FRAMING SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE WITH THE SIX-P

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A systemic needs assessment can help close performance gaps for continuous improvement. The Six-P framework assesses organizational sustainability with six elements: perception, potential, practice, profit, planet, and people. It builds on Kirkpatrick's evaluation model, Phillips's return on investment, and a triple bottom-line focus, facilitating corporate social responsibility. The framework, with its question guide and suggested assessment methods, highlights the importance of societal and environmental performance. The case study in this article illustrates the application of the Six-P framework for assessing sustainability.

IN RAPIDLY CHANGING TIMES, keeping an eye on the big picture is preferable to letting parochial issues blind us (Romanow, 2005). The driving force behind understanding how all things are interrelated is systems thinking, which is also a main principle of human performance technology (HPT). Incorporating social and environmental concerns with economic considerations demonstrates our growing awareness of the increasingly interconnected world in which we live. But rather than seeking root causes of problems and addressing them systemically, our lack of a clearer understanding of these complex interconnections often tempts people to search for scapegoats, especially in individualistic cultures such as in most Western countries (Senge, 2006). By focusing on the long-term sustainability of our actions as well as our institutions, we can clarify our vision of the present because we all have a stake in the future.

Experts and CEOs have long told us that what gets measured gets done. What we measure is what matters. However, "the single most influential national lens that we use to measure our progress and well-being as a country [gross domestic product] is confined to a narrow set of economic indicators . . . [which] sends inaccurate and even dangerous signals to policy makers" (Atkinson Foundation, n.d., para. 2).

The global economic downturn is not the only dire situation our world is facing. We also face growing environmental and social crises that are intertwined with our long-term economic well-being. Many individuals and groups are now calling for us to simultaneously meet social and environmental targets as well as economic targets. Growing environmental and social problems, linked to population growth and globalization, require a systemic approach (Porritt, 2007). However, an approach that allows us to successfully link consideration of environmental, social, and economic impacts requires us to use an expanded set of objective and subjective measures to gauge organizational success. The challenge is integrating and balancing socioeconomic with ecological measures to move sustainable development forward.

Traditional organizational assessments have tended to focus on short-term financial results, ignoring far-reaching consequences for multiple stakeholders (Senge, 2006). Today governments and societies can no longer afford to disregard organizations that externalize the negative impacts of their operations. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the meltdown of the financial sector in the G-20 countries. Banks and other financial industries have externalized the huge financial costs of terribly unwise and greedy business decisions, forcing governments to pass that cost onto taxpayers, to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars, to avoid an even greater economic meltdown. Taking a longer view of the consequences of our actions is "one of the antidotes to the myopia of short-termism," along with measuring variables affecting health and wellness, not just those affecting prosperity (Romanow, 2005, p. 3). Overlooking a company's impacts on its larger context is perilous to everyone in the long run.

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On the one hand, if we allow organizations to act with seeming impunity when they burden communities with their long-term costs, we encourage them to continue such practices. On the other hand, if we ignore the positive efforts of some farsighted organizations to find a profitable balance of social, environmental, and economic needs, then we fail to reinforce the very practices that are critical to achieving sustainability. As performance technologists, our mission is to systematically achieve results that add value through partnerships and systems thinking, which will support sustainability if they are done well (ISPI, n.d.).

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY

The United Nations Brundtland Commission (1989) defines *sustainability* as the capacity "[to meet] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Encyclopedia of the Atmospheric Environment, n.d., para. 1). This definition encompasses the triple bottom line (TBL) of environmental, societal, and economic results (Gray & Milne, 2007). Managing varied stakeholder interests and facilitating innovation is one means of supporting diversity (Elkington, 1998). Biodiversity is to natural what a varied financial portfolio is to economic sustainability (Henriques, 2007). By contrast, single-minded extraction of natural resources and soaring consumption make it impossible to maintain current resource levels. Sustainable living requires us to shift our current mind-set of endless growth and consumption toward a systemic vision of wise resource use and replenishment (Senge, 2006). Putting expanded perspectives of success on the organizational scorecard is one of the most critical challenges we face during this next decade.

SIX-P FRAMEWORK

Sustainability means thinking holistically over the long term. A history of unrestrained consumerism and a disregard for the externalized costs of organizations make it understandably difficult to develop a mind-set that promotes balance. We need new tools and approaches to help us shake some of these habits. One tool HPT practitioners can use is the Six-P framework (Marker, Johnsen, & Caswell, in this issue; also see Figure 1) to begin assessing and integrating social, economic, and environmental performance. The framework and its question guide are tools for holistically examining an organization's sustainability.

Three of the framework's components—perception, potential, and practice—build on Donald Kirkpatrick's four-level evaluation framework and his concern for systematic data collection and objective measurement (Marker et al., this issue; Kirkpatrick, 1996). Six-P also draws on Jack Phillips's return on investment methodology for the profit element (Phillips, 2001). Although profit is suggestive of business, it also embraces accountability in other types of organizations. Still, financial results alone are inadequate for describing organizational impact; therefore, two more "p" elements are included: planet and people. John Elkington's (2007) sustainability catchphrase, "people, planet and profit," paved the way for corporate social responsibility (CSR). These three elements make the business case for strategic product life cycles, partnerships, good governance, and transparency (Elkington, 2007).

The Six-P framework and its elements help us move away from bottom-line-dominated organizational results. Growing research and communications have raised our awareness of worsening environmental crises, the widening gap between rich and poor, and corporate disregard for operational impacts. Consequently, governments are starting to tighten regulatory standards and, in some cases, levy fines or initiate civil lawsuits for noncompliance. Regrettably, many companies still view measures of sustainability as too insignificant, subjective, or vague to bother with (Porritt, 2007; Fenwick, 2007). Environmen-

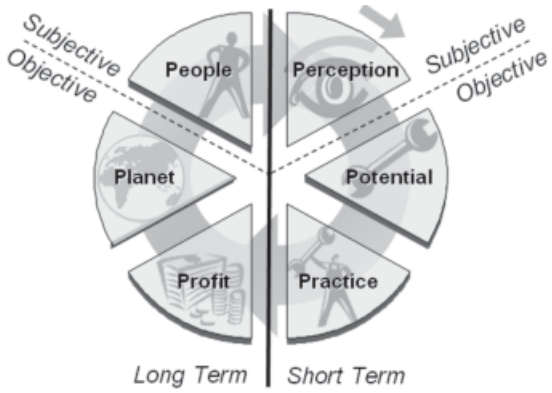

FIGURE 1. MARKER, JOHNSEN, AND CASWELL'S SIX-P FRAMEWORK

tal management systems often encourage only the lowest-common-denominator methods, given that global threats are insidiously gradual (Henriques & Richardson, 2007). Moreover, socioenvironmental reporting is voluntary in most countries (Gray & Milne, 2007; Elkington, 1998). For many, CSR has been more about publicity than performance (Doane, 2007), often by exaggerating claims of positive environmental or social practice referred to as *greenwashing*.

Regardless of one's perspective on how well sustainable development is being practiced, sustainability undeniably requires systems thinking. Roger Kaufman (1998) developed his organizational elements model, which proposes examining organizational results at three levels: individual or work group (micro), organizational (macro), and societal (mega). Achieving an organization's mission means aligning it with society's ideal vision (Kaufman, 1998). Following this line of thinking, everything an organization uses, does, produces, and delivers must be aligned with desired social outcomes (Kaufman, 1998). Ironically the ideal vision of reaching the "highest goals of human aspiration, decency . . . . and respect for the planet [is supposedly] at one with . . . . capitalistic enterprises" based on self-serving interests for wealth accumulation (Gray & Milne, 2007, p. 71). The Six-P framework is a tool intended to help practitioners assess the current state of the organization, offering an entry point into Kaufman's megalevel strategic planning.

ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE

Kaufman (1998) and others agree that knowing where society is headed and tracking its progress are critical. Sustainability efforts require accurate record keeping and ongoing monitoring to be accountable to stakeholders. HPT proponents have long touted evidence-based practice and are now linking statistical indicators of performance to progress and good governance. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (n.d.), and other signatories of the Istanbul Declaration in 2007, brought international recognition to the value of official statistics. The declaration recognizes that a growing level of societal complexity implies interrelatedness and that social well-being is a valid measure of progress. Imperative to sustainability initiatives are mandatory reporting and regulatory enforcement, supported by international agencies and governments (Elkington, 2007). Rigorous accounting, with standardized key performance indicators (KPIs) and stakeholder involvement, adds legitimacy to measuring the TBL, as do internationally recognized measures such as those listed in Table 1 (Elkington, 2007).

Sustainability indicators involve "auditing, reporting, risk rating and benchmarking" (Elkington, 2007, p. 18). KPIs should be demonstrable and triangulated, with independent auditors verifying data collection. Organizational monitoring must hold up to statistical accuracy and methodological rigor. We all benefit from honest organizational reviews and continuous improvement that promotes "getting things right at the beginning—where the solutions are cheaper and far more effective—instead of fixing them at the end" (Romanow, 2005, p. 8). The Six-Ps can serve as a tool for evaluating sustainable performance interventions (Marker et al., this issue) or simply offer "an elegant gaze at the situation" of an organization (Rossett, 1999, p. 4).

SUMMIT GEAR COOPERATIVE: A CASE STUDY

This case study uses the Six-P stakeholder question guide (see Table 2) together with Summit Gear Cooperative's (SGC's) 2006–2007 accountability report to systematically assess its performance. (SGC is not its actual name.) In addition, it incorporates prior research on the same organization. Summit Gear Cooperative makes and sells outdoor recreation equipment, with people and the planet in mind. It also promotes conservation and sustainability through continuous performance improvement.

SGC, affectionately known as the Co-op, was begun by climbers who wanted reliable outdoor gear at a reasonable price. It is now one of Canada's largest retail cooperatives, with annual sales approaching $250 million. The retailer's more than 10 stores are democratically owned by members who buy shares at $5 each—the same price they were at the Co-op's inception in 1971. Owning a share permits a member to purchase products, vote on governance, and engage in opportunities for environmental advocacy and education. SGC has become an icon of sustainability. Annual accountability reports outline the TBL impacts of the business, looking at product life cycle, production, transportation, and satisfaction of employees and members. The organization creates and tracks performance targets and opportunities for enhancement. Methodical data gathering and multiple stakeholder reviews support the Co-op's central tenet of accountability. This case study provides a snapshot of SGC's sustainability efforts through the Six-P lens.

PERCEPTION, POTENTIAL, AND PRACTICE AT SGC

Using the first three elements of the Six-P framework provided valuable insights. Summit Gear Cooperative

TABLE 1 SIX-P ELEMENTS AND MEASURES

SIX-P ELEMENT	SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT METHODS AND TOOLS
Perception	• Data from surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations, and extant data from various stakeholders (subjective)
Potential	• Statistical reports (internal and externally sourced) on current individual, group, and organizational practice (objective)
Practice	• Internally and externally sourced reports on individual, group, and organizational practices with a TBL focus (objective) • Global Reporting Initiative • Dow Jones Sustainability Index
Profit	• Organizational financial statements, quarterly and annual reports of revenues, cash flow projections (objective) • Statistical reports • Dow Jones Sustainability Index • Global Reporting Initiative • Index of Social and Economic Welfare • Sustainability Integrated Guidelines for Management

Planet	• Organizational statistical reports of environmental impacts
	  • Internal environmental management system
	  • Regulatory compliance
	  • Industry benchmarks
	• Global Reporting Initiative
	• Dow Jones Sustainability Index
	• Sustainability Integrated Guidelines for Management

People	• Organizational report on social impacts, investments, and value-add for various stakeholders • Global Reporting Initiative • Dow Jones Sustainability Index • Sustainability Integrated Guidelines for Management • Index of Social and Economic Welfare • Canadian Index of Well-being

attends to its stakeholder perceptions by keeping communication lines open and channels varied. Member feedback is welcomed, and some perceptions include an 85% member satisfaction rate and an average gear rating of 4.1 out of 5, along with active encouragement of member feedback and board participation. SGC's employee survey comments revealed that 82% of respondents recommend the organization to friends, and 80% report speaking positively about it. As well, respondents cited improved appraisals of people practices and senior leaders.

Admirable organizational perceptions support the cooperative's attempt to reach its potential through innovative means, much as in a learning organization (Fenwick, 2007). SGC educates staff and customers about environmentally friendly choices, and ongoing learning is promoted daily through different aspects of the organization (Fenwick, 2007). The Co-op's potential-building efforts include a 5-year sustainability agenda that extends to its supply chain, ethical factory sourcing training, and knowledge sharing, accompanied by encouragement for generative thinking in product design or life cycle optimization.

Besides addressing potential, SGC tracks its practice, guided by the Global Reporting Initiative's (GRI) sus-

TABLE 2 SIX-P STAKEHOLDER QUESTION GUIDE

SIX-P ELEMENT	SAMPLE STAKEHOLDER QUESTIONS
Perception	• Do you believe the organization practices corporate social responsibility? Why? • Does the organization seem financially stable? How so? • Are you confident in the organization's honesty and transparency of reporting impacts? Why?
Potential	• Are the mission, vision, and values reflected in practice? • Does the organization have the resources to meet changing needs? • Given the history, labor market, and other conditions, is future success reasonably assured?
Practice	• How large are the organization's performance gaps (social, environmental, and financial)? • Are best practices followed? If so, to what degree, and how are they monitored? • Which processes, procedures, and products can be improved for better efficiency, effectiveness, or quality? • What supports and constraints are there for change to organizational practice?
Profit	• Is the organization achieving its financial goals? If not, why not? • Do financial measures indicate healthy financial projections for the short and long terms? • What accountability and transparency measures ensure accurate reporting?
Planet	• What are the current environmental impacts of the organization's operations? • What is being done to improve the organization's environmental performance? • What could be done to reduce or neutralize operational impacts? • How can future environmental risks be mitigated?
People	• What social needs does the organization strive to meet? • What value does the organization add to the community and wider society? • What is the impact of the organization's culture, processes, procedures, and products on people?

tainability indicators. The GRI is a reporting framework that facilitates improvement and international application. With its TBL indicators, GRI metrics allow benchmarking and results comparisons over time (GRI, n.d.). The 2006–2007 report reveals that all factories sign the vendor ethics code, 76% of factories were audited, and 15% of SGC brand mills are certified in best practice standards.

Profit, Planet, and People at SGC

Examining the profit, planet, and people aspects of an organization can also enlighten us as to how sustainable it is. SGC recognizes that a just economy depends on an equitable society and ecological health. Co-ops, with their different structure compared to regular businesses, seek to maximize member value as opposed to profits. At year end, after operational costs are paid, any surplus is returned to members as share redemptions. The cooperative pays capital, property, and income taxes. Corporate tax is calculated following member returns, making the income tax nearly zero. Compared to its retail peers, SGC's viable economic performance is demonstrated by a modest surplus, along with $650 million generated by spin-off activities, $142 million in assets, and $115 million in shares equity. Reflecting the Co-op's priorities, for each dollar spent, 67 cents is for gear, 16 cents for salaries and benefits, 7 cents for patronage return, 5 cents for supplies and services, 4 cents for rent and occupancy, with 1% going to environmental conservation. While this business model has been successful for the Co-op, it is worth noting that it is not practical for all businesses; expanding the use of this organizational model considerably would

challenge the government's ability to raise taxes from corporations, and individuals would then bear the tax burden.

In conjunction with sustainable profitability or satisfactory surplus is the ever-critical emphasis on sustainability for the planet. SGC's 5-year sustainability agenda attends to the planet's limited resource capacity and the threats to a healthy biosphere (Fenwick, 2007). The Co-op's bold vision of zero waste commands a systemic view, creativity, and continuous improvement. SGC added *rethink* to the well-known mantra of *reduce, reuse, recycle* (Schaffer & Schmidt, 2006). For example, one store's sustainability coordinator located a company to turn worn climbing ropes into dog leashes. Aware of the consumption-versus-sustainability paradox, SGC strives to make excellent products but also to rent, repair, exchange, and recycle them. Product goals aim for lower-impact materials and production methods to reduce the ecological impact of operations. One product line contains at least 50% organic cotton or recycled polyester. Some environmental results at SGC include 100% organically grown cotton being used in garments, a 92% materials diversion rate from recycling and life cycle optimization, and an 86% solid waste recycling rate that is supported by regular audits.

As well, SGC seeks Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification of new buildings and uses biodegradable bags. Fundraising for conservation efforts has seen SGC investing $9 million in project grants since 1987. However, not all results are positive. While transport emissions per unit were reduced by 6%, total greenhouse gas emissions rose by 15% due to increased sales.

Besides realizing ecoefficiency gains, organizations must be accountable to people, including local communities (Fenwick, 2007). At the customer level, SGC guarantees all products sold and advice it gives to customers. If equipment fails to meet expectations, there is a no-hassle policy for refund, exchange, repair, or credit. SGC hosts gear swaps, donation bins, and recycling depots. At the community level, it supports local community, education, and outdoor recreation groups aligned with members' values of cooperation, sustainability, and stewardship. For employees, the most recent SGC survey reveals that 64% reported feeling engaged with their work, 26% of new employees in 2007 were rehires, there are roughly equal numbers of male and female employees and managers, and paid volunteerism opportunities exist for employees with nonprofit outreach projects (Fenwick, 2007). On the downside, the Co-op's flat organizational structure leaves little room for career development, and some locations require higher wages in response to strong local labor market conditions. Although SGC ranks in the top 25th percentile for retail compensation, some employees reported dissatisfaction with their wages.

In addition to local employees, SGC's business viability requires factory outsourcing, much like other retailers. As for factory workers, SGC believes outsourcing can further human rights abroad through its supply chain influence. The Co-op prefers factory monitoring, worker empowerment initiatives, and dialogue over boycotts. Its ethical sourcing program helps improve factory conditions for safe work and legal and reasonable pay. SGC regularly audits factories and publishes audit details on its Web site, a transparency first among Canadian retailers. SGC knows that violations will occur in a complex, flawed supply chain and that identifying issues can facilitate change. The organization's board believes that incremental improvements, ethical consumerism, and product maximization help offset outsourcing drawbacks. Where factory violations are not corrected, SGC discontinues its business relationship. For factory performance, SGC reported 243 vendor code noncompliance issues and membership in fair trade and labor associations with a zero tolerance for child labor. The cooperative also has many connections to the communities in which it operates, evidenced by $5.2 million invested in creating a provincial park, $2.5 million in donations for conservation and natural land access initiatives, and partnerships with various environment-focused organizations.

According to the data reviewed through the structure of the Six-P framework, the Co-op appears to be reaching its goal of producing quality gear at a reasonable cost while encouraging practices that show respect for people and the planet at large. For SGC, all Six-P elements are aligned with the mission of promoting responsible outdoor recreation, environmental conservation, and TBL sustainability. Insights revealed a number of supportive factors, such as admirable perceptions, strong growth potential, and respectable performance despite challenges in the supply chain and with local labor market conditions. The organization's modest surplus is reflective of its cooperative roots and offers a unique alternative to business ventures. SGC has produced some impressive results for the environment, its membership, employees, and local communities. Summit Gear Cooperative is poised to continue reaching for the highest peak of sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Researchers assessing an organization's sustainability can benefit from using many models, metrics, and instru-

ments. Marker et al.'s Six-P framework is a helpful tool to have in the HPT toolbox. Advancing the triple bottom-line agenda requires systemic thinking and continuous learning, leading to a win-win-win (Schaffer & Schmidt, 2006). Furthermore, Senge's concept of the learning organization supports the megalevel learning needed to leverage change (Kaufman, 1998). Regardless of socioeconomic and environmental performance, sustainability is not a destination but rather a path with many rocky crags to climb along the way. Unfortunately, there remains a lack of consensus on what constitutes sustainable practice, and much of it is directed at ecoefficiency rather than systemwide interventions. As well, the CSR movement is affiliated with large corporations, ignoring contributions from small to medium enterprises (Fenwick, 2007). Ecological practice in organizations, in any case, reflects ethical responsibility, innovation, interconnectivity, and local well-being (Fenwick, 2007).

More research is needed on how to facilitate organizational sustainability, especially in a market economy more focused on making profits and edging out competition than earthly stewardship. Education, advocacy, and support from policymakers and senior managers are needed to green our organizations. Sustainable organizations, much like complex self-organizing systems, thrive on diversity, feedback, and shared vision (Fenwick, 2007). HPT's systematic results orientation, systems thinking, partnerships focus, and commitment to adding value at all levels are crucial drivers of sustainability. The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy reminds us "in our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations" (cited in Tierney, 2003, p. 13).

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