

# **CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

## **Understanding What Drives Sustainability Professionals as Change Agents**

***By Wayne Visser and Andrew Crane***

### **Abstract**

This paper looks at what motivates sustainability managers to devote their time and energies to addressing social, environmental and ethical issues. It is rooted in the literature on the role of individuals as change agents for corporate sustainability, in particular in their capacity as environmental or social 'champions'. The paper presents in-depth research among sustainability managers, providing a rich, nuanced understanding of different types of sustainability change agents. It identifies four such types – Experts, Facilitators, Catalysts and Activists – and uncovers the pivotal role of values, inspiration, expertise, empowerment, strategic thinking and social contribution as sources of meaning for these purpose-inspired managers. The findings deepen our understanding of the psychological dimensions of corporate sustainability management, and provide a useful tool for improving individual and team performance, enhancing recruitment and retention of sustainability talent, and developing more effective organisational leadership for sustainability.

### **Keywords**

corporate social responsibility, corporate sustainability, change agents, environmental champions, meaning in life, psychology, sustainability managers, values

### **Introduction**

As social, environmental, and ethical issues like persistent poverty, climate change, financial market instability and economic globalisation continue to move up the geo-political and economic agendas, corporate sustainability is increasingly touted as a timely and necessary response by business (Dunphy et al., 2003; Shrivastava, 1995; Zadek, 2004). Viewed in this way, sustainability can be thought of as a conceptual framework and practical mechanism for creating change that results in improved social, environmental and ethical conditions (Van Marrewijk, 2003).

Attention to corporate sustainability has tended to focus on how change can be achieved at the organisational level (Benn, et al. 2006; Dunphy et al., 2003). By contrast, comparatively little research exists on the role of the individual as a change agent for sustainability (Sharma, 2002). What literature there is on corporate sustainability and the individual level typically focuses on four areas: 1) The importance of values congruence between managers/employees and organisational values (Fryxell and Lo, 2003; Hemingway and Maclagan, 2004; Van Marrewijk and Werre, 2002); 2) the instrumental association between individual concern, knowledge and commitment and corporate social and environmental responsiveness (Bansal and Roth, 2000; Keogh and Polonsky, 1998); 3) narrative accounts by sustainability managers of corporate 'greening' (Fineman, 1997; Georg and Fussel, 2000; Starkey and Crane, 2003); and 4) the role of sustainability managers as champions, entrepreneurs or agents of change in their organisations (Andersson and Bateman, 2000; Prakash, 2001; Walley and Stubbs, 1999).

This literature brings insights to our understanding of individuals within a corporate sustainability context by highlighting the importance of 'intangibles' like values, attitudes and beliefs in driving corporate sustainability, the crucial role of education and awareness in achieving behaviour change, the scope and necessity for managerial discretion in making change happen, the power of corporate culture in shaping a consensus 'story' on sustainability, and the pivotal role of leadership support for

sustainability. However, the literature also shows certain limitations. We still know little about what drives individuals to be sustainability managers, how this affects such individuals, and what they seek to achieve from their actions on a personal level. Moreover, the notion of sustainability champions – which dominates the literature on the role of individuals in corporate sustainability – only presents a partial view of sustainability managers, since not all sustainability champions are sustainability managers, and not all sustainability managers are sustainability champions.

What is needed is a clearer picture of the psychological drivers of sustainability managers. To date, the literature on the psychology of sustainability has mainly focused on how individuals respond to the human causes of global environmental changes, as well as how they are affected by global environmental change (Stern, 1992). While this is valuable, it does little to enhance our understanding of the personal motivations of sustainability managers within a corporate context. More specifically, we have almost no knowledge of how sustainability-related work contributes to job satisfaction and personal meaning. This is where the discipline of existential psychology can help to shed some light. In particular, the application of existential psychology can begin to answer questions such as: To what extent are sustainability managers motivated by instrumental incentives, such as career advancement and salary prospects, versus more normative aspirations, such as altruism or striving to make a difference in the world? Framed more broadly, to what extent is the business case for sustainability a driver of individual behaviour, as opposed to the moral case (Alexander, 2007; De Colle and Werhane, 2008)?

Looking at these questions through an existential lens – in terms of meaning in life or life satisfaction – has two major benefits. First, we are more likely to understand the relative contribution of corporate sustainability to an individual's overall motivation. For example, is it an all-consuming passion, or a marginal concern? Second, we are more likely to get an insight into individuals' real motivations, rather than eliciting a more predictable corporate sustainability narrative. For example, a sustainability manager may talk about how having children changes their perception of the problems facing the world, rather than how they are engaged in sustainability because they believe it is good for business (Starkey and Crane, 2003).

The academic importance of this research is two-fold. First, by contributing to existing theory on sustainability professionals, it helps to explain one of the key drivers of sustainability performance (namely the actions of sustainability managers themselves) within a significant and growing area of academic enquiry, namely corporate social responsibility and sustainability (Pfeffer and Fong, 2004; Starkey, Hatchuel, and Tempest, 2004). Second, the research helps to explore the appropriateness of various existential psychology theories in an applied setting. Many of these theories were developed in a clinical (medical) context and have yet to prove their resilience in practitioner environments, such as the work context of sustainability professionals. Hence, the trans-disciplinary approach of cross-fertilising existential psychology and sustainability is unique, resulting in a new hybrid theory (Gibbons *et al.* 1994, Tranfield and Starkey 1998). This hybrid theory – presented as a typology in this paper – takes the theories of life satisfaction and applies these to the field of corporate sustainability.

The research is also important from an applied management perspective, since sustainability is now an industry in its own right, and a flourishing profession as well. Hence, any research that contributes to a better understanding of sustainability managers is likely to offer benefits to growing numbers of practitioners. This addresses Mohrman *et al.*'s (2001) call for doing research that is useful to practice.

### **Corporate Sustainability and the Individual**

The role of the individual manager in corporate sustainability practice is embedded in the broader literature on agency theory in general (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen and Meckling, 1976) and moral agency in particular (French, 1979; Moore, 1999). Wood (1991) refers to managers as "moral

actors" and Swanson (1995) finds that managers' individual discretion is an important component of corporate social performance.

Prakash (2001) notes that the "beyond compliance" environmental policy literature is weak on recognising internal dynamics (as opposed to external factors) and the role of individual managers (as opposed to treating firms predominantly as unitary actors). However, there are four discernable themes in the literature on corporate sustainability and the individual. Each brings a different perspective to how individual commitment shapes organisational performance on sustainability.

One set of scholars find that the values of individuals influence corporate social and environmental responsiveness. Hemingway and Maclagan (2004) suggest that this is expressed mainly through managerial discretion, while Bansal and Roth (2000) argue that it manifests in decision making (helping managers to discriminate between more and less important ecological issues), motivation (inducing certain individuals to champion ecological responses) and leadership (where top management is more receptive to ecological reforms which are aligned to their personal values).

According to Posner and Schmidt (1993) and Hoffman (1993), alignment of the personal and organisational values or morals of managers reduces dissonance and therefore improves sustainability performance. This instrumental link between the attributes of individuals and corporate sustainability performance (the second theme) has also been studied by Keogh and Polonsky (1998). Focusing on environmental entrepreneurship rather than bureaucratic change, they find that it is personal commitment – defined as "both a process and a resultant through which organisational members display environmental concern" (38) – which results in change.

Such conceptual links made with the entrepreneurship literature are perhaps unsurprising. For example, Hostager et al. (1998) develop a model for environmental 'intrapreneurship' by individuals that illustrates how ability, efficacy (perceived ability), motivation and desirability (perceived motivation) affect the successful identification of opportunities. Starik and Rands (1995) similarly claim that individuals bring critical ideas and energy to the greening of their organisations and stress individuals' innovative resources in terms of ideas that can help increase ecological sustainability. Some have gone so far as to label this phenomenon "enviropreneurship" (Keogh et al., 1998; Menon and Menon, 1997).

Like Keogh and Polonsky (1998), Fineman (1996) also focuses on individual commitment to the environment, but he views it from the perspective of the emotional meanings that managers attribute to 'greening'. Hence, sustainability can be seen as an individual narrative account, which is the third theme in the literature. This reinforces Posner and Schmidt's (1993) proposition on values alignment, since meaning is also shaped by the values embodied in individual and organisational narratives (Mengel, 2004). It also introduces the importance of corporate culture and education in creating a consistent narrative on sustainability that individuals can tap into or align with. In this way, greening becomes "a sense-making process, in which organisational members' individual and collective identity is gradually transformed" (Georg and Fussel, 2000: 175) Hence, individual commitment becomes a two-way process, informing organisational greening but also informed by the changes in an organisation's response to sustainability.

Those individuals or managers with the most commitment to sustainability have been classified in the literature as 'environmental champions', the fourth theme. Fineman and Clarke (1996) define an environmental champion as "someone who can attractively express a personal vision about environmental protection that is in tune with both industry's needs and wider public concern" (726). This literature tends to focus on the attributes of effective champions, such as the ability to identify, package and sell environmental issues (Andersson and Bateman 2000; Crane 2000; Howard-Grenville and Hoffman, 2003; Post and Altman 1994).

Hence, from the literature we can build up a multi-faceted picture of what shapes individual commitment to sustainability. However, with the exception of the discussion on values alignment, this still does not tell us much about the motivation behind the commitment. Research to date has been fairly descriptive, rather than explanatory, suggesting an unmet need to understand the psychological drivers of individual commitment to organisational sustainability. Although psychological perspectives on sustainability more broadly have begun to emerge (Stern 1992), research on the role of the individual in corporate sustainability as yet only makes implicit use of psychological concepts, such as the literature on managers' value congruence (Agle and Mitchell, 1999; Hemingway et al., 2004) and emotional subtexts (Fineman, 1996). However, literature that applies psychology directly as an aid to understanding corporate sustainability and sustainability managers remains extremely limited (Sharma 2002). The research in this paper addresses this weakness by using insights from psychology (specifically existential psychology) to extend our knowledge of corporate sustainability managers as individuals.

### **Existential Psychology and the Individual**

Existential psychology, with its roots in religious and philosophical thinking, has emerged over the past fifty years or so, as a number of practising psychiatrists have made 'meaning in life' central to their psychotherapy approach. Collectively, they are regarded as belonging to the existential psychotherapy school (Patterson et al., 1996). Today, meaning in life is associated with a number of related concepts, including happiness (Ryff, 1989), life goals (Reker and Wong, 1988), life regard (Battista and Almond, 1973), life satisfaction (Tait et al., 1989), purpose in life (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1964), self-transcendence (Frankl, 1966), sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1979) and wellbeing (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992).

The literature on meaning in life can be characterised as 'positive scholarship', a recent strand in organisational theorising (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, Roberts 2006, Fineman 2006). More specifically, scholarship on meaning in life falls into three broad areas: 1) Scientific studies on the clinical or therapeutic applications of existential psychotherapy; 2) Positivist research to model and quantify meaning in life and its associated variables; and 3) Interpretive literature seeking to give descriptive and normative accounts of meaning in life.

In general, each category has a different focus. The medical science research tends to be concerned with diagnosing pathologies and testing the effectiveness of associated therapeutic techniques. The positivist research typically strives to measure the level of experienced meaning in life and whether there are causal or associated factors. And the interpretive research is mostly trying to understand the qualitative experience of meaning and the contexts which shape that experience.

For the purposes of this paper, the first category (clinical applications) is of the least relevance and will not be reviewed here. Of the other two categories, the positivist research is more dominant in the literature and provides some insights into sources of meaning (e.g. Wong, 1998), while the interpretive research adds qualitative depth to our understanding of sources of meaning and crucially also discusses contexts that shape meaning in life (e.g. Yalom, 1980). By way of summary, Table 1 shows that significant overlap exists between the sources of meaning identified by three leading existential psychology theorists, Wong (1988), Frankl (1964) and Yalom (1980).

What is interesting from this review of the literatures on corporate sustainability and existential psychology is the emergence of linking themes, especially those of values and self-transcendence.

Values appear in many of the normative conceptualisations of corporate sustainability (Ehrenfeld, 2000; Welford, 1995; Wheeler et al., 2003), as well as being discussed in the context of congruence between managerial and organisational values (Bansal and Roth, 2000; Hemingway and Maclagan, 2004; Posner and Schmidt, 1993). Likewise, Yalom (1980) states that positive life meaning is related to, among other things, strong religious beliefs and self-transcendent values. Wong's (1998)

research also finds that religion and values are significant sources of meaning in life, represented by statements like the following in his Personal Meaning Profile: "I believe that human life is governed by moral laws; and I seek higher values – values that transcend self-interests" (138).

**Table 1: Comparison of Theories on Sources of Meaning**

<i>Wong</i>	<i>Frankl</i>	<i>Yalom</i>
Achievement	Creative values	Self-actualisation, Creativity, Hedonism
Relationships, Intimacy	Being values	Intimate relationships
Religion	Ultimate meaning	Cosmic meaning
Self-transcendence	Self-transcendence	Altruism, Devotion to a cause
Fair treatment	Attitudes	Devotion to a cause
Self-acceptance	Being values	Self-actualisation

Source: Wong (1988), Frankl's (1964), Yalom's (1980)

Self-transcendence is also common to both literatures. For example, Wheeler et al. (2003) conclude that sustainability "is aspirational in nature, a meta-ideal, one inherently infused with societal values of justice, integrity, reverence, respect, community and mutual prosperity" (18). Frankl (1965), on the other hand, emphasises responsibility as central to the idea of deriving meaning from making a social contribution. Wong's (1998) Personal Meaning Profile includes self-transcendence statements like: "I believe I can make a difference in the world; I strive to make the world a better place; it is important that I dedicate my life to a cause; I make a significant contribution to society; and I attempt to leave behind a good and lasting legacy" (138).

These insights and linkages provide a useful platform from which to explore and understand the existential drivers of corporate sustainability managers. In particular, they set the stage for asking the following research questions: 1) Are there different types of change agents for sustainability, in terms of their existential needs? 2) What motivates and frustrates sustainability managers as change agents? and 3) How are the motivations and frustrations of sustainability managers shaped by the sources of meaning in their life and work?

## Methodology

In order to address these research questions, a qualitative approach was adopted, drawing partially on the narrative and life-history techniques (Jones, 1983; Marschan-Piekkari, 2004; Musson, 1998). Qualitative methods were well suited to the type of research being conducted, which was largely exploratory, involving inductive reasoning and theory building. It was also appropriate for the research objectives, which were focused on studying how meaning emerges and changes in situated organisational settings (Esterberg, 2002; Georg and Fussel, 2000). Here, we were engaged in a value-laden inquiry where we were seeking to build an intimate relationship between the researcher and what was studied (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Significantly, although positivist-based quantitative research has been dominant in the existential psychology field, a qualitative approach is consistent with the subjective and socially constructed epistemology adopted by several key scholars in meaning research (Frankl, 1965; Yalom, 1980) and in organizational sustainability research (Drumwright 1994; Fineman, 1996, 1997; Crane, 2000).

The life history method – which refers to "the ways in which individuals account for and theorise about their actions in the social world over time" (Musson 1998: 10) - seemed a natural choice for the type of research enquiry being undertaken. Musson (1998) notes that the life history method is particularly relevant if the research question involves understanding the motivations and influences which organisational leaders, or specific groups, bring to bear on organisations.

In order for research participants to share highly personal information about how they found meaning in their life, securing a high level of rapport, trust and credibility was critical (Miller and

Glassner, 1997; Esterberg, 2002). This shaped the decision to conduct in-depth interviews with thirty sustainability managers across a diverse set of organisational and professional contexts in South Africa, including business associations, large and small consultancies and companies from various industry sectors. The intimate approach to the interviews was consistent with the beliefs of most qualitative scholars (Easterby Smith et al., 1991; Miller and Glassner 1997) and so-called research 'romantics', who "emphasise interactivity and closeness to interviewees – seen as participants" (Alvesson 2003: 16). Similarly, Oakley (1998) suggests that attempting to preserve the distance and hierarchy between interviewer and interviewee makes for poor interviews, since researchers cannot expect intimacy if they are not willing to reciprocate.

The sample included sustainability managers from corporations (19), consultancies (9) and non-profit organisations (2). There was a good spread of seniority, from executive directors (6) and senior managers (12) to middle managers (7), junior managers (9) and consultants (2). There was also a good range of working experience, with respondents having worked on average for 18.5 years (minimum 5 years, maximum 38 years) for an average of 2 organisations (minimum 1, maximum 6). Their average working time in the sustainability field was 8.5 years (minimum 1.5 years, maximum 20 years). The majority of the managers described their roles in terms of sustainability (20) or sustainable development and environment (18), although other labels such as corporate governance, occupational health and safety, social responsibility, social investment, public relations, business ethics, corporate affairs and public relations were also used.

Data gathering occurred in three phases. In the first phase, a pilot interview was conducted, resulting in the original unstructured interview approach being modified to a semi-structured format for the second phase, as well as the introduction of two psychometric meaning in life questionnaires as an orientation technique. Both of these changes were because the pilot interview revealed that participants may have had difficulty understanding what the interviewer meant by 'meaning in life' and might struggle to keep the discussion focused on the topic.

The second phase involved conducting thirty in-depth interviews of up to one hour with sustainability managers from nineteen organisations in South Africa, guided by a number of thematic questions on personal meaning and corporate sustainability. The incorporation of two psychometric tests or diagnostic questionnaires – the Purpose in Life Test and the Personal Meaning Profile – was not to obtain quantitative data for statistical analysis, but rather to introduce participants to the way in which some existential psychologists discuss meaning in life, as well as to stimulate reflection on how meaning applied to their own life. Participants were free to question, criticise and discuss the questionnaires in the interview.

In the third phase of data gathering, second interviews were conducted with twelve of the original thirty participants from Phase 2. The purpose of the third phase was to present the initial findings, including the meaning framework which was developed out of Phase 2, in order to obtain feedback and add more depth to the data. These interviews were then used to refine the analysis and revise the framework.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed, adopting the qualitative approach to talk as data (Musson, 1998). The interview content was coded using an inductive approach, i.e. there was no pre-determined structure imposed on the data or preconceived categorical coding, but rather themes were allowed to emerge from reading of the transcripts (Easterby Smith et al., 1991; Silverman, 2000).

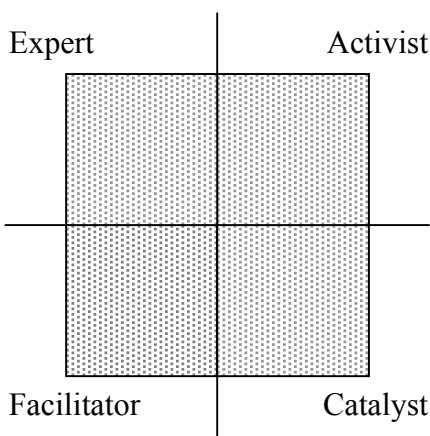
This resulted in the identification of 72 themes, which were then grouped into eight sources of meaning, eight contexts shaping meaning and four types of sustainability manager. These were presented to participants in the Phase 3 interviews for their critical comment, resulting in a revised framework, comprising six sources and four contexts of meaning, with the typology remaining unchanged. This remainder of this paper focuses on presenting the typology.

## Findings

Four fairly distinctive types of sustainability manager emerged, in terms of their meaning-driven role as change agents. A type is essentially a collection of attributes associated with sources of life satisfaction. Each type – the Expert, Facilitator, Catalyst and Activist – represents a relative constellation of meaning or centre of gravity for meaning in the sustainability managers’ work, i.e. the mode of operating in which they felt most comfortable, fulfilled or satisfied.

Figure 1 visually represents the idea that people derive meaning from a variety of sources by showing the types as boxes in four quadrants. The relative size of the shaded boxes simply indicates how much meaning the individual derives from each type. Hence, in the case depicted in Figure 1, the individual is perfectly balanced.

**Figure 1: Four Types of Sustainability Manager**



The typology is a composite in the sense that each type is an amalgam of characteristics that have been grouped and generalised. Hence, although we might expect to find individuals with a number of the defining characteristics of a given type, it is unlikely that anyone will embody all the features of any one type. The typology is also non-exclusive, in that individuals are likely to obtain their meaning from sources relating to more than one type, rather than exclusively one or another. This is consistent with all the major existential psychology theories (Frankl 1964, Yalom 1980, Wong 1998). What identifies someone as a particular type, therefore, is the relative weight of emphasis, or the strength of attraction associated with one constellation of meaning over another.

Table 2 on the next page introduces the comparative features of the four types, each of which is the described and illustrated in more detail in the sections to follow.

### **Expert**

The first type of sustainability manager is the Expert, visually represented in Figure 2 (note that for all types, the relative weights of the other three quadrants are arbitrarily depicted and can vary in any direction). Experts find their motivation though engaging with projects or systems, giving expert input, focusing on technical excellence, seeking uniqueness through specialisation, and deriving pride from their problem solving abilities.

To illustrate, one Expert-type sustainability manager explained: “There were a couple of projects that I did find very exciting ... It was very exciting to get all the bits and pieces in place, then commission them and see them starting to work.” Another said: “I usually get that sense of meaning in work when I’ve finished a product, say like an Environmental Report and you see, I’ve

really put in a lot and here it is. Or you have had a series of community consultations and you now have the results.”

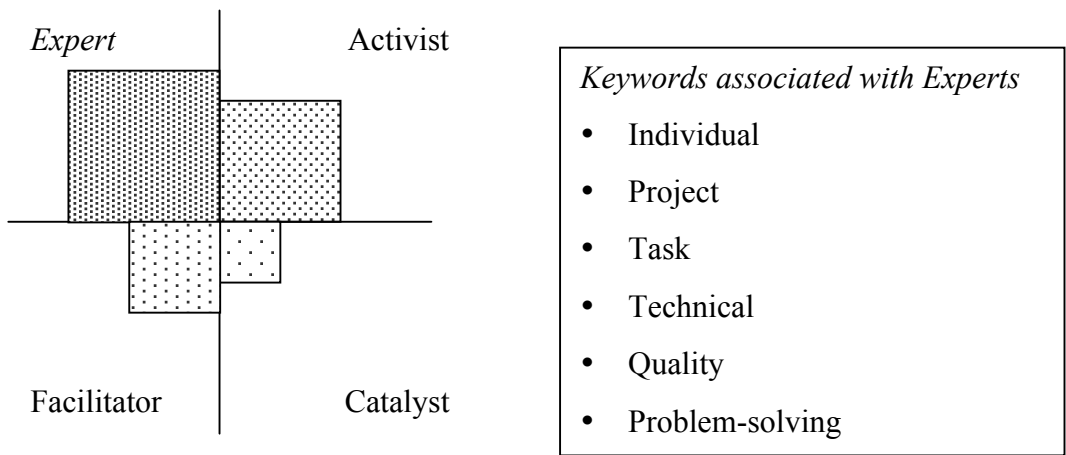
**Table 2: Summary Features of the Four Types of Sustainability Managers**

	<i>Types</i>			
	<i>Expert</i>	<i>Facilitator</i>	<i>Catalyst</i>	<i>Activist</i>
Primary source of meaning	Specialist input	People empowerment	Strategic input	Societal contribution
Level of concern	Individual	Group or team	Organisation	Society
Source of work satisfaction	Personal development, quality input	Staff development, effective facilitation	Organisational development, strategic change	Community development, social change
Skills	Technical, process	Managerial, facilitation	Visionary, political	Collaborative, Questioning
Knowledge	Specialist	Generalist	Key players, future trends	Community or macro needs
Legacy	Successful work projects	Staff or team’s achievements	Organisation or industry transformation	Sustainable environment and equitable society

Hence, the Expert typically derives satisfaction from developing and offering specialist input. This source of meaning echoes Frankl’s (1965) notion of work serving as a way for individuals to formulate their unique contribution in relation to society. For example, one participant believed his work fulfilled a specific need in the market, saying: “I actually found a niche so to say as an environmental scientist.”

The sense of fulfilment from being able to give specialist input as a sustainability manager often manifests through the achievement of specific tasks or completing projects (Wong 1998). Underlying this seems to be a motivating concern with quality improvements in processes or products. For example, one sustainability manager explained: “If I look at the products we have, the feedstocks, [I think] how can we improve this thing to become cleaner, more efficient? I like it when something works well, it’s optimal and it has an inherent quality in it.”

**Figure 2: Prototypical Expert Type Sustainability Manager**



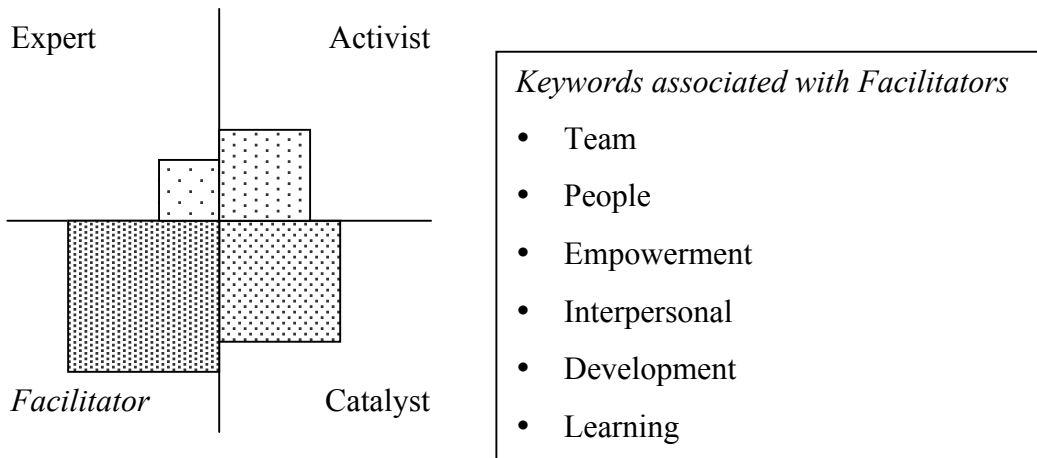


Frustrations for experts arise when their expertise is not appreciated or their advice not heeded. One sustainability manager commented that: "You feel frustrated when you think out of the box and you want to implement something new – like we want to implement a software system to help us on the management side of an EMS [environmental management system] and you can come up to a brick wall ... That puts a big boulder in the way and sometimes, you say, 'But you know: is it worth it?'"

### Facilitator

The second type of sustainability manager is the Facilitator, depicted visually in Figure 3 (once again, the relative weights of the other three quadrants can vary). Common themes among Facilitators are the derivation of motivation from transferring knowledge and skills, focusing on people development, creating opportunities for staff, changing the attitudes or perceptions of individuals, and paying attention to team building.

**Figure 3: Prototypical Facilitator Type Sustainability Manager**



For example, one Facilitator-type sustainability manager said: "If you enjoy working with people, this is a sort of functional role that you have direct interaction, you can see people being empowered, having increased knowledge, and you can see what that eventually leads to." Another explained: "The part of my work that I've enjoyed most is training, where I get the opportunity to work with a group of people – to interact with people at a very personal level. You can see how things start to get clear for them, in terms of understanding issues and how that applies to what they do."

Hence, Facilitators typically derive meaning in sustainability work from empowering other people. People empowerment draws on relationships as source of meaning (Wong 1998) and could also be seen as a form of altruism or self-transcendence (Yalom 1980). This aspect of self-transcendence is particularly clear in the way one sustainability manager of a large mining company reflected on his achievements: "It's hardly the individual successes along the way professionally that really mean much to one except the difference one has made to people's careers, people's lives and to developing people. It seems that's much more of a lasting type of fulfilment."

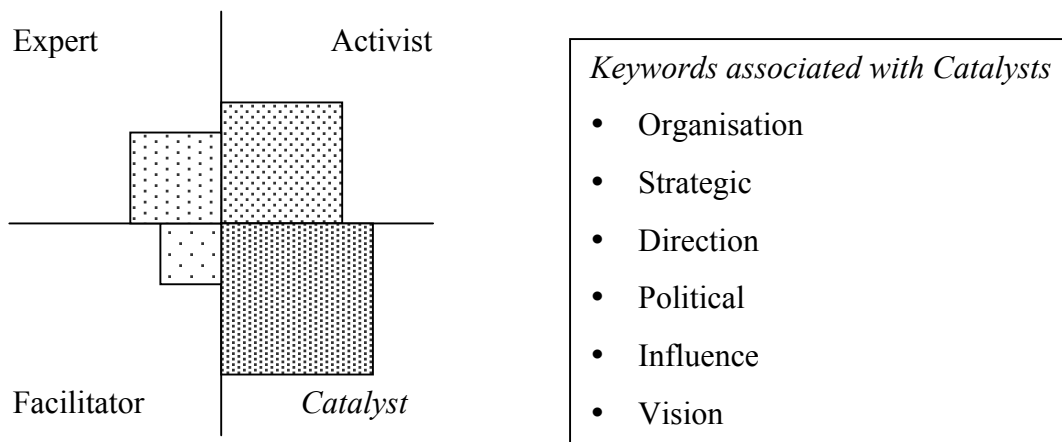
In addition to their team leadership roles, some Facilitators relish group learning contexts. One sustainability consultant talked about "getting people to think through things differently ... It's the teaching and the enlightenment. ... seeing people come in with one set of views and leaving with different set of views. And you think, 'That has been important'."

Typically, then, Facilitators are more sensitive to interpersonal dynamics and this can also lead to frustration. A manager of a large business ethics consultancy recounted: "When people let you down, it's always sobering [or] when someone is dishonest with you, or is really just so negligent that they let the whole team down." Another pointed to interpersonal conflicts in the workplace as a frustration: "It demoralises people [and] it becomes very tight and difficult".

### **Catalyst**

The third type of sustainability manager is the Catalyst, visually represented in Figure 4. For Catalysts, motivation is associated with initiating change, giving strategic direction, influencing leadership, tracking organisational performance, and having a big-picture perspective.

**Figure 4: Prototypical Catalyst Type Sustainability Manager**



For instance, one Catalyst-type sustainability manager involved in safety, health and environmental corporate policy claimed: "The type of work that I'm doing is ... giving direction in terms of where the company is going. So it can become almost a life purpose to try and steer the company in a direction that you believe personally is right as well." Another suggested: "I like getting things changed. My time is spent trying to influence people. The real interesting thing is to try and get managing directors, plant managers, business leaders, and sales guys to think differently and to change what they do."

Being a Catalyst, therefore, draws on elements of dedication to a cause and creative values as sources of meaning (Frankl, 1964; Yalom 1980). It also links strongly with the literature on social and environmental champions (Stubbs and Walley, 1999), especially descriptions of their ability to identify, package and sell sustainability ideas (Andersson and Bateman, 2000) and their reliance on being able to influence top management (Post and Altman, 1994). One sustainability manager, who spent many years leading a business association, reflected that "the most rewarding part of it has been seeing the progression in companies ... in terms of creativity around addressing social and environmental problems." Another, who headed the safety, health and environmental department of a major company, saw his most rewarding task as "identifying all these values which I consider important and then building it into a strategic focus area".

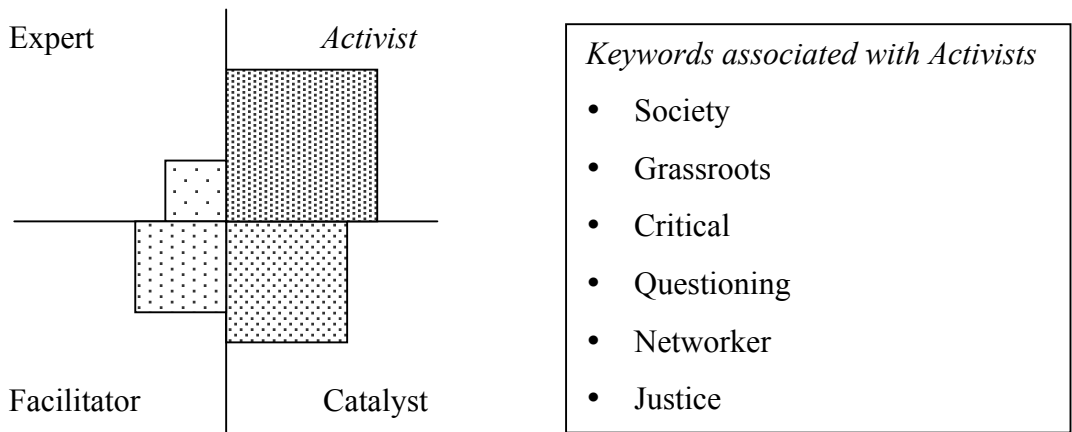
Other sustainability managers emphasised the satisfaction to be derived from influencing the company's leadership. Referring to one case where he had to persuade the CEO to invest substantially in tackling HIV/AIDS among migrant workers, one manager recounted that it was "satisfaction not just in terms of me getting something, but the sort of tangible commitment from the executives saying 'we are going to do business differently ... this actually makes business sense, this is part of our values, this is what we are about'."

Frustrations for Catalysts are typically related, as one put it, to “the speed at which I would like to move [rather] than total conflict”. Whilst trying to be a change agent, they often find that “you think that you’ve got messages across and then find that it just hasn’t happened, or it’s died a death in the cascading process.” For one sustainability manager, the frustration was so acute that he confessed that “it’s time to jump ship and actually drive something where you leave a legacy behind.”

**Activist**

The fourth type of sustainability manager is the Activist, represented visually in Figure 5. For Activists, motivation comes from being aware of broader social and environmental issues, feeling part of the community, making a contribution to poverty eradication, fighting for a just cause, and leaving a legacy of improved conditions in society.

**Figure 5: Prototypical Activist Type Sustainability Manager**



One Activist-type sustainability manager said: “It’s also about the issue of being poor. It actually touches you. You see these people have been living in appalling conditions, the shacks, the drinking water is so dirty, or there’s no running water at all, you see those kind of things, it hits you, and you think: ‘What can you do?’” Another suggested: “I think my purpose here is to help others in some way and leave a legacy for my kids to follow. I could leave a legacy behind where I actually set up a school - a kids’ school, or a campus for disadvantaged people - taking street kids out and doing something, building homes for single parents.”

Typically, therefore, Activists derive meaning from their perceived role in improving the lot of others at a broad societal level. There is a strong link here between corporate sustainability and existential psychology theory in terms of self-transcendence. For example, Yalom (1980) talks about the life satisfaction people derive from “leaving the world a better place to live in, serving others, [and] participation in charity (the greatest virtue of all)” (431). Similarly, Phillips (1979) claims that many people “look for new meaning potentials in work that benefit his co-workers, minority groups he identifies with and causes he considers worth supporting” (316).

One sustainability manager in our study cited a particular case where he had investigated worker abuse in Mauritius, which resulted in the working conditions being improved for over five thousand workers. He recounted: “That gave me satisfaction ... I can go back to a workplace and people say, ‘Since you’ve been here there’s been a change, we’re now treated like human beings, we actually now get rewarded for the work we do, our working environment it’s much better, there’s fresh air and there’s life, we actually enjoy it, we feel happy to come to work’, and for me that’s a big difference.” Another manager also gave a specific example, in this case involving philanthropy: “As we speak,” he said, “we’re in the middle of a massive program where as an organisation we’re

rolling out six billion tablets to wipe out this lymphatic fibrosis in Africa. ... Definitely you feel like, wow, we're making a difference, we're not just pumping out toothpaste." Another colleague noted: "You can always go home and say, 'Look, I made a difference today' – and that's the beautiful thing."

Frustrations for Activists often seem to be around the limits of their power to effect change, as compared to the scale and urgency of the problems. Or they feel that the impact of their sustainability work is too indirect to give a feeling of satisfaction. As one sustainability manager said, "often it's not something that we get a chance to see, or see the end product of." In some cases, there is also a sense of conflict between sustainability ideals – one person characterised themselves as "a messenger of the community" - and the organisation's response.

### ***Dynamics in the sources and contexts of meaning***

In the same way as sources meaning in life can vary over the life cycle or other changing circumstances (Yalom 1980), there is ample evidence from our data to suggest that sustainability managers' default types can change as well. For some (but not all) participants, this was shaped by their changing work roles. Hence, there is a suggestion that either people are naturally attracted to roles that fit with their types, or that their roles shape the meaning they derive as certain types, or perhaps both.

One sustainability manager also pointed out that freedom to align with one's natural type may vary over the career cycle: "One of the things that you have to bear in mind is how much individual flexibility you get in working environments. I think at an earlier stage in someone's career, no matter what their typology might be, they don't necessarily yet have the luxury of finding themselves in the position that gives expression to their preference." This adds some nuance to Swanson's (1995) argument that individual commitment is derived from managerial discretion towards social performance, in that discretion (and hence commitment) needs to be viewed in a temporal context.

Another influence that emerged was the organisational context. For example, one sustainability consultant, a self-declared Activist, observed that the "organisation dynamics of corporates require conformism to the organisational culture, which to a large degree requires maintenance of the status quo ... this makes it difficult for Activists." This recalls some of the literature cited earlier on narrative accounts of sustainability and the importance of being in alignment with the dominant corporate narrative (Fineman 1996).

Some participants also related to the typology as an ideal or aspirational state. Hence, participants may internalise the expectations of their formal job role and translate this into a meaning type, or they may simply wish that they embodied more of the traits of a particular type. This may also be influenced by the aspirational nature of sustainability itself (Wheeler et al. 2003).

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

We identified at the outset of this paper that the literature on corporate sustainability had paid little attention to date to the individual level. However, our findings clearly find resonance in the broader management, sustainability and psychology literatures. For example, the Catalyst draws on a strategic role (Mintzberg et al., 1995) and applies it to sustainability through forms of change management (Post and Altman, 1994). The Facilitator finds echoes in the servant leadership literature (Greenleaf et al., 2002). The Activist is probably best described in the work on social and environmental entrepreneurship (Donald and Goldsby, 2004; Pastakia, 1998) and there are glimpses of the Expert in much of the more technical scholarship on environmental and quality management (Isenberg, 1997).

Similarly, building on Stern's (1992) more general work in applied psychology, the application of existential psychology to corporate sustainability managers has proved fruitful. In particular, our research contributes evidence to support most theoretical sources of meaning in the sustainability context. However, the findings also suggest scope for improving current existential psychology models. In particular, change agency as a source of meaning, which was strongly in evidence in our data, is almost completely absent from existing theories of meaning in life. Further research in other professional contexts could usefully explore and confirm the validity of this additional dimension.

More specifically, however, the research findings enrich the current literature on corporate sustainability and the individual through our application of the existential psychology concept of meaning in life. In terms of the first theme in the literature identified earlier – the importance of congruence of manager/employee values with organisational values (e.g. Fryxell & Lo, 2003; Hemingway & MacLagan, 2004; Van Marrewijk & Werre, 2002) – our findings confirmed such a relationship across all types of sustainability manager, showing that some are inspired by the perceived alignment between sustainability values (Welford 1995) and religious faith or personal beliefs (Frankl 1964; Yalom 1980; Wong 1998), while others are frustrated in their work by the apparent contradiction between sustainability ideals and more narrow organisational goals. However, an important contribution of our work here is the recognition that whilst sustainability managers will be seeking a confluence of values with their organizations, such managers are not homogenous in terms of their sources of meaning. Experts find satisfaction from 'doing' and achievement, Facilitators focus on relationships, Catalysts on creative values and dedication to a cause, and Activists tap into their altruistic need to make a social contribution (Frankl, 1964; Yalom, 1980; Wong, 1998). Congruence needs to be understood in terms of role as well as organizational context.

In terms of the instrumental association between individual concern, knowledge and commitment and corporate social and environmental responsiveness (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Keogh & Polonsky, 1998) – the second theme in the literature – our evidence suggests some important influences on individual commitment. That is, commitment is shaped by an individual's sources of meaning. Therefore, in order to fully understand the relationship between commitment and sustainability performance we need to identify which constellations of meaning are driving individual commitment, and in which role and organizational contexts this commitment will therefore translate into improved performance.

The third theme, narrative accounts by sustainability managers of corporate greening (e.g. Fineman, 1997; Crane 2000; Georg & Fussel, 2000), typically focuses on the need to embed sustainability initiatives into organizational narratives oriented around the business case. Our evidence, however, suggests that the *personal* sense making narratives of managers are far richer and heterogeneous than these *organizational* narratives. These include narratives of professional accomplishment (Expert), team development (Facilitator), organizational transformation (Catalyst) and social change (Activist). One implication of this is that emphasising the positive association between sustainability performance and financial performance (e.g. Holliday et al., 2002; Sustainability, 2001; WBCSD, 2002), may not be sufficient to motivate sustainability managers. A second is that theories of organizational sustainability narrative may benefit from attention to deeper-level personal narratives, insofar as the latter provide critical insight into the obfuscations, diversions and psychological work involved in managers' constructions of organizational narratives.

The role of sustainability managers as champions, entrepreneurs or agents of change in their organisations (e.g. Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Prakash, 2001; Walley & Stubbs, 1999), the final theme alluded to in our review of the literature, is also addressed by our research. Our findings confirmed the importance of this role, but suggest that different types of sustainability manager represent different modes of change agency. For example, the Expert thrives when s/he can have an impact on sustainability projects or organisational systems and Facilitators when they can see sustainability team members or trainees change. Crucially, our findings also demonstrate that the

psychological drivers of such change agents vary, and that these drivers in turn may vary over time and context. The change agent 'toolbox' that has been identified in the literature may therefore need to be revisited to explore how particular tools and strategies may be more appropriate for particular change agents who are seeking to derive particular types of meaning from their actions.

Turning to more practical implications, we would suggest that the representation of the findings as a typology of meaning creates a useful management tool, demonstrating various of Bailey's (1994) advantages of typologies – it is descriptive, reduces complexity and allows for the identification of similarities and differences. More specifically, it suggests the potential for sustainability managers to improve their individual and team effectiveness and for human resource managers and organisational leaders to benefit from a better understanding of the motivational elements of sustainability managers' sources of meaning.

To date, the sustainability management role has been portrayed fairly one-dimensionally (Vick, 2001). However, the research shows that not all sustainability managers derive satisfaction from the same things and individuals display a natural predisposition for certain role types. If individuals can match their sustainability manager roles with their meaning type, it is likely that job satisfaction, commitment, motivation and productivity will improve (Brown, 2002). For example, if a Facilitator-type sustainability manager is given substantial team management and employee coaching responsibilities, they are more likely to perform well than if they are designated technical tasks on a systems-oriented project (Ramus and Steger, 2000). Likewise, Catalysts have a very particular set of needs around change agency, which will benefit corporate sustainability management if they are recognised and accommodated (Ginsberg et al., 1991).

An insight into the meaning types of sustainability managers can also improve sustainability team performance. The management literature recognises the importance of high performance teams (Balkundi and Harrison, 2006) and especially the positive impact of team diversity (Dahlin et al., 2005). Mathieu and Schultze (2006) point out that "team members' ability and/or knowledge have been shown to play an important role in team performance" (609). Similarly, Taylor and Greve (2006) conclude that in innovative teams "the more diverse the information and knowledge that are applied, the more novel is the output" (723). The same should apply to sustainability groups, such as sustainability departments, business units in large corporations or consultancy teams. The research suggests that each different type of sustainability manager is likely to bring a different set of complementary skills and knowledge. Hence, the head of sustainability for an organisation may consciously seek to balance sustainability manager types represented in the team.

Another way to think about team performance is to match the roles, skills and knowledge of individual team members to the tasks that are a priority for the sustainability department. This heeds Mathieu and Schultze's (2006) conclusion that "task-related knowledge levels are likely to be even more important to teams" (609). Hence, if the team has to deal a lot with operations, Experts may bring more credibility to the sustainability function, whereas a corporate policy advisory unit may have more need for Catalysts.

At the level of personnel management, as corporate sustainability becomes an ever more significant career path (Environmental Careers Organization, 2004), human resource departments of large companies are likely to increasingly be involved in efforts to recruit and retain sustainability managers. The literature is beginning to explore the role of existential issues in career decision making (Cohen, 2003), especially as it relates to spirituality (Lips-Wiersma, 2002), but to date, there has been little attention applied to the corporate sustainability context (Egri and Hornal, 2002). In order to address this, our typology could serve as the basis for a psychometric diagnostic like Myers-Briggs (Myers, 1962). The benefits of such an application – especially as a tool in leadership, team building and organisational development – are well documented in the industrial psychology literature (Gardner & Martinko, 1996), as are its limitations (Pittenger, 2005).

A final area of application is leadership. Leaders who realise the powerful links between their company's sustainability performance and their employees' motivation and satisfaction may choose to emphasise these practices more consciously as part of their leadership style (Mengel, 2004), as well as encouraging practices like volunteering (Lee and Higgins, 2001; Quirke, 1999), thereby creating a more meaningful work environment (Business in the Community, 2003; Corporate Citizenship Company, 2003).

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have sought to demonstrate that the relationship between corporate sustainability and existential psychology represents an innovative, interesting and important area of cross-disciplinary research. Corporate sustainability at the level of the individual currently represents an under-researched area of scholarly inquiry, which this research has helped to address through an empirical application of existential psychology to corporate sustainability. The results largely confirm the applicability of the major existential psychology theories to meaning in the life of sustainability managers. They also generate a distinctive set of sustainability manager types – the Expert, Facilitator, Catalyst, and Activist – as shaped by the sources of meaning in their life and work. The representation of these findings as a typology of meaning adds to corporate sustainability theory, as well as creating a useful management tool.

Future research could test the findings in other socio-cultural, organisational and professional contexts, and the typology could usefully be developed into a more robust and practical management tool, including possibly a psychometric diagnostic. However, some comments by the participants remind us that, for many, it is fulfilling in and of itself simply to be engaging with such a dynamic, complex and challenging concept as sustainability. "The satisfaction is huge," said one sustainability manager, "because there is no day that is the same when you get into your office. It's always changing, it's always different." Another concluded that sustainability was the epitome of meaningful work because it "painted a much bigger picture" and is "just as holistic as you want it to be. It requires a far broader vision".

In a similar spirit, we believe the research described in this paper demonstrates that deeper investigation into corporate sustainability at the level of the individual gives us both a more holistic view of sustainability management, as well as a broader vision of why it is important.

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