

Is Greening on Campus Hard to Do?

by **Brian Yeoman**

I'm not amazed when individuals express anger over efforts on campus to "green" anything from the food in the vending machines to the activities of their power plant. Greening campus operations, building green buildings, and buying green materials are not top-of-mind issues among campus business leaders. So, to hear some criticism is not unexpected. What is surprising is the *depth* of the misunderstanding, and sometimes, *that* is truly frightening.

In a related way, it reminds me of just how important listening is to all of us. Listening and trying to understand just what the sticking points are in this topic of "greening" has been instructive for me, and it may be for you too. In aggregating these positions in my mind, no intentional literary license has been taken. It took me longer than it should have to realize that it was important for these opinions to be codified and shared.

Many purchasing people believe environmental issues belong to others on campus with the time and/or the inclination to take ownership. Among these others are the sentimental, "rock-sucking tree-huggers". Too many purchasing professionals, like others in society, refuse to accept personal accountability for today's environmental issues. Unfortunately, they do not understand that the environmental issues of today are diffuse and ubiquitous molecular events, not the Exxon Valdez running aground in Prince William Sound of Alaska. We seem to readily embrace the notion that science is too complicated to understand, and there-

fore only nerds would want to understand it. *That* excuses us.

The principles of Sustainable Development are counter to our conventional wisdom, which celebrates the fatalistic individualism in which success is defined by quarterly earnings reports and to the victors go the spoils. Making routine decisions in a framework which forces us to consider the implications for future generations is a foreign notion to us. We are "Social Darwinists," preferring personal control and profit-making (at least until we retire and pay \$3.00 for a gallon of gas) to sharing risks and building a future long term. Short-term thinking and short-term acting are the dominant model.

Let's face it. Human beings like stuff. "Affluenza" is a disease that reigns supreme even (or especially) among the youngest. "He or she who dies with the most toys wins" is a widely held and celebrated paradigm. Keeping up with the Joneses is driving our children's behavior as much as our own. We are increasingly more willing to identify with our inanimate stuff than with the earth or any other living things. Stuff counts!

We really do not get it. We send our garbage far enough away to not see or smell it. We delude ourselves that the stuff we discard is gone...that is, until a permit is filed to put a landfill in our part of town, and then all of a sudden we remember it has not gone away at all. We live where we live to get away from the mess. By the time we die, most of us will have absorbed so many toxins that our bodies will be too toxic to touch and the graveyards of the future will be hazardous waste sites. We exile ourselves in gated com-

munities, missing the diversity that is nature and which is invaluable to the social and intellectual health of any community. We create weak monocultures poised to collapse, clinging to the belief that there is a place to get away to. But there is no "away."

We simply don't get it! Human impact on the environment is 17 times greater now than it was a hundred years ago. Imagine consequences to any system of a 1,700 percent increase in demand? Solutions to environmental degradation and resource depletion escape us because we cannot get over the first "cost" mindset, which is really a misnomer for first price. "You get what you pay for" and "the privatization of profit and the socialization of risk" are legacy paradigms difficult to shed. We continue to fail to recognize the large-scale damage we have done to our ecosystems. The logging clear cuts made for cheap building materials and the expanding deserts created by fertilizing and herbiciding cotton crops are visible from space. Can this really be smart growth?

We do not appreciate the extent of the damage being inflicted on the biosphere. Perhaps it would help to know that 15,000 people died in France in the summer of 2003 from the heat, or that 80,000 people in Europe died last year from automobile pollution, or that asthma accounted for much of the sick time in the public school systems in North America, or that American hospitals killed 108,000 patients with infections contracted in the "safest, most secure, best medical system in the world."

Sustainable development remains an ambiguous buzzword to many people. That is largely because it is seen as an antidote



to conventional economic development, and that frightens people. “Sustainable” is being applied as an adjective to nearly every concept in most professional settings. As we go about creating this tangled web, the most important victims of the deception are ourselves. Many among us honestly believe that we and our fellow humans are not causing serious problems. We argue that global warming is just one of nature’s cycles, ignoring the CO₂ we have put into the atmosphere the last 150 years. Many do not understand that their house pollutes more than their car, and that it is impossible to see their car’s engine’s harmful emissions. Those two sources of carbon emissions are melting glaciers and both polar caps at a record pace, and significantly contributing to global climate change.

I have been told many times that many of us lead lives too exhausting and confusing to enable us to envision any different way of living. Our natural intelligence, goodwill, and creativity are undermined by the efforts necessary for survival. We hold on with a death grip to things familiar. Our mindset becomes, “if it ain’t broke don’t even think of fixing it.” But it is broken. So...the greening of the campus languishes on the long list of missed opportunities for higher education to lead large-scale societal change.

Our economic system ignores human needs in favor of unbridled economic growth and thereby ensures continual anxiety. The feeling of helplessness and haplessness is growing and causing the greening of the campus to be overly microfocused on

initial price, ignoring the total cost of ownership. This false bottom-line mentality has led to layoffs, outsourcing, and the rejection of the social contract with fellow Americans. There are many among us who are honestly afraid that living more simply would reduce our competitive edge, and so they resist the ideas behind the greening of the campus.

We are pessimistic about change. Very few people fail to mention this when they speak of the greening effort. We believe that the democratic process on campus is powerless because financial interests control campus and community development. Too often we look to others to take the lead. I have been told that until my president stands up and makes it a priority, it won’t make any difference what the students want and what the faculty want.

But Wait!

Change is on the horizon. The greening of the campus is coming, and it is coming quickly. There are large and important strides being taken, and federal legislation is in the pipeline. I truly hope that we can ramp ourselves up quickly enough to become a major player in the greening of the campus effort. There is tremendous momentum. I would encourage you to set a Google Alert for Green Buildings to watch worldwide and national trends. I know we are going to play an important role in the implementation. It is simply a matter of understanding that the tipping point has been reached and that it is time – as it always is and has been – for us to do great things!



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