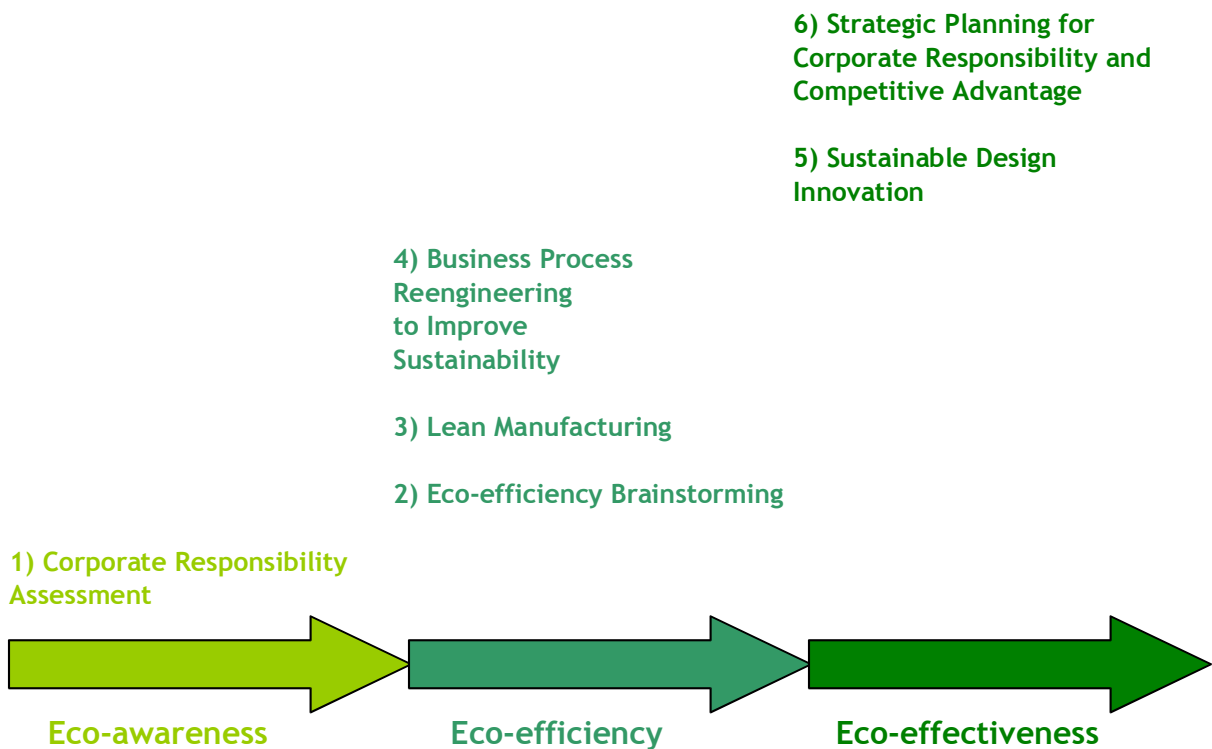
quickly and add an ease to the process of change. Participants of the Midwest manufacturing plant Eco-efficiency Workshop had the following to say about the facilitated workshop method:

- It's beneficial to hear the ideas of your peers. It was helpful to have a neutral observer speed the process and cut through some of the logjams.
- The facilitator was able to keep us on track and we accomplished a lot in a concise period of time.
- I feel the workshop pulled us together, looking at projects that will help us drive costs down and add value to the overall efficiency of the plant.
- I believe it will also begin to help build a sense of team among managers that will trickle down through the departments as teams are built to work on the various projects. Essentially, the workshop became a team building experience working towards the goals of increased efficiencies and reducing costs.

Coupling facilitation methods with sustainability goals promotes transformation within organizations catering to healthier life on the planet and a source of inspiration for those implementing the changes.

### Types of Sustainability Initiatives

Organizations can embark on a variety of sustainability initiatives that can be jump-started using a facilitated workshop method. These initiatives include, but are not limited to:



Each of these sustainability initiatives can be described as improving eco-awareness, eco-efficiency, or eco-effectiveness to a different degree on the Eco-continuum.

According to McDonough and Braungart in Cradle to Cradle, “eco-efficiency” is commonly referred to as the tenets of “reduce, reuse, recycle,” specifically reducing resource consumption, energy use, emissions, and wastes while benefiting the environment. (McDonough and Braungart, 2002, pg 53) They define “eco-effectiveness” as falling into one of two

categories. The first category of eco-effectiveness is composed of materials that biodegrade and become food for biological cycles, otherwise known as “waste equals food.” The second category is comprised of highly durable materials that operate in a repairable, replaceable, closed-loop technical system. (McDonough and Braungart, 2002, pg 104)

We define “eco-awareness” simply as the process of introducing and training organizations on the concepts of eco-efficiency and eco-effectiveness. Thus, every organization is a prime candidate to become “eco-aware.”

It is important to meet organizations “where they are at” along the Eco-continuum in order to establish trust and as a launching pad for further development. This meeting organizations “where they are at” requires facilitators to be particularly mindful listeners and to have a full awareness of project constraints. Once it is determined where an organization is at on the continuum, a facilitator can gently push barriers to assist organizations in moving from eco-awareness to eco-efficiency, and from eco-efficiency to eco-effectiveness. This type of partnership will require the full trust of the facilitator by an influencer who will serve as the Executive Sponsor of the organization’s sustainability initiatives.

### Facilitated Workshop Approach

When using a facilitated workshop approach, a project typically consists of a series of workshops. There are three phases to a facilitated workshop approach. In addition to the Workshop Phase, which is actually holding the workshop, there is the Preparation Phase and the Follow up Phase. In the Preparation Phase, the facilitator is getting ready for the workshop and doing all the tasks needed to ensure success. The Follow up Phase consists of refining and distributing results, as well as implementing Next Steps after the workshop. (Rush, 1995)

### Key Roles in a Facilitated Workshop Method

There are basic roles in which people function when using a facilitated workshop approach for sustainability initiatives. In order for the workshop process to be successful, it is important that each person understand how his/her role contributes to the success of the workshop process.

The **Facilitator** is primarily responsible for creating the method of detailed steps to achieve the workshop goal in the predetermined deliverable format. While the facilitator is responsible for the process and is NOT “process-neutral,” the facilitator is content-neutral. The facilitator ensures understanding that the participants are responsible for the content. The facilitator is responsible for driving participant’s input to develop deliverable content. (Rush, 1995)

The **Executive Sponsor** is typically the person funding the project, is generally in a position of authority, and whose authority is well respected. It is helpful if all the workshop participants report to the executive sponsor, in order to ensure their participation in the workshop(s). (Rush, 1995)

The **Project Manager** is responsible for the overall success of the sustainability initiative and is a participant in the workshop. The facilitator works closely with the project manager during the Preparation Phase on many tasks including choosing a diverse group of participants. If the executive sponsor is also functioning as the project manager, as was the case in our Eco-efficiency Workshop, the facilitator should determine the participant’s comfort level in speaking freely at the workshop during pre-workshop interviews. (Rush, 1995)

**Participants** are chosen to represent each function that will be affected by the impending sustainability improvements. In our Eco-efficiency Workshop, there were nine participants, all of whom work on-site at the manufacturing plant. The group consisted of the plant manager, process engineer (lean manufacturing supervisor), warehouse/shipping manager, production manager, materials manager, maintenance manager, human resources manager, quality/safety manager, and the plant accountant.

The **Documenter** is primarily responsible for recording outcomes of the workshop contributing to the project deliverable. The workshop deliverables should be meaningful and reflect exactly what the participants “built” in the workshop since participants are responsible for content of deliverables. The deliverable should not be the documenter’s interpretation of what occurred. (Rush, 1995)

One of the main tenets of facilitated workshops is that organizations have hired the talent they need and a facilitated workshop will provide a structured forum for encouraging creativity and productivity of an organization’s employees. For this reason, an organization may already employ the **Subject Matter Experts (SME’s)** needed for the sustainability initiatives and outside SMEs may not be needed. (<http://www.bteinc.net/pages/605775/index.htm>) However, in the workshop it is important for the facilitator to prevent against the “watering down” of ideas by compromise and not let “groupthink” dictate the lowest common denominator in decisions made. During meetings with the executive sponsor and participant pre-workshop interviews, if the facilitator notes a lack of technical expertise regarding the realities of sustainable initiatives, the facilitator will want to ensure the participation of an outside SME in the workshops. However, their role can be tricky. The facilitator must ensure with the project manager an outside SME is a full workshop participant with full rights to driving deliverable content, or if the outside SME will function as a technical expert advising the participants. Outside SME’s can prove to be very helpful as long as the facilitator, executive sponsor, project manager, and she/he fully understand the role for this organization.

### **The Preparation Phase**

Most important to the success of a facilitated workshop in jump-starting and implementing sustainability initiatives are the tasks undertaken in the Preparation Phase. Meeting with the executive sponsor and/or project manager is the first step in laying a foundation for a workshop in sustainability. It is important to come away from this meeting with a basic understanding of the sustainability initiative and constraints that are non-negotiable.

For example, the Midwest manufacturing plant executive sponsor indicated a need to improve efficiencies and reduce costs at the plant. We informally presented a slideshow on sustainability to gauge his reaction to widely used definitions of sustainability and achievements representative of eco-efficient and eco-effective initiatives that are closely aligned with the organization’s product line. The executive sponsor explained that neither he nor the participants have direct control over the materials used at the plant, since materials are controlled by corporate headquarters.

Recognizing this constraint, it would not be productive and could possibly be offensive to heavily encourage the use of bio-plastics. On the other hand, it is helpful to be aware of barriers that can be gently pushed during the workshop and to begin to determine the current situation at the company. Asking questions of the executive sponsor to examine these barriers can be an effective way to distinguish between real project constraints and self-imposed mental barriers. In the discussion following the presentation, we determined the Midwest manufacturing plant to be on the continuum between eco-awareness and eco-efficiency. We planned to meet the

organization “where it is at” and gently push barriers to lead to greater eco-efficiency while introducing concepts of eco-effectiveness.

After completing pre-workshop interviews with participants and determining the basic workshop approach, the facilitator must create a detailed agenda for every hour of the workshop. Each activity in the detailed agenda must have a purpose that contributes to achieving the project goal. The next section will describe the basic activities enacted in our Eco-efficiency Workshop.

### **The Workshop Phase - An Eco-Efficiency Brainstorming Workshop**

For the facilitator and documenter, the day of the workshop began with a factory tour. The visual knowledge gained was essential to the facilitator’s ability to ask the participants appropriate questions and to have a better understanding of the workshop discussion.

Once all parties were introduced, our Eco-efficiency Workshop kicked off with setting ground rules. Ground Rules establish a safe container for creativity, mutual respect, and personal accountability for the group process. All of the participants in the workshop were mindful of the rules and appeared to be engaged in the activities for the duration of the workshop.

In order to set the context for understanding, the facilitator asked the participants to explore what had already been done at the plant to improve efficiencies and cut costs. The team came up with 16 items that had been implemented or were underway. Overlooking setting the context can often lead to misunderstandings and incorrect assumptions. Speaking about what had been done in the past allows everyone present to be on the same page as well as bringing unfinished items to the attention of the team for the upcoming brainstorming process.

This activity was followed by collectively establishing a workshop goal, which would be referenced throughout the day to ensure discussions were relevant and “on track.” The group demonstrated an ability to work cohesively as a team, under the guidance of the facilitator.

The next phase of the workshop was dedicated to brainstorming the most effective manufacturing process. The facilitator presented a slideshow highlighting the connection between sustainable innovations in large corporations and the subsequent cost savings; in order to make the participants aware that sustainable improvement can be very much in line with the goal of the workshop and to encourage “out of the box” thinking. The activity was designed to push “barriers” by shifting the thinking of the participants of the Midwest manufacturing plant from an eco-aware stage to an eco-efficient stage under the guidelines of the workshop goal. The successes also serve as a source of inspiration for the upcoming brainstorming process. Facilitators can benefit the workshop process by introducing new information on successful sustainability initiatives that can be valuable to the participants. However, it is necessary for the facilitator to be able to let go of anticipated outcomes and to leave the developing content in the hands of the participants.

The slideshow presentation was immediately followed with a “guided visualization” technique encouraging participants to tap into their creativity. Guided visualization encourages ideas to be formulated that are outside the thought patterns of approaches typically taken at the plant to achieve the given goal. The facilitator led a guided visualization of the plant after implementing eco-efficiency changes. The facilitator suggested the participants imagine that the changes brought on by these sustainable initiatives had already been implemented and that the improvements far surpassed the intentions and expectations of the goals set. The facilitator incorporated many Lean Manufacturing concepts since our Eco-efficiency Workshop was at a

manufacturing plant and Lean Manufacturing concepts have been so successful in factories worldwide.

Next, the facilitator designated the participants into three brainstorming sub-groups with three people each, making sure to incorporate “thinkers” and “hands-on” personalities into each group. After spending time visually drawing and recording ideas, each sub-group presented to the full group. Each idea was assessed to determine if it was in scope of the workshop goal hanging visibly on the wall. After lunch, the generated ideas were defined and combined when there was overlap among them. The participants decided to distinguish between categories of short-term and long-term initiatives. The long-term distinction was made if an idea required funding over \$10,000 and/or if involvement of corporate headquarters or other stakeholders external to the workshop was needed.

Following the “define and combine” activity, it was time for the participants to prioritize initiatives. Out of the 24 ideas, the voting process resulted in six short-term initiatives and five long-term initiatives that were widely supported by the team as a whole.

As part of the Next Steps, the facilitator asked the participants to volunteer for the initiatives(s) they wanted to lead. It is ideal that the participants volunteer for the projects that interest them and may overlap with existing job duties. This method takes advantage of the participant’s excitement concerning the project and increases the chances of success of the sustainability initiatives.

The facilitator closed the workshop by engaging the group in a final activity to illustrate the link between the eco-efficiency initiatives and the impacts on improving sustainability. Analyzing the eco-efficiency initiatives against environmental and social impact categories provides momentum. Project leaders can anticipate the improvements effected in sustainability categories and begin developing metrics to track the anticipated improvements.

The results of analysis show the following sustainability categories anticipated to be positively affected as follows:

- Solid waste reduction - in 8 of 11 initiatives
- Reduced energy consumption - in 5 of 11 initiatives
- Reduced employee injury - in 8 of 11 initiatives
- Improved employee skills - in 3 of 11 initiatives

### **The Follow up Phase**

Now that sustainability initiatives have been successfully jump-started with the workshop process, it is of the utmost importance in the Follow up Phase for the facilitator to continue meeting with the executive sponsor and/or overall project manager to ensure next steps are being taken to plan for and implement each initiative. Additional workshops may be needed with each project team to build project plans and determine metric-tracking methods. In our Eco-efficiency Workshop, we were surprised at the great value the plant accountant provided as a participant. It makes sense that she be very aware of the plant processes since improvements need to be measured.

The facilitator may hold bi-weekly status meetings with the original participants to encourage accountability and transparency, and to keep projects on track. The facilitator can hold a 6-month audit workshop with the original participants to track successes and to brainstorm the next set of sustainability initiatives. Since the participants are busy performing their daily jobs

at the plant, don't underestimate how easily these initiatives can lose steam without effective follow up by the facilitator working with the executive sponsor and/or project manager.

### Conclusion

It is inspiring to be part of the process of creating and implementing sustainability goals in organizations. Corporations are recognizing the value in undertaking such initiatives and the positive impact the facilitated workshop method has in the planning and implementation process.

At our Midwest manufacturing plant workshop, even though it was held specifically to increase efficiencies and reduce costs, the discussion often led to social sustainability efforts already underway at the plant. The participants spoke of plans to participate in company-sponsored Spanish classes to minimize the language barrier between management and factory employees. When talk ensued of "reducing labor," it was widely acknowledged that the goal is to reduce temporary labor and overtime, while keeping employees with benefits, whom had undergone several weeks of training. These decisions not only improve efficiencies by decreasing misunderstandings and by promoting employee retention, it speaks to a commitment by management to honor the human capital that makes production possible.

The facilitated workshop method itself embodies social sustainability in the workplace by recognizing that typical organizations have hired the talent they need and providing a structured forum for encouraging creativity and productivity. Workshops provide the opportunity to have buy-in from all stakeholders affected by the sustainability goals to help ensure the implementation with management taking pride in the initiatives. The facilitated workshop method is an effective launching pad to jump-start implementing new ideas in sustainability.

At our Midwest manufacturing plant, the plant manager has a "daily goodbye" ritual, interacting with factory employees on the plant floor, that we were invited to watch. The plant manager describes it as "the best part of my job." Non-verbal cues were relied on as the primary form of communication and the exchanges were frequently playful and creative. We observed the factory workers and plant manager meeting each other "where they are at" to communicate, just as we, the facilitators of sustainability management are meeting organizations "where they are at" along the Eco-continuum. This way the facilitator will know where to place the launching pad to jump-start implementing sustainability initiatives.

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