

Finding your inner sustainability superhero

By Wayne Visser

For change to be sustained and transformational we need to tap into the powers of different types of sustainability superheroes.

Have you ever wondered why do we do it? The sustainability hokey cokey, I mean. Most of us – whether we are sustainability professionals, academics, consultants, students, activists or wannabes – could have pursued different career paths. For my sins, having studied marketing, I could have become a spin-doctor or an ad-man. So what makes us choose sustainability instead? What makes us tattoo the S-word to our foreheads (metaphorically speaking, I hope)?

My research shows that there are deep psychological – even existential – reasons why we ‘do’ sustainability. And you may be surprised to know that it is not because we want to save the world, or because we care about people, or even because we want to ‘make a difference’. At least, not directly. The real reason is because it gives us personal satisfaction – not of the sugar-rush or warm-cuddly variety, but of the purpose-inspired, life satisfaction kind.

If we dig a bit deeper, we find that six motivational forces drive our work in sustainability. First, it allows us to feel that our work is aligned to our personal values, whether these are faith-based or humanistic. Second, we find the work stimulating. Sustainability a bit like Sudoku for hippies – it is complex, dynamic and challenging, like an ultimate earth-puzzle that needs solving. Most sustainability enthusiasts share these two drivers.

The other four drivers tend to be distributed across the sustainability tribe. Some find meaning in giving specialist input, while others prefer empowering people. Some are motivated to come up with effective strategies, while others feel most satisfied if they are making a contribution to society. These drivers translate into a set of sustainability leader archetypes – think of them as our very own Fantastic Four, namely: Experts, Facilitators, Catalysts and Activists. Each represents a different kind of sustainability change agent.

Sustainability Experts tend to be focused on the details of a particular issue, with a deep knowledge and understanding, often of a technical or scientific nature. They like working on projects, designing systems and being consulted for their expertise. Their satisfaction comes from continuous learning and self-development. They are most frustrated by the failure of others to be persuaded by the compelling evidence, or to implement systems as they were designed.

Sustainability Facilitators are most concerned with using their knowledge to empower others to act, using their strong people skills to make change happen. They like working with teams, delivering training and giving coaching. Their satisfaction is in seeing changes in people’s understanding, work or careers. They become frustrated when individuals let the team down, or when those in power do not allow enthusiastic groups to act.

Sustainability Catalysts enjoy the challenge of shifting an organisation in a new direction, using their political skills of persuasion to change strategies. They like working with leadership teams and articulating the business case for sustainability. They are often pragmatic visionaries and are frustrated when top management fails to see – and more importantly, to act on – the opportunities and risks facing the organisation.

Sustainability Activists are typically passionate about macro-level issues and their impacts on society or the planet as a whole, using their strong feelings about justice to motivate their actions. Their satisfaction comes from challenging the status quo, questioning those in power and articulating an idealistic vision of a better future. They tend to be great networkers and are mainly frustrated by the apathy of others in the face of urgent crises.

As you reflect on what type of sustainability superhero you may be, I expect all four will resonate to a greater or lesser extent. This is because we are composite beings when it comes to making sustainability change happen. But we do gravitate more strongly to one archetype, based on what gives us the deepest personal satisfaction. And there are three good reasons why you should know which cape and tights fits you best.

First, aligning with your inner superhero means embracing a mode of action in which you are most professionally effective and purpose-inspired. Second, it allows you to check that your formal role, or the direction of your career, is consistent with your archetype – the mask must fit the cape and tights. And third, it encourages you to consciously put together teams with a balance of Experts, Facilitators, Catalysts and Activists – the ideal earth-crime fighting force.

So it is not enough that all change begins with individuals. For change to be sustained and transformational – for sustainability to be a force for good in the world, and to save the earth from humans – we need the joint efforts of the Fantastic Four, each with their particular superpowers: knowledge for the Experts, collaboration for the Facilitators, imagination for the Catalysts, and compassion for the Activists. Will you join in the heroes' crusade?

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