

What Sustainable Really Means...

By Doug Griffiths, President & CEO, 13 Ways Inc.

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If I had the ability to ban one word from the English language, it would be the word “sustainable”. It doesn’t mean anything anymore, since it is thrown around as the answer to every problem we face. The environmental challenges we have—we just need sustainability. Our community’s success—no problem, if we can just be sustainable. The best business strategy—a permanent sustainable advantage. That word is the answer to everything, it seems. It is also my impression that what people now mean when they think “sustainable” is actually status quo, but there is no such thing as a successful status quo.

Too often now, when we talk about sustainability, what we really want is for things to stay the way they are right now, forever. That doesn’t happen. Things change all of the time. The nature of the world is to change. If you really want your community to be sustainable, then it must be adaptive, enterprising, dynamic, vibrant, and responsive to the change that is coming. Simply ignoring the changes that come will not allow you to keep what you have, but will actually ensure your community fails in the long term. It is imperative for you to assess what changes are coming and capitalize on those changes for success, or at least moderate the negative impact they will have.

Businesses get lured into the notion of sustainability too, and presume they are enduring and permanent. A business will get complacent that everything is going well, and fail to assess changes in market conditions that can take them from being very prosperous to utter failure in a matter of years, or even months. When a business gets comfortable in the success of the status quo, they realize too late that they haven’t really done anything new with their product, and now markets have shifted to demand a different product they have not got the capacity to provide. Just ask Blockbuster about that. Or ask the French about the Maginot Line.

Industries are no different. There are entire industries across North America that see themselves as the cornerstone of the economy. They confuse being an enduring cornerstone, however, with being an unchanging cornerstone and work tirelessly to be “sustainable” when really what they are usually after is support to remain the same and to keep the status quo. The word sustainable gets used in many of those cases to elicit some emotional nostalgic response that turns away from real questions about how the industry will be adaptive, enterprising, dynamic, vibrant, and responsive to new realities.

I have an Honours Degree in Philosophy and my thesis was on an Ethics of the Environment. We have folks that think humankind has no impact on the earth. That is notion is wrong, ignorant of facts, and dangerous. We also have folks that think if humankind wasn’t here the earth’s environment would be in a wonderful stasis. That notion is also wrong, ignorant of the facts, and dangerous. Humans must lower their impact on the environment, but not every environmental change is caused by man, or necessarily bad. I have argued over and over that the environment is constantly changing, it did so long before humankind was here, and it will do so long after we

are gone. If you want the environment to be sustainable that is good, but if you think sustainable means unchanging or status quo, you are wrong. There is no status quo anywhere.

Success is not a destination, but an endless journey that requires work, that requires adapting to the constant shifting sands.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.