

Baby Steps Do Count

It seems as if there is more and more interest in doing something about the state of the environment. Purchasing professionals in particular are becoming increasingly aware of the critical role that they play. Frequently the question is asked of me, “What can I do? The problems are so big, so complex, that I feel helpless. Tell me, what can just one person do?” This question is always disturbing to me because it demonstrates the degree to which we all have become victims of something we do not understand and, thus, victims for many other events in our lives. In this instance, however, there is a great deal that just one person can do!

Everyone wants to care for the environment at some level. No matter where they live, how much money they make, how old they are, how much education they have, or where they were born, people want to leave a safe world for their children and grandchildren. They want those children and grandchildren to have a quality life experience. The problem comes when they try to decide just what to do?

There is so much information, so many choices, and it frequently may seem like it is not enough or that it is not worth it. But in each case, it is. Every little baby step we take with a little bit more care for the long-term health of our environment makes a difference. How do we know this? Because we have a myriad of success stories where the aggregate actions of everyday people doing relatively simple things clean up streams and rivers, improve the functioning of a wetland, avoid the cutting down of thousands of trees, slow down the depletion of soil, reduce the number of miles driven in cars, and on and on.

Having been in the higher education sector for more than 30 years and having been actively engaged in the transfer of knowledge to the members of higher education for more than 15 years, I say that we work in a bastion of conservatism when it comes to embracing change. That we are one of the oldest institutions on the planet is both good and bad. It is good because it gives us a history to examine our behaviors, and it gives us the opportunity to analyze and evaluate that behavior. It is bad because we can become mired and suffer mightily for analysis paralysis. Radical change in the workplace rarely happens. So it is the case that tiny little baby steps taken towards living a more sustainable lifestyle can make a huge difference.

It is also my observation that change is far more likely to come to those of us in higher education at the personal level than it is at the institutional level. I suspect this is due to our celebration of free speech and academic freedom. It is also probably due to our institutional leadership not being focused on the campus *per se*, but on the primary reason the governing board hired them in the first place: to raise funds. Thus, we staff are frequently left in

the unflattering situation where we know what needs to be done but we also know that there is no one in authority who has the inclination to lead a shift in behavior. We are stuck not knowing what we can and cannot do without upsetting the delicate balance of harmony which has been created by centuries of this homogeneous behavior dealing with matters outside the academy. We stop acting. We hunker down. We wait for direction. This survivalist tactic may benefit the organization but not the earth.

But there is always hope. We suffer only so long before we can no longer tolerate the tension between organizational protectionism and a personal call to action. We conclude that, as my friend Dee Hock, the founder and former chairman of VISA International, says, “It is far too late and far too bad to be pessimistic; it is a call to action.” Not every one of us may make that decision to act, but then consider this excellent statement by Sir Edmund Burke: “Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little.”

If you do not know what to do or what else to do about your environment, you might want to sample some of the ideas from the list that follows:

Food Purchasing/General Shopping

- Buy products grown locally.
- Avoid highly packaged items.
- Do use shopping as a therapy.
- Buy hormone-free milk and meat.
- Buy fair-trade coffee.
- If the grocer doesn't have it, ask!
- Don't accept plastic bags. Ask for cardboard – you can recycle it!
- Try eating one organic fruit or vegetable per week.
- Compost all of your nonmeat and nondairy leftovers.

In the House

- Don't run the water while you brush your teeth.
- Use cotton instead of paper napkins/towels.
- Use ceramic or glass instead of plastic or Styrofoam.
- Use nonfossil-fuel-based cleaning agents such as those based on citrus products.
- In paper products, remember that (generally) recycled paper is just scrap paper from the mill and that post-consumer waste paper is the paper you likely recycled.
- Buy chlorine-free 100% post-consumer recycled paper products (copier/fax and printer paper), and use both sides whenever possible.

- Buy organic cotton clothes.
- Don't support sweatshop clothiers.
- Reduce junk mail.
- Recycle your engine oil and car batteries.
- Support local recycling efforts.
- Get involved politically – ask politicians what their position is on the environment? On air quality? On sprawl? On the notion of sustainable development?

Outdoors

- Stop bagging grass clippings and pine needles.
- Plant a small garden.
- Begin a compost bin.
- Plant native trees and shrubs.
- Replace grass with low-water-use native plants.
- Eliminate herbicides, pesticides, and insecticides, and replace with safe alternatives.

Energy Savings

- Turn off the lights when you leave a room.
- Move your thermostat just 3 degrees warmer in the summer and 3 degrees cooler in the winter. It should generate a 5%-7% cost savings.
- Use those ceiling fans to improve air circulation and even out the temperature distribution.
- Buy only EPA Energy Star-certified appliances, both big and small.
- Insulate your home, and insulate your hot water heater.
- Set the water heater to 120°F.
- Replacing a water heater? Consider a tankless.
- Plant big, dense trees on your west and south exposures.
- Caulk your windows and doors.
- Install solar screens.
- Use radiant barrier paint in your attic.
- Don't turn on excess outside lights – enjoy the stars.
- Throw away those incandescent light bulbs and replace with compact fluorescent lamps.
- Install low-flow showerheads in your bathroom.
- Install low-flow toilets if yours are more than 12 years old.
- Replace your air conditioner if your SEER rating is less than 10 or you don't know what it is.
- Purchase fuel-efficient automobiles and keep them as long as you can.
- Consider buying a hybrid automobile as your next vehicle.
- Don't top off the gas tank. Stop when the nozzle clicks off.
- Make sure the tires on your automobiles are properly inflated. Underinflated tires increase resistance and waste gas.
- Reduce the number of trips you make in your automobile.
- Ride a bus once a week to work.
- Vanpool or carpool to work.
- Turn off your home computer, fax, copier, and the printer every night.

You can do it! Baby steps can and do count, they count for all of us. Pick a few – try it, you'll like it – and you will be doing good for your family, friends, and the environment. You, too, can do great things!



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