Achieving business sustainability: the role of integrity

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Abstract

Business sustainability is developing into a fundamental matter for practitioners and academics. The scope of sustainability has broadened from environmental matters only to include other topics such as good corporate citizenship, business relationships and value creation; all of them looking at a wide community of stakeholders and not only with focus on a limited number of shareholders. On the topic of relationships with stakeholders, this paper finds that an interaction enabler such as personal relationships with a member of a stakeholder group helps companies establishing beneficial projects for both parties, which later turn into the convergence point where the parties are able to discuss and resolve other relevant issues. Stakeholder groups that shared a project with the company felt that more value was created and were more supportive of the company's activities.

Regarding value creation and network integrity this paper finds that non-economic value is as important as economic value. Network integrity is built on consistency, trust, and pride. While consistency and trust are well known dimensions of business relationship, pride has not been studied previously. As pride needs no enforcement, when achieved, it strengths the links of the network and fosters business sustainability at little or no cost.

This paper concludes that relationship integrity increases business sustainability. Integrity strengths the links between actors in a network, reduces costs to build and maintain relationship and also reduced motivation for opportunistic behaviour. Integrity has positive effects on the parties' perception about value creation and how this is shared within the network. This research opens new avenues for businesses to become sustainable and also for academics to study business interaction in times of sustainability search.

Keywords: Sustainability, Integrity, Relationship Value, Pride

Achieving business sustainability: the role of integrity

Introduction

Business sustainability is developing into a fundamental matter for practitioners and academics. Sustainability, from an environmental perspective such as water conservation, energy production and waste control, has been a relevant discussion topic for many years now. However, the scope of business sustainability reaches beyond environmental aspects only. Environmental regulations (Menon & Menon, 1997) prompted the development of corporate strategies beyond the economical interests of the firm; at least partially (Carroll, 1979). As the obligations of businesses towards the society became more evident, most large corporations adopted social responsibility programs. Interest groups, then, gained ground to influence these corporations' long term strategies (Bowd, Bowd, & Harris, 2006), so many companies embraced social responsibility programs (CSR) to increase the overall sustainability of their businesses. Hewlett Packard moves beyond social responsibilities and includes in their program environmental responsibilities too creating a corporate social and environmental responsibility program (CSER) that Rosenberg (2004) reports successful. However, Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that the more businesses embrace corporate responsibility the more they are blamed for society's failures because companies are perceived to be prospering at the expense of the broader community.

Taking into consideration the increased commitment towards sustainability that businesses reveal and the importance and limitations of CSR, this research addresses the question of how can sustainability be achieved in the context of networks of stakeholders, extending further the concept of sustainability. This paper presents findings of two case studies at the network level, which reaches a wide community of stakeholders, one in the mining industry and the other in the fashion industry. Sustainability is studied including, in addition to environmental matters, topics such as good corporate citizenship, business relationships and value creation. After the discussion of results and conclusions, the paper finishes outlining managerial implications.

Literature review

Companies show concern about business sustainability and report on their actions and achievements through corporate websites and annual reports, nevertheless, Baumgartner and Ebner (2010) argue that their focus is unclear. Sustainability strategies may be guided by internal and external sustainable orientation. Internally, a company may be able to plan and communicate their aims, however, externally, as more than 30 years of IMP Group research has proven companies are reliant on the actions and reactions of other parties that form the networks in which they operate. Current thinking about sustainability recognises the importance of identifying and understanding the needs and interests of stakeholders and the value that is created in the interaction with them (New, 2010; Perez-Aleman & Sandilands, 2008; Prokesch, 2010; Valente & Crane, 2010). Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, and Steger (2005) reviewed research on business cases for sustainability concluding that existing research methods are mostly descriptive, that they do not shed enough light to assess the economic value of sustainable business; value that only materialises in the long term and thus is difficult to quantify. Difficulties in quantifying value are added to difficulties identifying beneficiaries of such value. The answer to which stakeholders contribute to value creation and how value is distributed remains unclear. Buysse and Verbeke (2003) highlight the linkages between environmental strategies and stakeholders' management, arguing that proactive environmental strategies are associated to deeper and broader coverage of stakeholders.

Several types of stakeholders are identifiable. They can be grouped by the role they play and by the influence they have on a company's performance. Primary stakeholders such as employees, customers, investors, suppliers, and shareholders are essential for a company's survival. However, secondary stakeholders such as the media, trade associations, non-governmental organizations, along with other interest groups are not. Nevertheless, even secondary stakeholders may have enough power to influence long term business sustainability. Maignan, Ferrell, and Ferrell (2005) argue that various stakeholders can exercise pressure on firms to demand actions in favour of their interests. Although companies have moved from the Friedman's perspective that proclaims that the only obligation of businesses is to create wealth for their stakeholders, the adoption of social responsibility initiatives has not increased their ability to secure sustainability. Clarkson (1995) argues that corporate actions should create value to the community through consultation with stakeholders. Miles, Munilla, and Darroch (2006) recommend proactively engaging specific stakeholder groups to enhance corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy making. Koll, Woodside, and Mühlbacher (2005) study the relationship of organizational effectiveness and responsiveness to key stakeholders, they find that balanced as opposed to single one responsiveness is more likely to lead to high organizational effectiveness.

CSR has been the way organizations found to respond to demands of different stakeholders. The focus of corporate citizenship has often been on the responsibility of a single organization in the value chain. However, Waddock (2004, p.32) argues for the need of a "holistic and integrated responsibility assurance system," to make corporate social responsibility real. As companies have many and diverse stakeholders, they ultimate focus on satisfying the key stakeholder groups, who have the greatest impact on the bottom-line of business (Greenley, Hooley, Broderick, & Rudd, 2004). This strategy has led to perceiving corporate citizenship only as a marketing tool to increase profitability with integrity from corporations (Phillips & Caldwell, 2005). What is even worse, some firms are afraid that by opening Pandora's Box on social responsibility, their resources will be unable to cope with what they find. However, stakeholder expectations are growing and the age old 'arms length' argument is no longer enough to satisfy the new business reality. Spence and Bourlakis (2009) argue that there is no evidence that suggests that corporate citizenship is achieving results. To improve CSR effectiveness the parties' commitment to collaboration and the alignment of social, environmental and economic goals, is necessary.

Sustainability for businesses is more than environmental. Sustainability is reflected in long term competitive advantage, on the business ability to thrive over time, to survive their founders and to accommodate to changes in the business environment, to respond to new regulation and to secure the support of other parties that supply critical resources, also, sustainability is about dealing with those that don't like one's business. It is still unclear how companies respond to demands of diverse stakeholder groups whether they are primary or secondary, and if such responsiveness is effective for business sustainability. Neither it is clear what stakeholders should companies focus on and what kind of actions improve and which worsen the probabilities of CSR long term success? Until know, social responsibility programs were thought to be promoters of sustainability, however, it is becoming clearer that

CSR is not enough to achieve companies' sustainable strategies. These research adopts a broader view of sustainability to address the question of what fosters business sustainability.

Method

This research is based on two case studies. The first case study is in the mining industry. The focal company is a mining company operating in New Zealand that we call company A. In the New Zealand context A would be considered a major mining operation. The second case study is in the apparel industry. The focal company designs and markets Merino wool garments targeting the high-end market customers. We call them company B.

For case study A, seven stakeholders were indentified and invited to participate of the research. Organizations that participated include the Department of Conservation, local Maori Renuaka, the surrounding community, which includes the school, businesses, local residents, and the Regional Council, an interest group focused on land rehabilitation and animal protection, we call them stakeholder group one, an interest group focused on fishing and water conservation, we call them stakeholder group two, an interest group dedicated to the protection and conservation of historic sites, we call them stakeholder group three. One hour long semi-structured interviewees were conducted with representatives of these seven groups.

For case study B, the commercial nature of the organization shaped a different network structure, thus, we sought data from members of the value chain, beginning at the farmers' level that supply the wool and ending at retail shops. One interest group focused on preventing animal cruelty was included in the research. One hour long semi-structured interviewees were also conducted with these parties.

In both case studies interview data were fully transcribed and their transcriptions, together with notes from field observations, published reports from websites of companies and affiliated stakeholders, were analysed. It was also performed an online search of news articles and media news related to issues that arose in interviews. For company B promotional materials about their products were included in the data set. For data analysis all documents were coded at the level of paragraph. Codes are based on concepts extracted from existing literature. Codes include type of stakeholder (e.g., primary, secondary), their ability to influence other parties' actions, type of relationship between the stakeholder and the company (e.g., adversarial, cooperative or neutral), structure of relationship (e.g., trust, commitment, bonds), beneficiaries of existing CSR initiatives, and their perception of the value that the business generates and whether they receive their fair share; objectives of the social responsibility program and costs. In the process of data analysis, specific aspects of each case study became evident. Different codes applied to the data set. Also, emergent codes grounded on empirical data were different, however, some commonalities were also observed.

Results

For presentation of results each case is in principle individually analysed, then a cross case analysis contributes to the final portrayal of a business sustainability model.

Company A has a sustainability project that basically consists of the implementation of individual projects targeting sustainable development for beneficiaries that are organizations in the surrounding community. A aims to build a relationship with key stakeholders through these projects. The company considers that these relationships have the potential of promoting sustainable development in the region and therefore foster their own intentions of achieving business sustainability. Three relevant projects related to each one of the stakeholder groups are identified. Stakeholder group one is associated to a project of landscape rehabilitation; stakeholder group two is associated to a trout hatchery project, and stakeholder group three is associated to a heritage and art park development. The effects of establishing these three projects were different.

We started our interviews asking the definition of sustainability. Not surprisingly our informants had different definitions for sustainability. For instance, representatives of the surrounding community define sustainability as *"Environmental stuff, like…eco-friendly dishwashing liquid"* whereas the local Maori community Renuaka definition of sustainability has a broader scope that includes the environment but also influences people's lives for the better *"My interpretation of sustainability is that after mined, life it is returned to better than it was prior to. That's my idea of sustainability."* The company's definition of sustainable development is very much environmentally related and also associated to the end of the mining activity *"We've got to focus on sustainable development, but that's when the mine closes the area will still have some sustainable thing."* Although the regional council focuses on the environment their definition of sustainability also includes a view for the future and current economic development *"It's really the balance between economic development and environmental, sustaining the environment or the ecosystem for future generations."* In a second thought Renuaka adds *"Another interpretation of sustainability is that it provides employment for the local people- that's sustainable too"* denoting that sustainability includes a current economic component that benefits member of their group and other stakeholders and secures their long term welfare.

Looking at the parties assessment of their relationships we found some important differences. Renuaka's assessment of their relationship with the company is *"Oh, we've had our ups and downs"* whereas the company qualifies their relationship with Renuaka as *"Positive relationship…it's generally quite good"* The company's overoptimistic view may prevent them for seeking further opportunities to promote sustainable development with this group. Regarding the relationship with the regional council that qualifies it as *"Well, from my point of view it's very arms length and regulatory."* the company reports *"Yeah. They're all good."* a little more optimistic that their counterpart too. Regarding interest group two the company qualifies their relationship *"We've got a pretty good relationship with [Interest Group Two]"* In our interpretation of these data, we see three different levels of good, of which the relationship with interest group two is the best.

In terms of responsiveness to the needs of stakeholders the company shows a rather reactive approach. That is, they only take action when a stakeholder complains and problems became so evident. For illustration, the company implemented a project for the construction of a new tail's dam triggering a number of complaints from stakeholders. Renuaka wants to be consulted before the company starts with any activity in the area, if they are not consulted as it happened with this project then they become upset and less cooperative. However, the company only approached Renuaka to consult their opinion after they started to face opposition.

A more successful project is the fish hatchery. However, the company's support of the hatchery project was also the consequence of interest group two initial actions. Nevertheless, interest group two is more satisfied with the company because the hatchery project delivers significant benefits from them, but they perceive this project to be mutually beneficial.

> *"We had an employee here that loved fish… he was a voluntary ranger, and so he heard that [Interest group two] were closing down a hatchery in Wanaka and he thought here would be a really good place so he, sort of, put the idea to us and the environment team." (Mining Company)*

> *"A proposal that went to the mining company at about the same time as the mining company was looking to do something green… they had a part of their consents which required them to maintain sort of like a sustainable community in the area." (Interest Group Two)*

In the end both parties are satisfied, interest group two because they have now a place to hatch fish. The company as this quote illustrates *"Our trout hatchery is really a feel good project"* is also satisfied. What is more, the company uses this project as a demonstration of mitigation activities that the council acknowledges as positive.

Summing up case study A, establishing a project with stakeholders has positive effects but not sufficient to secure sustainability. All three projects were beneficial to their stakeholders, however, the most satisfying was the project with stakeholder group two because of the project ownership and the perceived share of benefits.

Data from company B focus on a different aspect of the relationship between the company and their stakeholders. B was quick to explain that sustainability, which they construe as a consequence of being socially responsible, is only achieved through integrity. B defines integrity as *"more than the tip of the iceberg, it is instead the whole iceberg that includes everything about the product and is underpinned with credibility."* Driven by B's definition of sustainability we focused our enquiry on integrity, finding that other members of the value chain shared B's idea of sustainability and integrity being together. A wool grower explained "*the product we deliver is what we say it is and that we are not hiding or being un-truthful about any aspect of production of that product."* and a retailer justified the importance of having nothing to hide *"We are getting bigger and bigger, as people are getting more conscious about where their clothing is coming from, and the practices made to make it"*

An interest group that may have the ability to affect B’s success is PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). They are an organisation that advocates for and promotes the need for animal welfare. Although raising Merino sheep is not the responsibility of the company, their focus on social responsibility is also about ethical issues related to the wellbeing of animals. B keeps an eye on the quality assurance processes in place to secure fibre quality for their final products. B works alongside SAFE (Save Animals From Experiments) an organization dedicated to protect animals that provides their brand to organisations that raise animals in an ethical and responsible manner. B advocates one of the major challenges in Merino farming, which is to reduce the practice of Mulesing. A premium brand of B that the company only offers to a limited number of retailers that meet strict guidelines about socially responsible practices as well as having values that are similar to that of B and the Merino growers of New Zealand, requires the farm to have ceased Mulesing or to have never Mulesed. That way, New Zealand Merino distinguishes from Australian Merino where Mulesing, although controversial and considered animal cruelty, is still a common practice.

Essential to maintain integrity it is to get processes right from the start. Integrity provides B with marketing tools too. End consumers are provided with a swing tag, which allows individuals to trace back to the farm that the sheep were raised on the origins of the wool used to knit their garments. So, not only retailers want wool growers to farm in a sustainable way, wool growers also want it. Integrity generates value for growers because reinforces the way they look at their activity. *“[Farming], it’s more than a business, it’s a privilege and we want to make a living of it.”* Integrity also delivers value for retailers because it is believed that consumers are willing to pay premiums for the integrity of B’s products. Within the company informants believe integrity creates a sense of pride and personal ownership of the brand. Growers grow wool for the brand. *"It gives them a sense of pride about where their products end up"* One grower adds *"Instead of just growing wool, we’re actually growing it for an end-producer and for an end-consumer*. Retailers participate of the whole creation of value and are invited to visit the farms where the wool is produced and encouraged to share their experiences with end consumers.

B does not pay the growers higher than market prices, thus, the value created in the process goes beyond financial considerations. Making profits is a necessary condition but not the reason for being in business. A respondent of B explains *“Pride is to me, an equal [to money] and for growers as well, pride is a big thing.”* Both growers and the company feel that non-monetary value adds fullness and meaning to what they do for a living. However, retailers place money at a higher level. A retailer called money the driving factor.

Summing case study B up it could be argued that sustainability for them goes beyond environmental concerns. Although animal welfare is central, sustainability is grounded on a superior concept that is integrity, in which the pride that parties feel of being part of the value chain is a fundamental. Pride promotes collaboration and reduces bargain and opportunistic behaviour. Pride in case study B is critical in value generation, however, pride could not exist if integrity is broken.

Nothing could be more different than mining and fashion, however the findings of both cases supplement in defining business sustainability, particularly regarding the structure of relationship between the parties and the value that such relationship is capable to deliver, as we discuss in the following section.

Discussion

While Whitmore (2006) argues that behind the miners' rhetoric of sustainability lies the same old financial ambition, case study A shows that the implementation of a project, proposed by and beneficial to the stakeholder worked as the starting point for the company to build a relationship with stakeholder two, a relationship that delivers value for both parties beyond the benefits of the project. The case supports the value of open discussions with stakeholders to identify opportunities for value creation (Pratt, 2001). Based on Söllner's (1999) typology of commitment it could be argued that the employee's sharing of information with the company about the opportunity to build a fish hatchery was an attitudinal input towards commitment from the side of interest group two and the company's response financing the infrastructure was an instrumental input towards commitment from the side of the company. This created a solid structure of relationship that improved through the interaction between the parties that created an economic bond too (Holmlund & Törnroos, 1997). The mutual interdependence of the parties makes the business possible. The project fosters business sustainability for the mining company because it demonstrates a mitigation activity of the adversarial effects that the mining operation creates while for stakeholder two the project has economic relevance because fish hatchery is fundamental for their activity. However, if it were not that one member of stakeholder group two worked at the company, initiating this project might not be possible. This mutually beneficial initiative illustrates the importance of the intertwinement that exists between a company and their stakeholders. The case supports

(Koll, et al., 2005) who argue that the responsiveness of one party to the benefits of the other creates value for both.

In contrast, in the relationship between the company and the Maori community Reanuka the lack of consultation about the tail's dam project had a worsening effect on trust honesty, the belief that the other party will be credible (Ganesan, 1994). Less trust between the parties is detrimental for business sustainability.

In case study B sustainability is grounded in integrity. Rieke and Guastello (1995) argue that although psychologists have been studying integrity for more than 50 years the empirical evidence seeking to validate the concept is not compelling. However, evidence of case study B suggests that integrity is built on consistency, trust and pride, which are concepts that allow for a clearer understanding of integrity. Consistency keeps integrity stable (McFall, 1987), trust decreases the perception of risk when interacting with other party, and pride is about having high praise and dedication towards the values that products and services stand for, as well as having pride in the work you are doing and the relationships forged throughout the value chain. Pride needs no enforcement. This view of integrity contrasts Becker's (1998) views of integrity who argues that integrity requires rationality. That reason, not emotion, should be the primary guide of individuals. Individuals may lack integrity because of inconsistencies between desires and moral values, because individuals succumb to social pressure. However, understanding that pride is a constituent part of integrity, demonstrates that the inconsistency between desires and moral values cannot exist in integrity driven value chains. B's business sustainability is enhanced because of the pride that everyone in the chain experience to be part of the making of merino clothes. This shows the importance of business goals and values being aligned alongside the chain. Likewise, this reflects the findings of Iseda (2008) in that pride is an intangible benefit to an organisation that attenuates issues with work ethics, creates higher moral standards and increases the integrity of individuals' work. Hume (1911) refers to pride as a positive feeling towards oneself that can be considered a vice or a virtue. In the context of integrity it is considered a virtue as it leads to increased self-esteem and therefore happiness.

The difference between A and B in their approach towards sustainability is evident. While A adopts a reactive stance and only takes action when a stakeholder complains or comes with an interesting proposition, B focuses in value creation with most stakeholders of the organization and has managed to build an integer value chain. The idea of the value chain, as introduced by Porter (1985) focuses on the efficiencies in the processes of transformation until end consumers' needs are met at a profit, thus, the main focus is on economic value. However, value in this research goes beyond economic considerations, value is derived from what is gained from using money and not only the fact of having the money; value is also hedonic, like the peace of mind that growers find in working with B because B guarantees a stable price for the wool over an entire year, value is also symbolic for farmers that define their activity as a privilege or functional for retailers that can guarantee integrity alongside the overall chain. Manifestations of value in this research are consistent with the framework to assess value proposed by Smith & Colgate (2007).

Maignan, et al. (2005) call for a stakeholder orientation aiming to understand and address the all stakeholders demands, beyond markets, competitors and channel members. Peter Senge argues that companies need a more ambitious vision of sustainability and stop acting as if sustainability is about being less bad (Prokesch, 2010). This research points up how less constricted approaches towards sustainability deliver value for many and in diverse forms, while increase economic value for shareholders.

Conclusions

Sustainability has several dimensions including economic, ecological, and social. As companies are part of extended networks, they are related to several stakeholders. Sustainability strategies need to include all stakeholders bearing in mind, however, that most stakeholders are different regarding they demands, their abilities to influence the course of action, and their expectations. Thus, companies' responsiveness towards the demands of different stakeholders should be different too. Sustainability strategies must be stakeholder specific.

This research also shows that interaction affects the structure of the relationship between the parties for better or worse. The dimensions of relationship structure that empirical data of this research demonstrate have changed are trust, commitment, and bonds, however, because integrity is composed by consistency, trust, and pride, it is also affected by the structure of relationship, even though integrity is proposed to affect business sustainability.

The role of integrity observed in case study B is such that suggests sustainability is achievable with less instrumental inputs towards a relationship such as those that normally CRS programs put in place. Integrity is more efficient in building commitment between the parties. Hence, conscious efforts to enhance value chain integrity could pay off in the form of increased business sustainability at lower costs than CSR that as research suggest carry costs but does not deliver value always.

Managerial Implications

Company managers should not ignore the importance of achieving business sustainability. They need to respond to stakeholders' demands, however, proactively as opposed to reactively. Identification of different issues in companies' interaction with the community has the potential to save significant resources and prevents further problems. Sustainability goes beyond environmental issues. CSR is closely associated with achieving integrity, however, as Ebner and Baumgartner (2006) suggest CSR should include economic, ecologic and social aspects. Social responsibility initiatives should focus on the benefits delivered by both parties. That is, CSR should be about value creation. The effects of integrity on achieving business sustainability are such that companies should find increased motivation to demonstrate and pursue integrity alongside the whole value chain. Even a mining company should be able to instil pride in their stakeholders, not because of the product they sell, but because of the relationships that builds with them, to the value that their activity creates and shares with others in their network.

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