A Relational View into Sustainability: Change-Agent Experiences in Large Companies

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Abstract:

Navigating complexity for change toward sustainability in large companies is best done using a systems perspective, a principled vision of success and a step-wise planning process, as espoused for instance by the FSSD. However, the human factor of the undertaking is as of yet underdeveloped in extant literature. The purpose of the study is to provide those who wish to help large companies transitioning toward sustainability, an appreciation of the relational aspects of strategic planning. Seeking insights into experiences of sustainability change-agents in large companies, the authors conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with sustainability change-agents in large companies. Using the relational view as an analytical lens, the authors examined the social interactions and dynamics of these change-agents and thereby gained a greater understanding of the place held by these individuals in the broader system (the company). The 11 relational categories that emerged permitted to draw links between structural, behavioural and personal facets of advancing sustainability in large companies and highlighted the human aspect of strategic planning as well as the strategic nature of building relationships, teams and coalitions. Overall, the authors believe that consideration by the change-agents to relational aspects may help foster commitment and collaboration in the sustainability transition of the large companies, which have a significant role in and impact on global sustainability.

Keywords:

Corporate Sustainability; Organisational change; Relationship-building; Change-agents; Complexity; Strategic Sustainable Development.
Statement of Contribution

This research project has been undertaken in a collaborative manner, and keeping in mind each member’s natural gifts and predispositions. The subject of the thesis resonated with all of the four members; we were curious about the implementation of sustainability within large companies and rallied around the desire to produce research that could be useful to people who are really trying to speed up and scale up the change we all want to see in the world. Many hours were spent in discussion scoping our topic down to find an inspiring journey for every one of us. The diversity of our group has provided complementary perspectives in discussions and has enriched our work. We have used check-in and meditation techniques to ground ourselves and create the space for productive work. Throughout the research process, we have contributed according to our capacities, allowing each voice to be heard. We strived to achieve consensus and respect individuality in all decision-making. Each had the opportunity to demonstrate leadership skills and brought their best in each situation. Particular strengths of each of us were additionally helpful:

Beri took on significant portions of work with a sense of organisation and purpose, and her project management skills kept us on track in critical moments with detailed lists of to-do’s. Additionally, her mindfulness and personal practice helped to balance energies in the group and tensions when needed.

Claude’s energy and hardworking nature accelerated the work. His practical sense and energetic facilitation brought a great deal of tasks forward, especially during the analysis and the coding. Also, his background in business gave a real-life based perspective to this study.

Marine’s straightforwardness and practicality kept our discussions to the point and increase validity of our findings. Her cheerfulness on spring days when the sun came out was a huge boon for keeping the team energised and focused.

Pawel’s experience facilitating creative processes and visioning sessions played a large role in us maintaining open communication, achieving clarity in process and exploring the deeper meaning of ideas. He was also the primary contributor to editing and writing. His meticulousness and sense of initiative reaching change-agents increased the richness of the study.

Each brought to the table his or her unique gifts and this was reflected in our research. We wish you to enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed exploring the corridors of large companies where relationships are formed and strategies are made for a hopeful and better world.

Karlskrona, August 2014,

Berivan Mine Ferhanoğlu                        Pawel Porowski
Claude Tremblay                                Marine Deplante
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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Sustainability Challenge

The main objective for society transitioning toward sustainability is to alleviate the increasing pressure on the natural resources and on ecosystem services caused in part by population growth and consumption. Due to their financial and human resources, large companies should lead the way in environmental stewardship and shift this economical impasse by utilising sustainability as a driver of innovation and business value to stay afloat and ahead of the competition.

Navigating complexity of social systems in large companies

Change toward sustainability is inherently a complex process because it involves diverse people interconnected to various degrees through work responsibilities and social interaction. Changing business-as-usual is an additional source of social complexity because it demands that employees and decision-makers question and potentially modify their mental models about sustainability and their assumptions about others in the company. As corporate entities grow and face additional challenges out of the need to provide goods and services to large markets with regularity while maintaining profitability, mechanisms such as structural arrangements and corporate culture become validated and more ingrained in the way things are done.

The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) is a conceptual model that uses systems thinking and science-backed Sustainability Principles to address the inherent complexity of the sustainability challenge. Large companies may use the FSSD to strategically move toward sustainability by incrementally closing the gap to a vision of sustainability and business success and reduce their contribution to global unsustainability. However, to spearhead the change in complex social situations, large companies must make use of the most precious resource - their human capital - in a way that acknowledges the elements of diversity, resistance, adaptability, networks and interdependence of their employees and decision-makers as social systems.

A relational view of change toward sustainability

Social ties are a key dynamic of the process of overcoming the sustainability challenge in large companies because no one actor or department can do it alone (Pinske and Kolk 2012; Senge 1990), and changing entire value chains requires the involvement of all the parts of the system, including external and internal stakeholders and working together (Clarke and Roome 1999). In this regard, the relational view recognises the fundamental importance of all social interaction in moving large companies toward sustainability, and pays particular attention to the relational complexity in the processes that make up the journey.
The important role of the change-agent

The change-agent in particular is responsible for co-implementing change initiatives and dealing with resistance, which in turn requires support from the other roles in terms of providing time and financial resources, helping communicate the need for change, and aligning change direction with strategic priorities (Stummer and Zuchi 2010). Change-agents can be internal (executives, managers and members of the workforce) or external (external consultants, community activists), but what all have in common is the willingness to undertake the challenge of changing the status quo of an organisation (Griffiths, Dunphy and Benn 2005), or what is termed as the mentality of business-as-usual.

Research Question

What does a relational view reveal about the experiences of change-agents trying to move big companies toward sustainability?

Scope of Research

This research was conducted to describe existing and potential relational elements as perceived by the change-agents identified by the authors, in the context of organisational change initiatives toward sustainability.

Research Methods

In order to structure this research, the authors used the Interactive Model for Qualitative Research developed by Joseph Maxwell (Maxwell 2005) permitting iteration of five interconnected parts: goals, conceptual framework, research questions, methods, and validity.

For this research, the authors chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with twenty change-agents, defined in this research as sustainability practitioners who have a background and knowledge in sustainability and who have been directly or indirectly involved in a change initiative or project toward sustainability within a large company. The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) was used to guide interview design and process the complex and rich data that resulted. Each interview was transcribed and coded using predetermined categories from the authors’ first insights of the collected data. The relational lens – an abstract lens that looks at interconnected, relatedness and interdependence of social agents in complex social systems (large companies) – was then applied in order to make sense of the analysed data from a broad relational perspective.

Overview of Results

Systemic sources and types of complexity: Each stakeholder’s decisions and actions relating to sustainability are influenced by myriad elements, such as job descriptions, worldviews, age and experience, expectations of subordinates and bosses, function in the company, etc. Most of these factors affect how members of the organisation react to change and relate to other stakeholders, and navigating these is a challenge for the change-agent.

Interpersonal challenges and opportunities - the human factor: Change-agents fundamentally need other individuals for their work, either to support them on a personal
level, provide them with resources, or to deliver/receive information. Different forms of resistance coming from other individuals (worldviews about the nature of business, mindsets of other employees, job descriptions) confirmed the presence of pushbacks that keep the system in business-as-usual.

Organisational goals and the business case for sustainability: Although the business case is a key element for the company committing to sustainability, it does not seem to be easily communicable, readily embraced and is persistently viewed by others in the company as a costly investment. The relational analysis identified three elements suggesting that the central determinant is not the bottom-line increase in revenue itself, but rather the way in which it is communicated.

Collective behaviour: organisational culture: Organisational culture should unify diversity of interests, ambitions and worldviews in all corporate organisations. Sustainability must therefore be embedded in the large company’s organisational culture. Key elements have been identified such as sustainability literacy, common language, alignment of values, meaning of sustainability and vision.

Structural integration of sustainability: Sustainability was typically relegated to a single position or department, a reality that was difficult to change. Companies were either marginalised, isolated by departmental siloing, or lacking the access to key senior managers and their resources. Sustainability should not be any one person’s responsibility, but that of every employee, manager and department, and it should be organised in a collaborative way. Informal relationships may be a way to decrease the silo effect leading to information, knowledge and ideas pollination across different business units.

Key system stakeholders and departments: Certain stakeholders in the company play more important roles than others in helping the change-agent further integrate sustainability. Among these, top management was seen as the most crucial stakeholder group for the change-agent to engage. Contacts or relationships with key stakeholders are in the majority of cases limited; for this reason, it is important to engage other informal leaders, including internal people interested or sensitive to sustainability issues and people with a certain level of seniority who are directly connected to higher management.

Change-agent roles: Common relational patterns with regards to the change-agents’ roles underlined the collaborative nature of the change process. From the change-agent’s descriptions of their work, two complementary roles emerged: one centered on making contact, engaging and connecting; the other on empowering, motivating and supporting those contacts.

Types of interaction: Interactions help to achieve common understanding of sustainability encourage product and service innovations, increase buy-in from key stakeholders, and create bonds between people that help overcome resistance to the idea of change. Formal relationships and communication channels do not always present enough opportunities for change-agents to engage and empower others in the company. Therefore, informal relationships are crucial to provide support, create a personal bond, and can lead to fewer conflicts, better work conditions or higher performance on collaborative projects.

Personal characteristics: Possessing certain personal characteristics can help change-agents build connections with stakeholders into a strong network over time to spread sustainability.
The main characteristics that arose from the data were trustworthiness, integrity professional competence, and honesty. In addition, the study identified passion, authenticity, and persistence as contributors to building credibility.

Discussion

Revisiting the research question: The relational categories that emerged permitted the authors to draw links between structural, behavioural and personal items and to outline the major challenges (interpersonal challenges, resistance, lack of resources) that change-agents are facing. Consequently, change-agents must be equipped with the necessary personal characteristics in order to fulfil additional relational roles such as relationship-building, conflict resolution and interpersonal facilitation. Their work of moving the company toward sustainability also underscores the importance of engaging top management, leveraging informal relationships and presenting sustainability in a relatable way.

Scaling-up sustainability - decentralising and teaming up: implementing sustainability in large companies often needs improvements in about every aspect of the organisation. Therefore, as change-agents cannot be everywhere at once and may not have decision-making power, there is a necessity to decentralise sustainability stewardship from a single person or department to each individual of the company. Thus, change-agents must find, engage, collaborate with and empower stakeholders to create change teams and scale-up their sustainability efforts.

Coalition-building - positive narratives and prioritisation: change-agents are sense-makers of sustainability concepts by translating and adapting the general sustainability concepts to the organisational context of different departments and functions. A positive narrative is key for recruiting key stakeholders and creating a basis for mutual understanding and collaboration. Moreover, a whole-systems perspective of the social environment in the company may help change-agents recognising complex linkages and prioritise projects and actions strategically beneficial for reaching a given goal.

The relational view and SSD theory / practice: The findings make contributions to both SSD theory and practice by highlighting the human aspect of strategic planning as well as the strategic nature of building relationships, teams and coalitions. A relational analysis can help support a step-wise process toward sustainability in large companies and may also inform the design and implementation of an ABCD strategic planning process from co-creating a vision to strategically prioritise actions and projects toward a given goal.

Conclusion

Overall, the authors believe that consideration by the change-agents to relational aspects during strategic planning may help foster conditions for sustainability becoming an integral part of company’s culture and structure. Management should strive to develop a common understanding of sustainability and institutionalise informal relationships. The structural silo effect that isolates the sustainability agenda can be diminished through collaboration, collective participation in online platforms and social activities, as well as the decentralisation of sustainability decisions. Furthermore, sustainability considerations should be progressively integrated into as many job descriptions as possible.
Glossary

**Backcasting**: a planning method used to address complex problems in which planners first build a vision of success in the future, and then steps are planned and taken to work toward that vision of the future (Holmberg and Robèr 2000).

**Backcasting from basic principles**: backcasting from a vision of success that is defined using basic principles, conditions that must be met for a system to continue in a certain state (Robèr 2010).

**Business case for sustainability**: the idea that decreasing the environmental and improving the social impacts of business activities has a positive impact on the bottom line (i.e. creates economic value or economic advantages).

**Change-agent (sustainability)**: employees or consultants who have a background and knowledge about sustainability and who have been directly or indirectly involved in a change initiative toward sustainability within a company.

**Change initiative (sustainability)**: a series of actions taken to implement a transformation process towards sustainability which should properly begin with planning, then proceeding with communicating as operational implementation, solving problems, evaluating situations and making decisions.

**Collaboration**: the act of more than one individual or a group working with a deep, collective, determination to achieve a shared goal.

**Collaborative team**: collaboration with employees from different departments functions and disciplines.

**Complex Adaptive System (CAS)**: open systems of people and nature with firmly interrelated components in which complexity emerges from a small set of critical processes that create and maintain the self-organising properties of the system.

**Conceptual framework**: a mental model that allows to simplify and categorise a complex issue in a way that aids understanding.

**Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**: the continuing commitment by business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the community and society at large.

**Five Level Framework for planning in complex systems (5LF)**: a conceptual framework that aids in analysis, decision-making, and planning in complex systems. It consists of five distinct, interrelated levels - Systems, Strategic, Actions, and Tools.

**Formal organisational interactions**: interactions that occur through the formal structure of the organisation.

**Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD)**: the application of the Five Level Framework for Planning in Complex Systems to a planning endeavour with sustainability as the desired outcome.
**Informal organisational interactions:** interactions that happen between people in an informal setting at work notwithstanding their position in the organisation.

**Interaction:** an occasion when two or more people or things communicate with or react to each other.

**Large company:** a profit organisation with two hundred fifty or more employees without any geographical limitation to its operations.

**Leadership:** the process of influencing a group of individuals or the activities of an organised group to achieve positive change toward a common goal.

**Management system:** a set of procedures, processes and guidelines, which are used to ensure an organisation, is progressing towards its stated goals.

**Mechanistic view:** a viewpoint that stated that the behaviour of complex systems, such as individuals, societies, and economies, are determined strictly by the interactions of the parts or factors of which they are composed.

**Mindset:** the ideas and attitudes with which a person approaches a situation, especially when these are seen as being difficult to alter.

**Organisational change:** an alteration of a core aspect of an organisation’s operation. Core aspects include structure, culture, leadership, technology, goal or personnel of an organisation (Helms Mills et al. 2009).

**Organisational culture:** an organisation’s core values and its management, leadership, and communication styles. It is the form of its dominant inter-personal relationships or characteristics that distinguishes it from other organisations.

**Organisational learning:** the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding (Fiol & Lyles 2007, 803).

**Organisational structure:** the formal allocation of work roles and the administrative mechanisms to control and integrate work activities including those, which cross formal organisational boundaries (Child 1972).

**Reductionism:** the idea that a complex system can be understood in terms of its simpler parts or components.

**Relational view/lens:** focuses on the analysis of network or dyad and used the paper as a lens that pays particular attention to the relatedness between parts (i.e. individuals and groups) of a social system.

**Relationship:** the way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected.

**Silo (effect, nature, mentality):** a system and process that operates in isolation from others.

**Stakeholder:** a person, group or organisation that has interest or concern in an organisation.
**Sustainability:** a state in which the socio-ecological system is not systematically undermined by society, and where multiple billion humans and millions of other species can coexist, evolve and thrive. The four basic Sustainability Principles must be met in order to have a sustainable society (Robèrt 2000) (see Sustainability Principles).

**Sustainability practitioner / professional:** an individual, internal (on salary) or external (in an advisory position) to an organisation, whose work is to help organisations transitioning toward sustainability.

**Sustainability Principles:** minimum requirements for a sustainable society in the biosphere, underpinned by scientific laws and knowledge (Robèrt 2000). In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing 1) concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust; 2) concentrations of substances produced by society; or 3) degradation by physical means; and in that society people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs. Missimer’s study (2013) elaborates social sustainability into 5 new sub-principles to articulate the main human needs for integrity, competence, influence, impartiality and meaning.

Missimer’s study (2013) elaborates social sustainability into 5 new sub-principles to articulate the main human beings.

**Sustainable Development:** development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission 1987).

**System:** a set of two or more interconnected and interrelated parts whose functions and behaviour depends on the interaction of those parts.

**Systems thinking (Systems perspective):** the organised study of systems, their feedbacks, and their behaviour as a whole.

**Top management:** individuals and teams that are responsible for making the primary decisions within a company, including the board of directors (non-executive directors and executive directors), president, vice-president, CEOs and other members of the C-level executives.
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1 Introduction

1.1 The Global Sustainability Challenge

Activities by society are increasingly hindering the biosphere’s ability to sustain human civilisation and eroding human capacity to meet individual and collective needs (Brown 2011; Starke et al. 2013; Steffen et al. 2004). Over the last century, industrial development, economic growth and technological improvements have contributed to increased well-being in parts of the world, but this progress has neglected the finite nature of natural resources and come at a great cost to ecosystems and people, with pollution, climate change, soil degradation, widening social and economic inequality, fresh water shortage, and biodiversity loss on an increasingly long list of externalities (Brundtland 1987; Kotler 2011; Shrivastava 1995; Stern 2006). Moreover, at regional and global scales, these problems are interacting in complex ways to produce unforeseen, unintended and/or lagging effects (Rockström et al. 2009, Steffen et al 2004) that further undermine our chances at improving, or adapting to, the situation (Walker et al. 2004).

The common definition for sustainable development is development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987). Adding to the definition, sustainable development also denotes the inherent difficult transition from our current unsustainable society to a sustainable one. The term ‘sustainability challenge’ conveys the need to address these complex and interlinked environmental and social problems, and to overcome significant systemic barriers to such a change (Meadows, Meadows and Randers 1992; Steffen et al. 2004) in a time span that reflects the urgency of the global situation. A visual representation of the challenge is contained in the funnel metaphor (Robèrt et al. 1997), illustrated in figure 1.1, which depicts the decreasing room of manoeuvre for society as anthropogenic pressures on the biosphere increase and human needs fail to be met.

Figure 1.1. The funnel metaphor (Robèrt et al. 1997; image courtesy of The Natural Step).
1.1.1 Contribution of Large Companies to Unsustainability

Due to the nature and size of their operations and their global reach (either through the markets they serve or their supply chains), large companies (having more than 250 employees) contribute to the depletion of natural resources and are responsible for a significant portion of pollution, production health hazards and exploitative labour practices (Elkington 2002, Hesselbarth and Schaltegger 2014). Despite their number being much smaller than that of small and medium commercial enterprises, large companies have greatly contributed to the unsustainable nature of society’s activities and elevated many issues to a global scale (Shrivastava 1995), but most continue to operate in the paradigm of business-as-usual (Robért et al. 1997). The traditional economic tenet of continuous growth and consolidation, together with pressure from stockholders for generation of surplus value, continue to drive corporate activities that demand natural resources and services at a faster rate than they can be regenerated, and favour low standards in labour and community welfare in order to keep costs low (Elkington 2002).

The reach of these firms is such that a large company endorsing better business practices attuned to environmental and social realities would greatly further the sustainability agenda (Kotler 2011) and constitute an achievement to serve as inspiration for other market players (Friedman 2008; Lovins 2011). ‘Sustainable development’ in the business world (or in other incarnations as Corporate Social Responsibility, Triple Bottom Line) has been part of the business language since awareness of environmental and social issues increased in the 1980s around the publication of the Brundtland (1987) report and the run-up to the Rio Conference of 1992 (Dyllick and Hockerts 2002), but despite two decades of growing evidence as to the importance of corporate sustainability, as little as a decade ago a majority of corporate decision-makers still saw in it primarily additional costs (Bansal 2002; Van der Heijden, Cramer and Driessen 2012).

Thankfully, corporate leaders increasingly see sustainable development as a way to develop business value for their organisations by opening up new revenue opportunities and providing long-term competitive advantage (Eccles, Ioannou and Serafeim 2012), making a move toward sustainability highly strategic. Willard’s (2012) seven business case benefits of sustainability confirm its relevance to improved performance, reduced risk and retained market share and competitiveness. Companies face a number of external drivers for sustainability, including competition for increasingly scarce resources (Bansal 2002), emerging legislation on pollution, stronger customer demands for environmentally-responsible and fair trade products, and negative media publicity about their contribution to unsustainability (Willard 2005).

In fact, it is increasingly evident that large companies are among the only institutions on the planet resourceful enough to address global sustainability issues and communicate its value through their products and services – if they have the will and commitment to change their behaviours accordingly (Fielder 2010; Willard 2005).

1.1.2 Complexity in the Transition towards Sustainability

Large companies are social entities made up of individuals, all of whom are interrelated to various degrees through work responsibilities and social interaction. The dynamics of their
functioning can be characterised as a **complex adaptive system (CAS)**, in the sense that an individual’s actions influence others in many ways and at multiple scales, and that the group’s collective behaviour, materialising as the operations of the company, is the result of social agents (i.e. employees and other stakeholders) interacting.

Any complex adaptive system, be it an animal cell, a community or a multinational corporation, generally exhibits the following characteristics (Fabac 2010; Holling 2001; Folke et al. 2002):

- **Nonlinearity**: small changes in the system can have large, unpredictable consequences, often due to the presence of unknown thresholds;
- **Collective Behaviour**: intricate patterns appear in the interaction of components and lead to such things as dominant culture, herd mentality and swarming behaviour;
- **Self-Organisation**: component arrange themselves in optimal ways to achieve system goals; this is a process occurring independently of any one component and generally without centralised control;
- **Emergent Properties**: properties, such as collective memory or leadership, appear at the system level that could not have been guessed to exist by merely looking at the individuals;
- **Adaptation and learning**: the system naturally selects components for improvement and evolution, and individuals learn through interaction;
- **Diversity**: individual agents naturally exhibit diversity in their functions and characteristics, which gives flexibility and adaptability to the system; and
- **Networks**: regardless of hierarchy, system components form an interconnected group and share information (Newman 2003)

In addition to these, resistance is also recurring feature in complex systems. Systems tend toward dynamic equilibrium through feedbacks that keep relative stability, and controlling variables (Folke et al. 2002), and it is no different in big business. When a change is introduced into the organisational system, it is normal for there to be system push-back on a psychological level (Merritt 2010, Norgaard 2009) and organisational level (Doppelt 2003), because organisational change fundamentally asks that people and groups reassess and modify their behaviour (Henry 1997).

For commercial activities to proceed predictably over the globe, businesses have evolved and self-organised around mechanisms such as structural arrangements and corporate culture, which help create order in commercial operations and alignment in behaviour. These mechanisms include policies, human resource and knowledge management systems, workplace norms, reporting structures, etc. As corporate entities grow and face additional challenges out of the need to provide goods and services to large markets with regularity while maintaining profitability, these mechanisms become validated and more ingrained in the way things are done. The prevalence of the term ‘business-as-usual’ denotes the difficulty of changing these patterns once a company has shed its initial leanness.
The structure of large companies, in particular, can be a source of complexity. By organisational structure is meant the arrangement of policies, rules and procedures that the company uses to organise communication and reporting as well as decision-making and supervision (Herrick and Pratt 2012); from these result its formal scheme of hierarchy, work division, role allocation and administrative mechanisms (Martinez-Leon & Martinez-Garcia 2011). The structure of the large company impacts complex change toward sustainability for a number of reasons related to their size, not least of which are the wide distribution of offices and facilities, the complexity of extensive value chains, the breadth of information and management systems, and the disparities between (and nuances of) legislative and cultural contexts of various host countries in which corporations decide to do business (Cragg 2005; Kolk and van Tulder 2010).

An organisation’s culture can be seen as a set of shared patterns in behaviour used to achieve organisational goals and transmitted through language, norms, values, stories, mental models and knowledge (Schein 1992). Schein also argues that culture is the most difficult organisational component to change, since assumptions that have proven to “work well” are considered valid enough to be taught to others, resulting in organisational culture often also being understood as “the way we do things around here.”

For Schein (1992, 10), the most "useful way to think about culture is to view its accumulated shared learning of a group.” Learning in organisations has been demonstrated to play a significant role in organisational change (Molnar 2003) and in particular in companies’ transition to sustainability (Brown and Posner 2001; Senge 1990). According to Clarke and Roome (1999), organisational learning is directly related to capacity of organisational processes to move the organisations toward sustainability by linking the individuals together with the flow of knowledge, ideas and information.

Interventions in complex adaptive systems are complex as well, not least of which is moving a large company toward sustainability. There may be multiple stakeholders and geographically widespread offices and business units, all of which may have competing interests and diverse cultural approaches to sustainability. When dealing with tough social challenges, Kahane (2004) suggests a three-pronged typology of complexity: i) social complexity emerging from the diversity of belief systems and opinions held by individuals; ii) dynamic complexity occurring when cause and effect are distant from each other in space and time, making difficult the observation of consequences of intervention; and iii) generative complexity resulting from constantly changing patterns and untested practices, meaning that results are often unexpected and unfamiliar. These can naturally lead to uncertainty, confusion and conflict (Andrade, Plowman and Duchon 2008; Fabac 2010), and thus many planned changes will be abandoned for seeming too disruptive.

### 1.1.3 Dominant Approaches to Dealing with Complex Systems

The complexity of the sustainability challenge and that of social systems are realities humans may fail to acknowledge and address – a testament to not only how we do things but also how we think: humankind’s dominant worldview is grounded in analytical science traditions that have a mechanistic and reductive tendency to view problems as isolated phenomena instead of as interrelated parts of a system (Capra 1985; Wardman 2011) and exhibit a pathology of top-down “command-and-control” management (Holling and Meffe 1996, 328)
that make it often unable to address modern problems (Senge 1985; Zwetsloot 2003) and leads to a staggeringly high failure rate for change efforts – around 70% (Burnes and Jackson 2011). In a corporate organisational setting, traditional structures tend to support the assumption of companies as mechanistic rational entities, one that tends to encourage optimal control of each part of the system through departmentalisation and considers employees as economic components (Martinez-Leon & Martinez-Garcia 2011, Fertig 2007).

With such a mentality of reductionism and control, large companies develop systems to manage physical infrastructure and materials (e.g. procurement, buildings and properties, information technology, etc.) as well as human resources, knowledge, product/service quality, etc. These affect organisational change by pre-determining flows of information and creating dominant trends in employee training, leaving little room for complexity. In particular change management systems, by attempting to plan and control change, affect both processes and outcomes of change (Epstein, Buhovac and Yuthas 2010) as well as organisational capacity to absorb change (Gloet 2006). Despite the need for a long-term system perspective, certain characteristics of organisational structure such as rigidly defined roles, control management systems and the ‘silo mentality’, remain a barrier to organisational change (Denison, Hart and Kahn 1996; Efremovska, Geurts and Perret 2012; Senge 1990).

Kotter (1990) writes that there is significant difference between change management and change leadership, the former being about keeping things under control and the latter about driving collective and collaborative processes with vision and passion. By its complex nature and the interconnectedness of system components, the sustainability challenge requires a capacity to deal with “situations that are unfamiliar or have not been seen before” (Weick 1993) and adapt existing rules, behaviours and structures to support deep change (Bass 1990). A recent IBM Global Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Survey found that the great majority of CEOs expect that business complexity is going to increase, and more than half doubt their ability to manage it (Brown 2013). Implementing change in complex systems such as large corporations requires a change of thinking and attitude (Millar, Hind and Magala 2012) as well as a more strategic and systematic approach (Hjorth and Bagheri 2006). “Dealing with individual problems without a thorough understanding of their interconnectedness at a global system level often leads to new and aggravated problems” (Broman et al. 2013, 1). Consequently, it is crucial to nurture leadership and decision-making that moves beyond the reductionist approach of ‘problem-solving’ and supports a lasting and coordinated planetary move toward sustainability.

1.2 The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) is a conceptual framework created to help decision-makers organise relevant information about complex systems and situations for planning purposes. The FSSD was designed in 1989 by Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt in collaboration with scientists and academic institutions, businesses, municipalities and sustainability organisations, and has undergone extensive peer review.

An extensive scientific consensus allows it to provide a robust definition of sustainability and clearly articulate the mechanisms by which environmental and social well-being are eroded. It takes a systems view of human society (as depicted by figure 1.2), which depicts human
society as a subsystem of a larger whole and points to linkages between nested subsystems and to processes at other scales, such as the flows of matter and energy (Hjorth and Bagheri 2006; Robèrt et al. 1997). With this thorough systems-level understanding of the current reality, the FSSD practitioner can link his/her organisation’s activities to broader social and environmental issues at the global scale.

Figure 1.2. A systems-thinking view of human civilisation on Earth (Robèrt et al. 1997; image courtesy adapted from The Natural Step).

Conditions for global sustainability are elaborated as sustainability principles (Ny et al. 2006), which serve as a “compass” (Robèrt et al. 1997) for action and describe the mechanisms by which society may live within the regenerative capacities of the biosphere (Broman et al. 2000). The sustainability principles are that in a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...

1. concentrations of substances extracted from the earth’s crust;
2. concentrations of substances produced by society; or
3. degradation by physical means;

and in that society . . .

4. people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.

Although there are traditionally these four sustainability principles, Missimer's study (2013) expands on the fourth, the social sustainability principle (SSP). She proposes five new sub-principles for meeting human needs of 1) integrity, 2) influence, 3) competence, 4) impartiality, and 5) meaning.

“Personal integrity is about not doing direct harm at the individual level; physically, mentally or emotionally. In an organizational context it might refer to working conditions. Influence is about being able to participate in shaping social system(s) one is part of and dependent on. At
a minimum, this might mean being able to vote on leadership and issues and being able to make one’s voice heard. Competence is about safeguarding that every individual (and group) has the opportunity to be good at something and develop to become even better. Impartiality is about acknowledging that all people have the same rights and are of equal worth. Lastly, meaning speaks to the reason for being an organization or system. How does the organisation inspire its members, what does it aim to do and why?” (Missimer 2013).

Furthermore, the FSSD combines this scientifically-supported systems perspective with a step-wise approach to sustainable development, based on a compelling vision of success and a set of strategic guidelines for choosing actions. To lessen the risk of a reductionist approach, which can lead to underestimating the consequences of a specific decision or intervention on an entire system, it uses a set of five complementary levels (Baumgartner and Korhonen 2010). The first level is the system level, where is placed information about the primary variables in the system and their relation to each other and to the wider biosphere. The second level is the success level; for sustainability, success is bound by the Sustainability Principles (SP’s) mentioned above. The third level is the strategic level and contains recommended guidelines for choosing actions and tools. Here are outlined steps for using backcasting, which means tracing back from the vision of success to the current reality and determining what needs to be done today to reach it. When minimum requirements of this vision are defined by basic principles, it is called backcasting from basic principles (Robèrt 2000). The fourth and fifth levels are actions and tools that will support the transition toward sustainability (see figure 1.3).

![Figure 1.3. ABCD Strategic Planning Process](Efremovska, Geurts and Perret 2012, 9).

The four-step ABCD planning process is a form of backcasting from principles designed to strategically move any organisation toward sustainability. The ABCD starts by (A) creating awareness and shared language of sustainability issues and to then elaborate a vision of organisational success framed by the Sustainability Principles. The B step involves a baseline assessment of the company’s current reality. One does this by looking at the company’s decision-making as well as inputs and outputs (infrastructure and equipment, structural and cultural aspects), and waste/by-products of those processes. A gap analysis between the current reality and the desired sustainable vision of the future leads to a brainstorm of actions, the C step that can be undertaken to close the gap. The last step (D) is the strategic prioritisation process of those actions incorporated into a strategic plan (Ny et al. 2006).
In summary, the FSSD constitutes a powerful way to deal with complex challenges involved in transitioning a large organisation such as a multinational corporate entity toward sustainability (Nattrass and Altomare 1999). An understanding of society’s current reality from this systems perspective can support problem-solving and decision-making that more aptly identify solutions that account for, and outweigh, social and ecological costs (Meadows, Meadows and Randers 1992). An additional benefit for big business is that it can help organisations navigate an uncertain future and unpredictable market-based realities while also delivering value in social and ecological levels (Senge and Carstedt 2001).

The FSSD and its related concepts do not prescribe practices; instead each organisation chooses strategic priorities based on consideration of its own unique context. While this approach is meant to produce optimal outcomes, it may be that the people-driven processes that support them are underexamined and seldom explored from the point-of-view of those practitioners implementing strategic plans.

### 1.3 A Relational View of Change toward Sustainability

“Organizations are webs of participation. Change the patterns of participation, and you change the organization.”

*Seely Brown and Solomon Gray (2009)*

Is there a way to think about social complexity that can yield additional insight into why and how people come together around sustainability in large companies? This study’s authors suggest an additional lens of analysis, one that is relational in nature. The relational view recognises the fundamental importance of all social interaction and exchange in moving large companies toward sustainability, and pays particular attention to the relational complexity in the processes that make up the journey. First are outlined reasons to take a relational view, followed by an overview of the change-agent’s critical role from a relational perspective.

#### 1.3.1 On the Importance of Interaction, Networks and Relationships

Corporate sustainability is characterised by Savitz (2012, 3) as “operating a business in a way that acknowledges the needs and interests of other parties (community groups, educational and religious institutions, the workforce, the public) and that does not fray but rather reinforces the network of relationships that ties them all together.” In other words, strengthened social ties are an outcome of sustainable development. However, social ties are also a key dynamic of the process of overcoming the sustainability challenge in large companies because no one actor or department can do it alone (Pinske and Kolk 2012; Senge 1990), and changing entire value chains requires the involvement of all the parts of the system, including external and internal stakeholders, working together (Clarke and Roome 1999).
If sustainability is a significant shift from business-as-usual, then new ideas and practices must be found in increased connectivity – linkages between people that support sharing of expertise (FIN 2012) and ideation (Johnson 2010). These types of creative and innovative processes, moreover, require an alignment of values (De Groot and Steg 2008; Dossa and Kaeufer 2013) as well as the subordination of planning and control to adaptability and emergence of new ideas, the mechanisms of which are often meaningful conversations, ongoing participation and generative interaction (Sosik 2005; Zwetsloot 2003). Meanwhile, relationships are needed for communicating, mobilising, evaluating change and for overcoming resistance by engaging “influencers” – strong informal leaders whose opinions are highly regarded – at different levels of organisations (Duan, Sheeren and Weiss 2014).

Connectivity, networks, and individual diffusors are significant mechanisms for transforming culture (Katzenbach and Harshak 2011). Understanding the overall network structure of organisations can help managers to support change, and cross-departmental friendship ties will help generate positive response to change in organisations by fostering trust and shared identity (McGrath and Krackhardt 2003).

Experts in leadership and organisational development meanwhile point out that despite progress in performance and quality, we have forgotten that companies are not machines, but groups of people doing something together, and that life is about change, not control (McLeod, Senge and Wheatley 2001). Public engagement and organisational change practitioner Tim Merry adds that we have gotten so taken by the “tyranny of the finish line that we forget that it’s the relationships that actually get us there” (Merry 2014).

1.3.2 The Important Role of the Change-Agent

This study aligns with Griffiths, Dunphy and Benn (2005) in regarding the organisational change-agent as a central component of understanding corporate change toward sustainability. The authors do so because the agent’s interaction exemplifies the complex social nature of large companies.

Broadly speaking, the change-agent in particular is responsible for co-implementing change initiatives and dealing with resistance, which in turn requires support from the other roles in terms of providing time and financial resources, helping communicate the need for change, and aligning change direction with strategic priorities (Stummer and Zuchi 2010). Change-agents can be internal (executives, managers and members of the workforce) or external (external consultants, community activists), but what all have in common is the willingness to undertake the challenge of changing the status quo of an organisation (Griffiths, Dunphy and Benn 2005), or what is termed as the mentality of business-as-usual. Change-agents must also design actions and efforts specific to the organisational context and with a deep understanding of company-specific sources of resistance (Burnes and Jackson 2011). They do this when initiating, leading and/or directing change toward sustainability (Caldwell 2003; Hesselbarth and Schaltegger 2014) and help organisational stakeholders make sense of complex change around them as the company proceeds along its sustainability journey (Van der Heijden, Cramer and Driessen 2012) and employ communication, interaction and relationship-building in order to help achieve collective meaning around sustainability.

Experts point out that change-agents require particular skills to establish new relationships and to work across diverse settings (Marshall 2004; Rowledge 1999); they must be excellent
communicators, able to develop and maintain broad networks, and thus possess the ability to be flexible and adaptive with regard to people and relationships (Gloet 2006). Ultimately, they must be networkers to better reinforce an organisational ethic aligned with sustainability by collaborating throughout the organisational, and up and down the supply chain (Kurland et al. 2010) to be able to create synergy (Kezar 2001). In the context of strategic decision-making, the quality and authenticity of relationships is crucial to organisational practices that lead to sustainability (Craig, Macura and Pucci 2012).

1.3.3 The Relational View

The relational view is a lens that pays particular attention to the relatedness between parts (i.e. individuals and groups) of a social system. By relatedness is meant any aspect that can constitute a commonality or connection among them, be it tangible or intangible, present or potential, conscious on behalf of individuals or not. What gets individuals in these organisations to get interested and motivated by others, provide consent for common decisions, share information and resources, and lend vocal support to sustainability initiatives?

At a fundamental level, looking at relational elements in the interactions of social agents in large companies is part of an effort to understand how complexities in the organisational culture and structure impact progress toward sustainability. Technical fixes are not enough to bring big business to alignment with sustainability, and embedding sustainability in organisational culture has repeatedly been shown to be a crucial determinant of whether sustainability change initiatives (policy, product innovation, training programs) can be successful in the long-term (Doppelt 2003). However, this requires extensive efforts at changing dominant mindsets and organisational goals (Harris and Crane 2002), acceptance of uncertainty, structural and functional integration, sharing of information and cross-departmental collaboration, as well as participatory and adaptive leadership styles (Graves and Sarkis 2011, Herrick and Pratt 2012) – many of these being somewhat contrary to the dominant patterns around which most large companies have evolved.

Considering that many of an organisation are generated and exchange in these relational channels, studying how this materialises at the scale of the multinational company becomes a useful avenue for research. From existing literature, the relational view has mainly been used for inter-organisational studies about relation-based processes across supply chains, including customers and suppliers relationships (Walker et al. 2013; Sanders, Autry and Gligor 2011).

However, it has not been extensively applied in the context of sustainability in large companies from the perspective of change-agents, most significantly.

1.4 Purpose and Research Question

The importance of social interaction explained above suggests that change-agents can affect the overall change process by helping embed sustainability in different parts of the organisational structure and culture through interaction, networking, collaboration and other processes. Being that companies are complex social systems made of individuals inter-related
through structures and culture, whose collaboration is needed for the progression of organisational sustainability, the authors believe that a relational lens could complement and deepen the systems perspective inherent to the FSSD. Secondary goals were to expand SSD literature in the corporate context and to provide practical insights into change-agent actions and efforts. The purpose of the study is to provide those who wish to help large companies transitioning toward sustainability, an appreciation of the relational aspects of strategic planning.

**Research Question:** What does a relational view reveal about the experiences of change-agents trying to move large companies toward sustainability?

### 1.5 Scope and Limitations

This research targets two audiences; first it aims at professionals involved in or in a position to influence a change initiative aimed at moving large companies toward sustainability. This audience includes internal employees, consultants and students in the field of sustainability who could benefit from insights about relational elements in companies transitioning toward sustainability. And secondly, it is intended for the applied research community and thereby contributes to the academic body of knowledge by enriching the Strategic Sustainability Sustainable Development (SSD) concepts with the relational lens.

This research was conducted to describe existing and potential relational elements in the context of organisational change initiatives toward sustainability. These elements include the status and the quality of social interactions and the different factors contributing to it. Although a systems-level exploration and analysis of said context precedes the focus on social interactions, the study does not claim to constitute an exhaustive look at all the factors possibly influencing the change process of these complex organisations.

The data contains geographical patterns that are not addressed, with participants from eleven different countries from different continents. The large companies were operating in different industries and taking various sustainability change initiatives according to their level of sustainability integration. Because of time and accessibility restrictions, this research didn’t focus on a specific type of large company e.g. multinational versus regional companies.

The authors did not attempt extensive quantitative or comparative analysis of the data. Time constraints led the authors to employ a mix of non-statistical sampling methods (Burt and Barber 1996), based on purpose (to target practitioners from different functional levels as to achieve system-level understanding), convenience/accessibility (to access practitioners through existing personal and academic networks) and volunteerism (getting seasoned practitioners through online forums eager to help early-career professionals like ourselves); this naturally restricts the generalisability of the findings.


2 Methods

2.1 Model for Qualitative Research Design

Maxwell’s research design is an interactive model, based on a systemic perspective. It offers a definite, interconnected and flexible structure, which describe the key components of a research design (Maxwell, 2005). It is also a tool to develop a strategy for creating appropriate relationships among these components. With this model as guidance, the authors understood that the reassessment and interrelation between all the components were expected. This design process allowed to progressively enhance the authors’ work with ongoing new insights.

![Maxwell’s Interactive Model of Research Design](image)

*Figure 2.1. Maxwell’s Interactive Model of Research Design.*

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Literature Review

The literature review helped the authors making sense of the relevant concepts and theories to guide in creating the rationale of the research. A literature review of management studies and the field of organisational development and change provided a deeper understanding of the important elements, requirements and considerations for change toward sustainability within organisations. The systems theory and resilience literature was reviewed to describe large companies as complex social systems. Understanding large companies as social systems moving toward sustainability required the authors to review the strategic sustainable development and corporate social responsibility fields. The importance of relationships and the role of change-agents were also researched in the existing literature.
2.2.2 Interviews

For this research, the authors chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. (See Appendix A) This type of interview consists of predetermined questions with the possibility of follow-up questions and interaction to gain the researcher further insight on the topic. It was chosen for this purpose as it enables the researchers to ask complex questions that may require clarification or allow capturing unexpected answers that a survey or regular interview might have missed due to its format (Esaiasson et al. 2002; Maxwell 2005).

The interviews were conducted by Skype, audio-conference calls or in person. One author was responsible to lead the interview while a second author took minutes and asked following-up questions to clarify the interviewee’s answers when needed. Each of the interviews was conducted with two group members to prevent validity threats. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the two other members who were not present during the interview. (See Appendix A for Interview Roles)

2.2.3 Selection of Interviewees

Change-agents have been defined in this research as sustainability practitioners who have a background and knowledge in sustainability and who have been directly or indirectly involved in a change initiative or project toward sustainability within a large company.

The authors reached the interviewees through the Masters of Strategic Leadership toward Sustainability (MSLS) alumni network, The Natural Step (TNS) network, their personal networks and connections and finally LinkedIn related Sustainability Groups. (See Appendix A for Interviewee list) The criteria in selecting the companies were solely based on the number of employees with no discerning factors for the industry in which the company operated, the sustainability maturity level of the chosen company, the country of origin or its intrinsic motivations to become more sustainable whether reputational, branding related, efficiency driven, or for other reasons.

The potential participants were asked to fill an online survey in order to verify the predetermined criteria required for participants in terms of their involvement in sustainability change initiative within large companies. The final sampling resulted in a total of twenty participants including both, internal and external practitioners to large companies. (See Appendix A for Online Survey)

2.2.4 Interview Design

The authors had the assumption that relationships were more than a just a connection between two individuals and that there was a potential to look for a greater level of relatedness within large companies. Thus, the interview questions were designed to have a broader level of understanding of relationships occurring within the overall organisation and this was done by looking at the context in which change-agents operate and inherently in which the change initiatives occur. This clarity helped the authors to make sense of the relational aspects present in the change initiative toward sustainability. The design and the flow of the questions encouraged the participants to reflect on the overall context in which they operate and to better express the existing relational aspects on a wider perspective.
2.3 Data Coding and Analysis

2.3.1 Phase I: Initial Coding

The two members who were not present during the interview transcribed each interview word-for-word and summarised in key categories with relevant quotes. The interviews were coded using six predetermined categories from the authors’ first insights of the collected data. (See Appendix B for Data Categories) This initial coding consisted in understanding the organisational contexts that change-agents operate in and making sense of the relational aspects observed within the organisational system. The coding of each interview was done by two authors separately and was cross-checked to avoid validity threats. A qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA V.11) was used for coding the interviews and allowed the authors to cluster internal and external practitioners for further potential comparisons. The coded data were converted into spreadsheets per categories and subcategories for the analysis stage (See Appendix B).

2.3.2 Data Analysis

The analysis consisted in finding commonalities and differences in ideas between interviewees allowing the authors to extract main patterns and ideas and to welcome emergent sub-categories and concepts. During this process, new codes emerged and were integrated to the initial coding matrix. The data was organised by reviewing the index, eliminating duplication, replacing them with the concepts from existing literature, and connecting the related concepts with each other. (See Appendix B)

2.3.3 Phase II: Applying the Relational View Lens to Analysed Data

The lens was applied in order to make sense of the analysed data from a broad relational perspective. This process consisted in understanding the different ways people connect to each other during a change initiative. The lens allowed the authors to have a higher level of understanding about existing social interactions and dynamics in large companies and allowed a greater understanding of place held by the change agents in this broader system (the company).

2.3.4 Data Significance

During the data analysis for the present study, a phrase was considered to be significant if it was mentioned by half of the respondents or more. The result section ahead thus presents findings that were found important without always mentioning discrete statistical information. Also, quotations are used for examples that are illustrative of the majority of change-agent experiences, but in some instances have also been included to describe a unique case that gives additional depth to the analysis.
2.4 Validity

2.4.1 Bias

The authors acknowledged and worked through a small degree of personal bias. These biases are rooted in academic background and past experiences with the participants; individual interpretation and meaning-making during and after data collection; some assumptions about, for instance, the extent of the profit-maximisation mentality in large companies, the implicit motivations of decision-makers and change-agents, and the true value of the sustainability initiative that was highlighted during the interview. These were mitigated by using multiple analyst triangulation complemented by document analysis as a data validating method; and partly with peer review through peer presentations and discussions. The authors were also biased with expectations based on the extended literature review that supported various concepts, ideas and processes that the authors could anticipate from the data. This allowed the authors of the study to present unexpected results.

2.4.2 Analyst Triangulation

The multiple analyst triangulation method was used to reduce the bias coming from a single researcher’s perspective and interpretation (Patton 1990). This method consisted of using two researchers during the data collection and analysis processes. Each of the twenty interviews were conducted by a team of two people, one interviewing and one taking notes and filling a summary form that highlighted the key points of the interview. Following each interview, two other members transcribed and summarized the interview to find potential gaps in the collected data. Those two members were also responsible for sending the follow-up questions to each interviewee to cover the aforementioned gaps and prepare the data for analysis. (See Appendix A)

2.4.3 Sampling

The sampling of change-agents was based on their sustainability change experience within large companies. The sampling methods, which use online forums as well as snowballing to find interview participants, resulted in data that was rich but also incredibly diverse – itself a source of limitation. The authors acknowledged that findings are context-dependent due to the cultural differences among interviewees and among their experience companies, as well as their position and role within that company. In particular, context differences materialise as company size, available budget and maturity level of sustainability commitments and performance, which all naturally generate barriers and opportunities for sustainability initiatives that are unique to those cases. They did not attempt extensive quantitative or comparative analysis of the data because the purpose of the study was to describe and explain the experience of change-agents during a change initiative toward sustainability from a relational view lens.
3 Results

The change-agents interviewed are driven professionals seeking to alter the status quo of company operations in a direction aligned with sustainability. Throughout their professional careers, they have occupied a variety of positions. Some of these positions carried a relatively high level of responsibility and influence, but in the end regardless of position, many expressed that no one person can transition the company to sustainability alone. “None of us is clever enough,” as a senior director pointed out (Taylor 2014).

The following section outlines the results of our analysis of interview data using the proposed relational view. The findings, detailed below, primarily illustrate that change-agents must mobilise, convince and collaborate with numerous other employees and decision-makers. Ultimately, most of what the company’s sustainability journey needs is generated through interaction (discussions, exchange of resources, workshops, etc.) with key stakeholders. Many of these interactions are necessary but non-existent under current or formal arrangements; and many others pose ongoing challenges. Change-agents consequently experience isolation and resistance from others to their ideas and efforts.

The authors outline how the basis for these interactions, often more important than the interactions themselves, is made up of complex relational elements that are useful for the change-agent to identify and understand in the context of driving the change toward sustainability. These relational elements as relating to sustainability are:

- Systemic sources and types of complexity
- Interpersonal challenges and opportunities
- Organisational goals and the business case for sustainability
- Collective behaviour: organisational culture
- Structural integration of sustainability
- Identity of key system stakeholders and departments
- Change-agent roles vis-a-vis other stakeholders
- Types of interaction
- Personal characteristics

3.1 Systemic Sources and Types of Complexity

The whole-systems perspective confirmed expectations about the nature of the systems in which change-agents operate. As predicted in the introduction, the complex nature of the social environment in large companies was visible throughout the interviews. Although 'complexity' as a term itself was mentioned by only one third of the interviewees, the picture that emerged of their work in sustainability was definitively one of complexity.

Interpretation of their experiences suggests that stakeholder views, decisions and actions relating to sustainability are influenced by myriad elements such as job descriptions, worldviews, age and experience, expectations of subordinates and bosses, function in the company, etc. Most of these factors affect how members of the organisation react to change and relate to each other, and navigating these is a challenge for the change-agent. Moreover, the work of change-agents has tangible inputs (such as financial resources, training programs, data spreadsheets) and intangibles ones (value systems, behavioural norms, friendships);
some are less easily observable than others. Navigating the complexity can be daunting. A sustainability consultant with almost two decades of experience described it thus:

“Oftentimes people will be grappling because the nature of the issues is complex, because there are political implications internally for almost all this stuff and probably this impacts things more than anything. There’s a lot of things going on at the same time, so your point person might be worried about what their boss is thinking; they want to make sure they perform well; maybe on a personal level they are interested in sustainability or maybe they are not and have just been tasked with it; maybe they’re having to manage an external consultant they don’t know well, and so on” (Brooks 2014).

**Generative complexity**: Change-agents reported that any strategy-level intervention takes a minimum of 3 to 5 years and that building the relationships to get the whole company on board with sustainability is equally lengthy. They further expressed that there is no single best way or ‘silver bullet’ in their situations. Instead, for a majority of them, corporate sustainability is a trial-and-error process and requires embracing failure and surprise along the journey. This is in part because the initiatives and methods employed to align company operations with sustainability have little or no precedence in those environments (such as cases where environmental planners in a company have had little or no interaction with production departments or other stakeholders necessary to make a service sustainable).

**Systemic complexity**: Many change-agents discussed the realities of conducting business worldwide that generate complexity. Some mentioned these explicitly by pointing to variations in cultural and political business considerations between headquarters (where planning is done) and regional offices. For instance, those interviewed at ABB mentioned that state-regulated environmental, health and safety standards varied from country to country, which made it more challenging to craft training programs that could be applicable universally (Nordström and Swanström 2014).

**Social complexity**: Due to the breadth of the undertaking, corporate sustainability implies collaboration of stakeholders in various positions and departments. As part of these collaborations, change-agents say they must find opportunities amidst challenging social processes: negotiating with recalcitrant superiors and decision-makers for financial resources, retrieving data from individuals in distant offices, and comprehending other employees’ vastly different perceptions of what sustainability entails.

### 3.2 Interpersonal Challenges and Opportunities: the Human Factor

Intervening in and changing complex organisational systems must acknowledge that they are made up of distinct individuals, with unique personal characteristics and biases that influence the collective outcome. Change-agents express that they fundamentally need other individuals for their work, either to support them on a personal level, provide them with resources, or to deliver/receive information. It is this necessary exchange and support that generate challenges and opportunities, making individuals “the hardest part of sustainability” (Claesson 2014). Even recurring themes such as ‘my company does not give me enough resources for sustainability projects that I wish to initiate’ can be interpreted as a barrier
stemming from a difficult relationship with a superior or fellow decision-makers. This is the human factor in all sustainability work and an essential component to the relational perspective.

Almost all change-agents mentioned one form of resistance or another coming from these other individuals, confirming the presence of pushbacks that keep the system in business-as-usual. Notable sources of resistance (with illustrative examples) included:

- **Worldviews about the nature of business**: Shareholders often do not relate sustainability to business value; “they think, ‘let’s make money, we are not a philanthropy or charity.’ Unfortunately in the West (i.e. Americas), business people and schools are more oriented to profit, and are not sustainable or purpose-driven organisations” (Solorzano 2014).

- **Mindsets of other employees**: Individuals may relate to certain sustainability initiatives as an extra effort that does little for them; “for this mentoring program, the volunteered employees were responsible for one youth for one year, to orient him in his/her career choice. These youth in need, they don't think of having the opportunity to go to university, it is so far from their universe. This program made them dream but for the employees to decide to dedicate that time as volunteering, it was an organisational battle. It is hard if you don't have a clear structure for people to say – ‘okay, I’m dedicating time for my business here.’ Not to be an add-on; but as part of my job, a contribution to the company” (Gomes 2014).

- **Job descriptions**: Superiors may resist a change-agent’s efforts to innovate or introduce a program because they do not perceive it as fitting within his/her existing job description or performance goals. “I was not hired to do [corporate sustainability and philanthropy], but my energy was there. I had a huge conflict with my direct boss; they [the company] liked being in the spotlight [but] wanted me to do that from midnight to six in the morning, and from eight to five in the afternoon to do my ordinary work. We started to have some relational issues, because I needed to dedicate time as the social mentoring program leader” (Gomes 2014).

Analysis of the data suggests that the change-agent must engage people in order to advance the sustainability agenda, and that the level of engagement will be determined by the degree in which people can relate to each other and the change – their understanding of a given sustainability initiative and personal connection to it. The complexity and conflict among the different motivations, ambitions and perceptions of individuals affect the outcomes of sustainability work, hence the need for the change-agent to engage and gain a general understanding of all these personal elements. This is discussed further in Section 3.7.

### 3.3 Organisational Goals and the Business Case for Sustainability

All businesses have basic organisational goals: to generate value while maximising returns. Because it explicitly aligns with these goals, the *business case for sustainability* is an important reference point by which individuals (particularly decision-makers) relate to a given sustainability initiative and to the change-agent who promote it. In fact, 16 of 20
interviews contained reference to the business case, and a significant proportion confirmed the authors’ expectations that a clearly articulated link to company performance or profits was a deciding factor for the adoption of sustainability.

The results show that although the business case is a key element for the company committing to sustainability, it does not seem to be easily communicable or readily embraced, and more than half the change-agents remark that sustainability is persistently viewed by others in the company as a costly investment (in terms of time, and money for training and other improvements).

Furthermore, sustainability may be on the agenda for many companies, but most times not at the top of the list of priorities (Anonymous 2014). A company’s priorities may also change during the year, sometimes undermining commitment and allocation of resources for sustainability or re-assigning key point-people (Anonymous 2014). In fact, two out of every three interviewees said that business priorities are barriers to increasing sustainability, suggesting that the transition toward sustainability represents a burden and a trade-off in many stakeholders’ minds.

Although at first glance this was no surprise, the relational analysis of the interviews identified three elements suggesting that the central determinant is not the bottom-line increase in revenue itself, but rather the way in which it is communicated. First, the findings underscore that the business case must fundamentally be communicated in language that is suitable for the audience in question, and since there is no universally applicable phrasebook, change-agents should be able to tap into multiple perspectives. “It was good that we involved our directors and people who had a background in business. [It was crucial] to talk with the same language, to tell them that there are ways to improve things, that sustainability is an opportunity, and to give good examples,” remarked a consultant embedded in an industrial conglomerate. “You must adjust the language with [both] upper management and the workforce; in order to support the process, they have to understand,” he continued, suggesting also that all departments can contribute to sustainability on the condition that they can relate it to their own realities (Pereira-Ramos 2014).

Second, change-agents commented that the business case must highlight the quick benefits (called low-hanging fruits) pertaining to implementation of sustainability. They say that it is less about having a short payback period for investments, and more about coming to understand how people relate to the change process – a process that requires questioning the way things are done. In this regard, this study detected somewhat of an element of personal and collective pride that is useful for advocating for sustainability and building momentum. “As soon as you get achievements [...], you should be very noisy about it and tell everybody ‘listen, we implemented these sustainability processes, look we have very good results’. [...] If you don’t advertise loud enough, they are going to think it was a casual thing.” (Solorzano 2014) Recognition in stock exchange indexes and at sustainability awards is equally marketable and pride inducing, and one that can lead to significant increase in resources for sustainability, according to Pereira-Ramos (2014) and Taylor (2014).

A third relational insight concerns sustainability as a narrative and how others fundamentally respond to it. Change-agents stress that there is a recurrent perception among many employees and even decision-makers that sustainability is a fringe initiative imposed by sustainability advocates and that it is a trade-off with other activities. Change-agents pointed
out that the business case is most effective in overcoming this when it relies on a positive, win-win perspective.

“[It] is a broader level awareness and motivation that is not implicitly present in everyone within the organisation, who have not been exposed to an abundance mentality, where you think ‘what’s possible?’ as opposed to business-as-usual. You know, business as usual would not have us do what’s proposed. But if you take an abundance mentality and say ‘actually, if you think about it differently we can change everything we do’ and one of the payoffs is in actual, reportable sustainability savings... I mean, my God, you’re talking about a real game changer!” (Taylor 2014).

However, there is no denying that not all stakeholders view sustainability in this positive way. Fragmentation and differentiation of individual perspectives are the realities of doing business on a large scale. The next section of results describes how it is possible to drive sustainability in a coherent and unified way.

### 3.4 Collective Behaviour: Organisational Culture

Theoretically, an inherent diversity of interests, ambitions and worldviews is present in all organisations, including corporate ones. What unifies them and allows collective action is an emergent system property, organisational culture. Most change-agents explicitly stated that for sustainability to take hold, it must be embedded in that culture. The necessary elements to this embedding, with the corresponding proportion of interviews mentioning them, are listed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 3.1. Important cultural aspects summary.</th>
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<td>Learning platforms and training</td>
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**Sustainability literacy**: The process of embedding sustainability within a large company is an educational one, as the general manager of a large newspaper pointed out (Solorzano...
In order to become engaged and committed, members of the organisation must have a minimum level of knowledge. Change-agents mentioned various methods used in their companies to deliver the required knowledge for collective action around sustainability. The most frequently mentioned methods were learning tools and platforms in which participants acquire large amounts of sustainability knowledge around subjects like global climate change, environmental health and safety, and human rights. These were designed primarily as e-learning programs and multi-day workshops, with the aim of getting groups of diverse stakeholders to a comparable level of sustainability literacy so as to facilitate further progress and collaboration. Mentioned less often, but seen to be very effective by change-agents, are online communities and digital platforms in which employees can reflect, share knowledge, and develop ideas together. The diversity of views and expertise was thought to increase the innovativeness of ideas. Finally, half of the interviews described internal communication of knowledge on a per-need basis, with a small group of sustainability practitioners acting as experts and knowledge brokers for other employees. They are allowing them to impact the sustainability content of particular decisions but ultimately relying on the initiative of those other employees to come see them for that service. They are supporting the other employees/departments reactively only when they are asked, instead of engaging them in a proactive manner.

**Common language:** Interviews repeatedly highlighted that to have coherent action on sustainability there must be a common language. The company’s dominant office language may act as a barrier to change and need to be adapted (and combined) with sustainability language. This is in order to form a set of references suitable for the company’s culture and make the language accessible for employees. Collective action is also fueled with “a shared language, a shared understanding and a shared framework that can be used by everybody as opposed to relying on one person who has their own way of doing things” (Mackie 2014). Strict definitions pose problems in this regard; ‘sustainability’ has many interpretations and this may lead to confusion, especially when communicating with partners in different countries; in turn, if employees cannot relate to a sustainability initiative due to the vocabulary in which it is communicated, commitment will likely stall.

**Alignment of values:** Values were seen by more than half of the interviewees as a key element in building an organisational culture that fosters sustainability. The interviewees referred to the significance of both personal and organisational values. Each employee has his/her worldviews, while the company as a collective of individuals has specific corporate and social values as well. In order to spread organisational values among the employees, change-agents often try to get inside and win “hearts and minds” (Taylor 2014; Van Arkel 2014).

**Meaning of Sustainability:** More than half of the interviewees indicate that the definition of ‘sustainability’ is important; they also tell us that the meaning of the word is different, even when a common definition is found – and this is true whether the preferred term is ‘sustainability’ or ‘corporate responsibility’ or ‘triple bottom line.’ In addition, images and words are interpreted in different ways: “the [image of a] factory has lots of chimneys, lots of steel work. Some people look at this and immediately see pollution; but then you can also spot the filters on top of the exhausts and see the environmentally-friendly engineering operating in a robust manner” (Taylor 2014). Now, if the company wishes to communicate a given message about sustainability, it can do so through channels like trainings, workshop events and public announcements by the CEO, but the trick is to craft meaning that resonates with employees and decision-makers. In fact, many change-agents state that they prefer to
start by letting their peers develop meaning for themselves because finding the “right message” and “right channels” is often complex (Swanström and Nordström 2014, Taylor 2014). Taylor continues: “I think you guys can understand that sustainability can mean many different things to different people. We’re actually saying that we should have a comprehensive and inclusive approach to sustainability, not a narrow-minded one. That’s an important philosophy for how we engage with our customers and how we engage with our colleagues.”

Vision: Company vision for sustainability came up in less than half of conversations, but the core message is that having a clear sustainability vision shows commitment to action from the company. It can be a strong “navigational aid” in tough times, especially if its elaboration gives the opportunity to all members of the organisation to be represented. The importance of integrating sustainability compellingly into the vision was outlined by Taylor (2014): “It’s an invitation to participate in sustainability, not so much a directive or a mandate, and we find we’d rather have people inspired and motivated to participate than commanded to comply. So, we have deliberately moved sustainability from a compliance agenda to an inspiration agenda, to be strategic if you like. That has been very powerful and will continue to be very powerful.”

3.5 Structural Integration of Sustainability

Individuals within large companies are interrelated in formal ways according to the organisational structure, laterally (as part of departments working toward a common organisational goal) and vertically (through systems of hierarchy and reporting). The specific organisational structure of the company determines the types and levels of their interactions by delineating formal communication channels, authority, responsibilities and decision-making power.

What place did change-agents have in this structure? Many change-agents voiced that sustainability should not be any one person’s responsibility, but that of every employee, manager and department, and it should be organised in a collaborative way. It should ideally be integrated in each position’s job description to prevent being viewed as an add-on to what the company fundamentally does. Such integration into wider company functions and operations was mentioned explicitly as an important goal by 60% of the interviewees. One director said it thus:

“In Flavouring and Nutrition, we do not have a chief sustainability officer. We have deliberately said that sustainability is not one person’s responsibility. [...] We are looking at the moment to make every single employee a global sustainability ambassador, where no one person has a full-time sustainability role. That’s brought a challenge, but I believe that’s the way it should be”(Taylor 2014).

However, in the sample, sustainability was initially typically limited to a single position or department, a reality that was difficult to change. In many sustainability efforts (especially bottom-up ones), companies were either marginalised, isolated by departmental siloing, or lacking the access to key senior managers and their resources. Most change-agents, being program officers or external consultants, lacked any significant decision-making power and
were therefore dependent on access to higher-level managers. They argued that implementing sustainability requires shorter hierarchical lines, and one senior consultant exemplified the difficulty of implementing a project when the structure of the company doesn’t allow a direct connection to the top management:

“We are working with [the company] and we haven’t even met the deputy general manager yet. It has been eight months we are working with them and probably we won’t; so the top management doesn’t even know that sustainability work is done in the company, that the report will be issued. We developed a strategy for them but they didn’t ask for it. We don’t know if they are going to use that strategy or not” (Anonymous 2014).

Under such isolation, what do change-agents experience while trying to influence business decisions to be more aligned with sustainability? Even change-agents working from within company headquarters, including directors and senior advisors, expressed that overseeing the sustainability-related decisions of business units and local offices was quite difficult. Others, who occupied lower positions, commented that their sustainability-related positions lacked authority on the business operations. Overall, one quarter of the interviewees mentioned the silo effect as a barrier to creating a shared understanding and to the ability of stakeholders to see the broader picture.

To overcome isolation and achieve better understanding of the business, some change-agents attempt to prioritise certain work relationships and leverage them to get what they need, as discussed below. The interviews also strongly suggest that informal relationships may be a way to decrease the silo effect. Having coffee or lunch, participating in outings with co-workers and socialising on business trips give the opportunity for people to exchange and talk about their jobs. These interactions may lead to information, knowledge and exchange of ideas across different business units.

### 3.6 Key System Stakeholders and Departments

From a systems and networks perspective, the results tell us that certain stakeholders in the company play more important roles than others in helping the change-agent further integrate sustainability. The interviews included a portion of questions about who the primary collaborators are for the change-agents. Key individuals and groups repeatedly were deemed important for several reasons: They could be intermediaries for access to individuals on the board or in corporate headquarters, they had high visibility in the company and could communicate to large groups, they were fellow change-agents with a passion for sustainability, and/or were individuals with resources needed by the change-agent. Eleven of the twenty participants spoke of the value of prioritising relationships with these individuals and groups over other ones.

Among these, top management was seen as the most crucial stakeholder group for the change-agent to engage. This group includes senior managers such as directors, department vice-presidents, and chief officers. Members of the top management play an important role by mobilising company resources and making decisions affecting long-term company efforts and the capacity for sustainability, some of these being decisions that no one else has the authority to take. The importance of their support, through vocal support in the media, a
known passion for sustainability, and direct contact with sustainability initiatives, was expressed in nearly all interviewees with change-agents in lower positions and external consultants. “The only enabler [to sustainability work] is buy-in from the gatekeepers – that is it. From there, you will have the commitment, funds, etc. required to accomplish things.” said the sustainability manager at IKEA Canada (Seale 2014). Another interviewee commented that the top management’s support means that a sustainability initiative will be taken seriously and run less risk of being misunderstood (Anonymous 2014). Conversely, interviews with change-agents belonging to this group suggested that they are aware of their role as the most significant influencers in a company, especially with regards to displaying the company culture.

However, contact between top management and other stakeholders is in the majority of cases limited, and from both sides it was noted that more interaction was needed. For this reason, it is important to engage other informal leaders, including internal people interested or sensitive to sustainability issues and people with a certain level of seniority who are directly connected to higher management. “We are looking for people, who are respected by their peers and staff,” as an experienced consultant discussed (Brooks 2014). “They can help to open doors to others; they can host conversations at the water cooler, they can host conversations during staff meetings, they can respond to questions.”

Meanwhile, more than one third of the interviewees mentioned the need to get closer to particular departments. Many practitioners referred to attempts to build connections in particular with communications & marketing branches, and corporate planning. The human resources department also plays an increasingly important role in embedding sustainability within large companies: one CSR manager remarked, “they are key in not just hiring the right people but also making sure that the right people are acting accordingly to what we want as a company” (Gaard 2014).

In the sections above, the relational view underlines key elements of large corporate systems, namely the interconnectedness of individuals, the goals, structure and behaviour of the collective, as well as the relative importance of particular individuals and groups. Where does the change-agent fit into this? This is explored below.

### 3.7 Change-Agent Roles

Despite the change-agents occupying different positions, some common relational patterns emerged during analysis with regards to their roles in the sustainability change process. These patterns underline the collaborative nature of the change process. The study’s findings indicate that sustainability change-agents need to understand and shape the connections among other social agents in the system in a way that moves the company toward sustainability. Thus, from the change-agent’s descriptions of their work, two complementary roles emerged: one centered on making contact, engaging and connecting; the other on empowering, motivating and supporting those contacts.

More than half those interviewed explicitly said their work was about engaging and connecting people toward a shared understanding of sustainability. As mentioned previously, engaging employees and top management requires different approaches and arguments. Change-agents also said that they not only connect with people but help connect people with
others as well. As mediators and facilitators, they help create cohesion during the change process. They may also play a role in bridging the gap between departments by supporting the creation of sustainability teams and the identification of other champions or potential ‘ambassadors’ (Claesson 2014; Swanström & Nordström 2014; Goetzee 2014; Taylor 2014; Solorzano 2014). Networks of collaborators in the company were seen as fundamental to spreading information and innovation, and to giving change-agents the ability to diffuse sustainability throughout the organisation.

In turn, this engagement process requires following-up in the form of support, motivation and empowerment. Change-agents describe their contribution as advising, suggesting solutions, and assisting people in their work. Because the involvement of all departments is at some point required, the change-agents need to empower individuals by enabling them to think critically and take appropriate decisions toward the common objective of sustainability on their own and, as mentioned previously, in a way that makes sense to them. Provided with knowledge, these individuals slowly integrate sustainability considerations into their job responsibilities and tasks, with the ideal outcome of them not being dependent on sustainability practitioners in the long-run (Gaard 2014; Harvey 2014; Kneppers 2014; Swanström & Nordström 2014). As a CSR manager states:

“I need them to get the ideas themselves because I know that we are functioning like that as human beings; if somebody else gets a good idea we don’t really like it as much as if we get the same idea ourselves. I’m trying to make them really get the picture of this in the positive way so they will get the ideas themselves and I’ll be there to help with my knowledge and my time.” (Gaard 2014)

Many interviewees mentioned relationship-building as part of their work in the change process as well and more than half spoke to the importance of relationships. IKEA Canada’s sustainability manager, for instance, referred to how sustainable product design requires new forms of internal partnerships that likely would not have happened otherwise. His role was often about helping to figure out “which partners are the right ones to collaborate with, at the right time, and how to work with those partners in a good way” (Seale 2014).

Various tools and techniques can be used with this aim, with stakeholder mapping tools being most recurrent. These help to understand the different roles and positions of important influencers and detractors in the company. Change-agents say they will often use success stories to convince, influence and get the buy-ins from top management, because others can connect to sustainability by hearing the experiences of others: “telling stories and examples is to help people understand how somebody else has tackled this problem and the benefit they got from doing that and what it took to make that succeed” (Harvey 2014). Despite the allure of storytelling, a key consideration remains whether the audience can relate to the story message: a change-agent in a New Zealand-based consulting firm expressed that there is some difficulty translating even powerful success stories like that of Dutch-American carpet manufacturer Interface to their regional context.
3.8 Types of Interaction

What forms do interactions between change-agents and their supporters take? The change-agents described the types of interactions that take place and what they help achieve. The most recurrent forms of interaction were:

- Partnership on projects, e.g. production departments collaborating with sustainability change-agents on improving the environmental performance of a product
- Workshops and activities, often hosted by company employees as well as consultants
- Digital networks and intranets, i.e. online platforms designed for sharing of ideas
- Casual conversations, in the office as well as outside the workplace

Change-agents said that these interactions help to achieve common understanding of sustainability, as well as encourage product and service innovations, and increase buy-in from key stakeholders. Most importantly, they create bonds between people that help overcome resistance to the idea of change.

Some of these interactions were reported as ‘formal’, meaning work relationships that are written into department structure, or job and project descriptions. In other words, exchanges and communication that are official and expected. Such relationships are often the source of influence, information, or financial resources that are critical for the change-agents’ work. For instance, some change-agents reported being able to overcome resistance in another department by utilising the status and contacts of their formal superior.

However, according to the interviewees, the formal setting may not be enough. Going back to the point of isolation in company structure, change-agents repeatedly mentioned a number of informal interactions that they said were crucial to their work. These would include casual encounters during coffee breaks and outside of the workplace, as well as friendships developed over time. In addition, many mentioned having to create random and casual encounters such as impromptu office visits (Van Arkel 2014) or “showing up at a meeting you’re not invited to” (Seale 2014). Existing formal channels do not always present enough opportunities for the interaction that change-agents need to engage and empower others in the company, especially when it comes to stakeholders at much higher or lower levels in the hierarchy.

Furthermore, formal channels do not tell the whole story of how people actually work together. Most of the change-agents had many things to say about the difficulties of changing business-as-usual, including the isolation and communication troubles already mentioned. These can all be emotionally draining. Informal relationships often provided personal support and allowed consultants, employees, and decision-makers to get to know each other on a more personal level and be more tolerant of differences. Experienced change-agents said that these relationships frequently led to fewer conflicts, better work conditions, and higher performance on collaborative projects. IKEA Canada’s Brendan Seale exemplified this:

“A strong personal relationship is equivalent to having an ally to make change and get things done. I believe it is no coincidence that I have made good progress with the functions who I have broken bread with, shared a beer with, and played indoor simulator golf with! When people have a good rapport, they will naturally want to help each other. It puts you on the same level of humanity. After socialising together, I am no longer perceived as some radical or tyrant tree-hugger, but just a
guy who cares about the big picture and sees connections that can make IKEA a better company. We are on a journey together, and we can help each other.”

These informal relationships also contain a lot of knowledge and wisdom relating to company operations and sustainability as well. “The challenge is that if ‘Susan’ and ‘Jim’ leave the company, the institutional memory and the relationship is gone. So formal structure needs to institutionalise culture and norms because there are issues with turnover, people retiring, and a loss of wisdom of an organisation that is present in these informal networks and relationships” (Claesson 2014). What can be done about this? Formalising and institutionalising these types of relationships through collaborative teams (which involve employees from different departments, functions and disciplines) as well as participatory platforms (such as online forums), or implementing a policy, training or procedure to standardise interaction in how something is executed, were suggested by Claesson to be crucial.

3.9 Personal Characteristics

Finally, the study findings also suggest that possessing certain personal characteristics can help change-agents to be successful at changing business-as-usual in complex social environments. They help the change-agent build connections with stakeholders into a strong network over time to spread sustainability.

In the interviews, trust was described as an essential element for the success of sustainability, because it is the foundation on which people can connect, share, and evolve toward a common goal. For change-agents, building trust with key stakeholders can accelerate the change process in different ways. A trust-based relationship with one employee can enable the change-agent to access other key stakeholders (Pereira-Ramos 2014). Trustworthiness was thus mentioned as a critical intangible for change-agents to exhibit in the way they work, communicate and behave. Tied to this were attributes of patience and mindfulness: trust in relationships takes a lot of time to build and but a moment to be destroyed.

Professional competence and integrity go hand-in-hand with trustworthiness: change-agents must fundamentally accomplish what they commit to and provide good results on time, which may often lead others to be more considerate of their advice and recommendations. Honesty and transparency are similarly deemed essential for building trust. By acknowledging and clearly communicating the potential weaknesses and difficulties of a proposed action, the change-agent may find a common understanding of issues and the appropriate ways to overcome them (Claesson 2014). In addition, the study results identified passion, authenticity, and persistence as contributors to building credibility by showing the change-agent’s devotion in moving the company toward sustainability.
3.10 Unexpected Results

Unexpected results are outlined below on a more detailed level. They are elaborated on due to the individual-level perspectives of change (as opposed to organisational or operational levels), and to the sparse literature on these subjects.

Journey fatigue: The Natural Step consultant Sarah Brooks’ described the development over time among change teams of what she calls ‘journey fatigue’ due to rising expectations / deliverables but no additional or even progressively decreasing resources (typically 2-3 years into long-term organisational change initiatives. This ‘fatigue’ paralleled the feeling of exhaustion and frustration described by other practitioners working within companies, who expressed they seldom saw the fruition of initiatives they had spent so much time and effort on.

Relationship-building: At first, the interviewers’ interest in relationships led to specific questions regarding the importance of relationships. Explicit mention of specific relationships and their usefulness by change-agents was, despite questions asking directly or indirectly about key stakeholders, methods of interaction and importance of relationships for their work. The change-agents considered the matter, but the resulting conversation often strayed off topic, leading the researchers to suspect that relationships are not a useful heuristic for change-agents in all situations. Although several interviewees made comments about particular relationships (e.g. bosses, managers of various business units), there did not seem to be coherence to their awareness or much intentional approach to building and managing them.

Sustainability knowledge gaps: The sustainability expertise of many change-agents grows over time through access to internal reporting, attendance at conferences, company training, and/or self-teaching. However, there is an increasingly visible gap in the (sustainability "elite") level of understanding of the topic and the level held by what Taylor calls the “sustainability masses” in the organisation. For this group, sustainability is considered little more than turning off the lights when leaving the office. Although seldom mentioned, this observation was eye-opening as an emerging challenge for the integration of sustainability.

From these unexpected results, we proceed into the Discussion to examine the deeper meaning of these findings.
4 Discussion

In the following section, results are looked at through the lens of the primary research question and compared against literature. The practical insight into the experience and actions of change-agent teams gathered in the research is presented and then put into context of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development and related concepts. Data validity and further research are also addressed before moving to the conclusion.

4.1 Revisiting the research question

What does a relational view reveal about the experiences of change-agents trying to move large companies toward sustainability?

The relational view revealed a lot of information about the dynamics of social agents interacting in large companies that may not have been as visible without the systems perspective and the emergent analytical approach employed. The relational categories that emerged permitted the authors to draw links between structural, behavioural and personal items that may have otherwise appeared distinct and unrelated.

Among the significant findings, the authors heard that change-agents often find themselves facing major interpersonal challenges, resistance and lack of resources. Such challenges revolve around the difficulties inherent in rigid organisational structures and embedding sustainability in culture and dominant behaviours. Consequently, change-agents are required to not only fulfil the tasks formally assigned to them in their job; they must also be equipped for additional work like relationship-building, conflict resolution and interpersonal facilitation. Their work of moving the company toward sustainability also underscores the importance of engaging top management, leveraging informal relationships and presenting sustainability in a relatable way.

The relational view thus demonstrated the need for giving consideration to human dynamics when planning a large company’s transition to sustainability. An appraisal of these relational elements can support the adoption of appropriate attitudes, language and interaction methods for building mutual understanding, compromise and collaboration.
In turn, this mutual understanding, dialogue and collaboration are the basis for healthy relationships. Relationships help change-agents in the implementation of change initiatives and in dealing with resistance (Stummer and Zuchi 2010); and articulate what Epstein, Buhovac and Yuthas (2010) call the ‘soft systems’ of personal and organisational values, leadership and interpersonal connection, which drive sustainability efforts and complement ‘hard systems’ like change management, performance evaluation and incentive programs.

The following section outline some more specific implications of this research for sustainability literature, management practices as well as change-agent strategies.

**4.2 Scaling-Up Sustainability: Decentralising and Teaming-Up**

The results confirmed the remarks by Cooperrider and Fry (2012) stating that corporate sustainability is about giving attention to multiple stakeholders and “relating with them in ways that foster enduring and innovative partnerships”. The scale of implementing sustainability in a modern large company poses unique challenges for change-agents because improvements often need to be made in just about every aspect of operations and across large regions. Unfortunately, in most companies change-agents are few in number and cannot be everywhere at once. This study proposes a few insights about what it means to scale up sustainability to the reality of these companies.

Firstly, it is about the decentralisation of sustainability: companies should not rely on the work of a sole individual or department for sustainability. Cooperrider and Fry (2012) outline research systematically showing that the sustainability agenda must be strategically embedded through interpersonal relationships rather than bolted-on projects. In fact, social and environmental stewardship should be a consideration across most if not all job functions.

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**Figure 4.1. Implications of the relational elements**

- **Relational Elements**
  - Systemic sources of complexity
  - Interpersonal challenges & opportunities
  - Organisational goals
  - Culture & collective behaviour
  - Structural integration
  - Identity of key stakeholders
  - Change-agent roles

- **Support the adoption of appropriate**
  - Attitudes
  - Language
  - Interaction methods

- **Collaboration**
and merely coordinated on a high level from headquarters. Thus, change-agents must be able to find and engage stakeholders in the organisation, and empower them with information and support to make the right choices on their own.

This engagement and collaboration on a broader scale creates networks of individuals working actively on supporting the transition of the company toward sustainability. One change-agent talked of this network metaphorically as “rings on the water”, a structure in which new knowledge, an initiative or a decision concerning sustainability has a ripple effect to other sectors in the company through strategically-placed change-agents. This ripple effect then occurs through both informal interpersonal connections and formal communication channels. This finding among others highlights what in literature is a growing emphasis on having not single change-agents but change teams more broadly. Teams can support and scale-up individual efforts, help exchange knowledge and best practices, and mobilise a critical mass of supporters for broad acceptance of the sustainability agenda (Cadwell 2003; Kotter 1995; Rogers 2003). Teams may provide the emotional support to the individual for the drawn-out journey, and the results underline the risk of burning out if the change-agent remains isolated in their goals to change the company.

Scaling-up in turn implies a personal characteristic trait that did not come up in the interviews but that seems particularly fitting, namely the ability to let go of outcomes. Sustainability is a long-term journey for most companies and involves a lot of trial-and-error, and change-agents themselves may get re-assigned from projects. Additionally, one must be sensitive to the fact that people are being asked to question the rationale for many things. The relational view tells us that it may be important for the change-agent to acknowledge that they might not be able to see the fruits of their labour for a little while. This echoes Joanna Macy’s advice for individuals working toward system change, which includes the following statement: “be content not to see the results of your work: your actions have unanticipated and far-reaching effects that may not be visible to you in your lifetime” (Macy 1995). Likewise, ‘letting go’ would also apply to controlling the process. Change-agents might feel as though they are best equipped in terms of sustainability knowledge, are the most passionate about sustainability as well as its original proponents; but the fact is that they are not the ones making all the crucial decisions and oftentimes that responsibility rightly lies elsewhere.

In this regard, if they are going to be teaming up and work as a network, trust must work in both ways and it must felt by the change-agent for his or her peers, even if at first those other stakeholders do not make optimal choices or do not seek out the help of the change-agent. The fact that trust was mentioned by almost all change-agents reminds the authors that implementation of sustainability is fundamentally an interpersonal journey of convincing, engaging and recruiting others, where openness and dialogue are critical. Trustworthiness, the experience of which Rothstein (2005) says builds and alters trust itself, emerged in interview data as an important condition for the relationship-building that is often needed. Trust between parties is the core from which effective collaboration emerges and collaboration in turn builds and maintains it (Getha-Taylor 2012).
4.3 Coalition-Building: Positive Narratives and Prioritisation

The results confirm the research of Van der Heijden, Cramer and Driessen (2012) about the role of change-agents as sense-makers of sustainability concepts in the corporation: using appropriate language and narratives, change-agents aim to spread sustainability by translating and adapting the general sustainability concept to the organisational context of different departments and functions. The authors of that study call this an “emergent learning process” (2012, 554) where all stakeholders learn to relate to each other by communicating, acting and building relationships in both formal and informal ways, a process that is ongoing, unpredictable and fluid.

This leads to some new insight into the practice of building sustainability coalitions. Building on studies that explore the motivations of sustainability professionals (Degroot 2008; Visser and Crane 2010) and stakeholder engagement through relational practices (Cooperrider and Fry 2012), the data strongly suggests that promoting actions and initiatives that employees can relate to personally and professionally is fundamental to making that language and narrative of sustainability more accessible. It also helps with recruiting and retaining supporters for sustainability in the company by creating a basis for mutual understanding and collaboration.

In turn, this seems to be linked to another insight, namely that a leadership philosophy of positivity can be a great benefit for motivating key stakeholders such as top management and boards of companies. It was already known from literature that using appropriate business language when arguing the business case for sustainability is a key component of moving the sustainability agenda forward (Orlitzky, Siegel and Waldman 2011; Willard 2002). With the relational view, the authors also see the importance of building company pride and framing sustainability as a collective journey with rewards for everyone (Katzenbach and Harshak 2011). This lesson about positivity echoes studies around the psychology of environmental issues (Norgaard 2009) and organisational development (Bushe 1995) that have discovered significant limits to attempts at changing business-as-usual through fear and compliance mentalities, which may only serve to elicit greater resistance and feelings of powerlessness.

If a positive narrative is key for attracting attention and recruiting helpers, then the personal characteristics uncovered by this research go hand-in-hand with it. For starters, the enthusiasm and drive of the change-agents were attributes visible in all interviews; it largely confirmed extant literature on the importance of personal passion, perseverance and conviction in taking charge of change (Kanter 2000). Tied to these, this research also echoed explicitly relational characteristics such as empathy and ability to motivate others identified by Dunphy, Griffiths and Benn (2007), who also study change-agent sustainability efforts in the corporate setting.

However what seems to be the biggest stand-out from the results globally in terms of personal characteristics is systems thinking. A whole-systems perspective of the social environment in the company is helpful to have and nurture for the change-agent because it means looking at more than just the obvious answers and as such it may help identify deeper sources of resistance, recruit partners outside the change-agents immediate social circle and secure critical resources from other departments. It invites the change-agent to consider the multitude of worldviews and interests that guide company operations, not just those of peers and closest co-workers. Before this study, systems thinking already suggested itself to be the
fundamental skill for dealing with the complexity that characterises the large company, because it naturally pushes change-agents to avoid reductionist thinking and choose projects and actions that are strategically beneficial for reaching a given goal; now, informed by the relational view, the authors see that systems thinking is about recognising complex linkages not just between issues but also between people as well.

Additionally, systems thinking can be tied in an additional way to strategic prioritisation. Building friendships, partnerships and professional relationships as part of furthering sustainability takes a lot of time and still does not guarantee a change-agent getting what (s)he needs. Since certain stakeholders are more important at given times, it makes sense that the change-agent should manage these in a strategic manner and from a systemic perspective. In particular, this study uncovered that oftentimes change-agents refer to others using explicitly relational terms, like ‘gatekeepers’, ‘champions’, ‘detractors’, ‘supporters’, ‘influencers’ etc.; in other words, their primary descriptors are about that person’s attitude and disposition vis-a-vis the change-agent and/or sustainability, and are inspired either by experience with that person or their reputation. It suggests that what are often considered static change roles (c.f. Stummer and Zuchi 2010) based on position and responsibilities (e.g. executive directors authorising a project, project team members managing technical aspects) are, when seen through a systems perspective, actually part of a wider system of important change stakeholders, i) whose identities shift and evolve as relationships are built and managed, and ii) who may not have formal responsibilities in a given project but whose involvement or support may well be a critical factor for success. Furthermore, the change-agents’ experience seeking to identify and engage these individuals lends credence to predictive theories such as Diffusion of Innovation (Rogers 2003), which outlines similar roles and argues that recruitment of even a small number of such actors can help reach a tipping point of supporters and adopters.

4.4 The Relational View and SSD Theory / Practice

Does the relational view help to embed sustainability faster in the structure, culture, goals and networks of the company? By itself no – it is but a lens for analysis – but it can greatly help when considered alongside refined strategic planning tools like the FSSD. At the start of this report it was pointed out that existing SSD literature contains little of the information regarding human interconnectedness that we should expect when examining complex social systems. However, both SSD and the relational view are based on a whole systems approach and are formulated to make sense of complexity. In addition, evidence appeared in these results that demonstrate parallel ideas, suggesting that the relational view and SSD have complementary uses.

4.4.1 Implications for SSD Practice

In terms of sustainability management and planning, the study findings suggest that a relational analysis can help support a step-wise process toward sustainability in large companies by helping:
Develop appropriate language to communicate the need for change and the “rules of the game” as outlined under the Sustainability Principles;

Understand and address individual and organisational sources of resistance;

Make a case for resources and knowledge from other departments; and

Identify, engage and support champions, influencers and potential collaborators.

The relational view may also inform the design and implementation of an ABCD strategic planning process. The best practice planning as outlined by the FSSD can be complemented by a relational understanding of the social system and how the individuals that constitute its parts can work together toward a common goal.

In the awareness and vision (A) step, understanding is built about the meaning of sustainability in a way that resonates with individuals at both personal and professional levels. Then, a vision for the future that presents a compelling image of what sustainability will look like to each member of the organisation, regardless of position, is co-created by those present so as to get individuals connected to and empowered by that vision. Following this, members of the organisation backcast to reach the vision of success, and determine what must be done today and through which type of collaboration. During the baseline analysis (B) of the current reality, systems thinking is used to map relevant stakeholders and to identify key sustainability challenges, with particular attention paid to how issues interconnect across departments and to whose actions they are dependent upon. In addition, the B step invites us to consider the strengths of the organisation, so that employees and decision-makers can ground solutions in something they are already doing well; and to start identifying the resources and collaborative structures that can support sustainability advancements in the company. Brainstorming a list of compelling actions (C) is equally relational, least of which is the creation of a trusting environment through participatory hosting techniques (c.f. Rees 1998) and building a list of solutions that everyone can contribute to. Finally, deciding on priorities (D) can make the most use of the relational perspective by prioritising actions that can influence more departments, more people, and activate more relations while moving the company toward sustainability.

Some guidelines that emerged from this study are that a proposed action:

- Generate and support vertical linkages and horizontal collaboration in the company, as a means to reduce siloing and grow collective knowledge

- Elicit dialogue and participation from employees to integrate a diversity of views

- Be flexible to individual/departmental contexts, and permit some decentralised diffuse decision-making

- Help institutionalise informal relationships through means like online forums and regular social events

- Have stable support mechanisms available, e.g. funding, communication channels, training, etc.

Additionally, some of the results categorised as ‘unexpected’ reveal an inside perspective that is seldom seen in literature and perhaps unknown to management. Journey fatigue, for instance, is typically not addressed in SSD literature; it may be beneficial to keep in mind that the SSD process in and of itself does not guarantee successful interaction and
consideration of such experiences might help the long-term survival of sustainability initiatives.

In short, a relational approach can be quite informative, and may well be a powerful complement to existing material in both basic and advanced FSSD training offered by the Natural Step and partner organisations.

4.4.2 Implications for SSD Literature

This study expanded extant SSD literature in the realm of corporate sustainability and contributes to understanding of how far strategic sustainable development actually goes beyond technical fixes. The greatest implication of this research is that when one examines how individuals relate to each other and to the rest of the system, one is able to activate the drivers of dialogue and commitment, tap into the power of personal and collective values, and energise potential networks of champions. Moreover, nowadays individuals seek more than ever to affiliate themselves with organisations with a purpose, a vision and values that are aligned with their own (Willard 2012, 96). This can speed up the sustainability transition: when people feel they are a more important part of the solution and see a goal larger than themselves, they are likely to be more committed, helpful and innovative. In brief when there is a ‘fit’ in the interaction between the organisation’s vision (purpose, culture, and institutional structure) and the individual’s personal needs and goals. Sustainability transformation accelerates. Those interrelationships (on-going interaction, co-learning and change) between the company and each person within the company is explained by the ‘person- organisational dynamic’ referred to in FSSD literature.

At Interface, a man who had been employed for only six months had readily embraced the company's unique brand of sustainability; the company’s innovation manager Geanne van Arkel, attributed this to a high quality of interaction that is embedded in the company's culture and that induces a feeling of worth and contribution. This interpretation confirms Missimer's (2013) recent addition to FSSD literature. In her work, she deepens understanding of social sustainability by proposing five new principles – minimum requirements for

![Figure 4.2. The Person-Organization Dynamic (adapted from Robèrt 2010).](image-url)
meeting human needs worldwide. This research suggests that interactions and relationships that foster connectivity and mutual understanding present a quality that may contribute to meeting needs for at least three of those five needs: i) competence, through company training and sharing platforms that are specifically designed to bridge widening gaps in sustainability knowledge and to generate cross-sector innovation; ii) influence, by decentralising sustainability decision-making and empowering actors in the network to share ideas and champion projects; and iii) meaning, which grows as individuals participate and feel their work valued.

A similar comment about quality of relationships comes from consultant, organisational coach and The Natural Step chairman Göran Carstedt. Adapting Japanese quality-management philosophy, he points out that quality is generated and monitored throughout production and not merely a final step to it, and that high quality relationships ultimately help to generate the conditions that drive sustainability forward (see figure 4.2).

![Figure 4.3. Role of relationships in Japanese quality management (image courtesy of Carstedt).](image)

In terms of what these quality relationships look like, he says that if we study how value is created and map the network of relations, we find not an organisational chart but a non-hierarchical hub, an interconnected and organic network in which relationships are fundamentally important. Co-creative processes of change within this network, like those of sustainable development, are driven by trust and learning, and by putting equal weight to what people find important. This is a particularly important consideration when we consider the challenges of transforming large companies.

Achieving mutual understanding, compromise and collaboration (or, put differently, the satisfaction of the above-mentioned social needs for competence, influence and meaning), constitutes the foundation of the principled vision of success that one looks for when planning with the FSSD. In this vision of success, meeting the social needs creates a positive feedback loop where learning and commitment are mutually reinforcing. From this vision, one may backcast to a present reality in order to identify actions that address the various key relational challenges identified by this research, and use prioritisation guidelines as developed above.
4.5 Validity and further research

This study’s examination of the social environment in large companies and the experience of dedicated change-agents yielded rich data and allowed the authors to identify key relational elements to consider when working on strategic transitions toward corporate sustainability. The richness of the data came from the number of change-agents in the sample as well as the variety of their experiences, personal values and ambitions for the companies in which their work. In the end, the findings answered the main research question within the stated limitations of the research. They are aligned with dominant change models, have expanded literature in corporate SSD and have yielded practical insights for change-agents seeking to energise positive system change.

If time had permitted, the authors would have liked to do another round of interviews with other change-agents in the same large companies at different levels of the hierarchy or in different departments to confirm some aspects of the data. Moreover, in terms of further research a longitudinal study could help link these relational insights with the success of sustainability change initiatives and thereby identify some best practices in terms of relationship-building. Those in our sample who had received extensive academic training in strategic sustainable development, or whose companies had adopted the FSSD in management and planning, made more explicit claims of using systems thinking to further their work and also made clearer observations about the benefits of leveraging relationships. Additional research could look into this and attempt to explain long-term patterns and differences between practitioners who use such an approach and those who don’t.

It then begs the question – to what extent can relationships be managed? Much of the disciplinary expertise contained in management literature is based on the assumption that the most effective change processes occur in a planned and controlled manner (Cummings and Worley 2005; Kotter 2011). However, our findings inherently come with the limitation that relationships that helped one change-agent overcome a specific barrier would not necessarily help others do the same, even for the same barrier; and ultimately, they indicate that relationships seem to be just as emergent as the change that they are looking to help support. Hock’s (2005) compelling argument that complex adaptive systems naturally waver between chaos and order – an idea that brought him to develop the concept of chaordic organisation – may well translate to relationships: unpredictable and emergent, a space in parallel to the hierarchical structures that divide, rationalise and constrict; in other words, a space for the constantly evolving conditions that support organisational change. Consequently, the authors suggest that research be undertaken to develop a model of relationship management that can make room for this emergence.

Finally, the topic of vertical relationships came up often, unsurprisingly given the importance of top management’s commitment to sustainability. It is therefore also proposed to explore the question of how leadership can be supported by other stakeholders in these organisations. Can change-agents lower on the corporate ladder cultivate a certain type of relationship to activate and nurture leadership qualities and sustainability ethos in decision-makers and influential individuals? Examples of questions to ask are: what is keeping a CEO from being fully engaged? What if a top manager is interested in increasing sustainability within his/her company but cannot? What factors prevents him/her from doing so and can company networks and interactions help alleviate these? Can the CEO be engaged in an other way than by financial arguments?
Navigating complexity for change toward sustainability in large companies is best done using a systems perspective, a principled vision of success and a step-wise planning process, as espoused for instance by the FSSD. However, the human factor of the undertaking is as of yet underdeveloped in extant literature. Seeking insights into experiences of sustainability change-agents in these settings, this study adopted a relational view - a complementary approach to the FSSD focusing on the social complexity of the working environment of these individuals.

Using the relational view as an analytical lens, the authors examined the social interactions of these change-agents and thereby gained a greater understanding of the place held by these individuals in the broader system (the company). Results were categorised using indigenous concepts inspired in part by complex adaptive systems theory.

Key findings surrounded the current siloed place of sustainability in the organisational structure of most companies, the importance of building a narrative around sustainability that others could relate to, and the need to leverage the different types of interactions between change-agents and other individuals. Furthermore, both formal and informal interpersonal bonds were highlighted as crucial for sustaining the efforts of the change-agents; and in turn suggested that specific skills and capacities were needed for the change-agent to fulfil their roles of engaging, supporting, motivating and empowering others.

Although the findings cannot be guaranteed to represent best practices due to the scope and limitations of the study, they nevertheless make significant contributions to literature around corporate management structures and scaling up of sustainability efforts. In addition, they make contributions to both SSD theory and practice by highlighting the human aspect of strategic planning as well as the strategic nature of building relationships, teams and coalitions. The authors believe that consideration by the change-agents to relational aspects during strategic planning may help foster conditions for sustainability becoming an integral part of company culture and speeding up its integration.

Key recommendations to sustainability change-agents are to develop facilitation and conflict resolution skills, along with the use of appropriate language and a win-win, positive narrative when talking about sustainability, in order to better engage stakeholders. Trust for others as well as systems thinking are critical capacities for the change-agent and must be nurtured, especially where it concerns relationship-building and new collaborative projects. In turn, tools designed to map stakeholders and interactions can be of help for understanding the human dynamics at play, as can participatory social methodologies such as Appreciative Inquiry (c.f. Bushe 1995) and Open Space (c.f. Owen 2008). Finally, leveraging vertical relationships (between the different hierarchical levels) can help broadcast important messages between top management, project staff and charismatic leaders.

More broadly, management should strive to develop a common understanding of sustainability and institutionalise informal relationships. The structural silo effect that isolates the sustainability agenda within a single department or at a high level can be diminished through collaboration of multiple administrative and/or business units, collective participation in online platforms and social activities, as well as the decentralisation and delegation of sustainability decisions according to the principle of subsidiarity. Furthermore,
sustainability considerations should be progressively integrated into as many job descriptions as possible: companies that do so report that employees feel a higher degree of individual responsibility and consequently show higher levels of awareness and commitment.

In closing, it could be said that the fundamental need in organisations seeking to implement sustainability seems to be not a model to codify and manage relationships as a cog in a machine. Instead, it is rather to analyse sustainability from a relational point of view; to have engaging and meaningful discussions on the questions of ‘how we understand sustainability’ and ‘how we work together’; and to acknowledge that culture changes when people ‘show up the right way’, as Canadian engagement expert Tim Merry puts it (2014):

“People will not build relationships for the sake of it, in a professional setting. It starts with, say, a needed strategic intervention because a product line is tanking and there is the opportunity to launch this other one. Great. What’s the particular multi-stakeholder team we need to launch it? And suddenly we are in a conversation about the relationships we need in general, in order to do something new - to move toward sustainability for instance.

It is almost as if the purpose of doing the work was an excuse to learn how to be in relationship with each other again and how to figure things out together.”
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Peterson, Celia. 2014. Skype interview by authors. Sweden/Finland. 21st March.

Seale, Brendan. 2014. Skype interview by authors. Sweden/Canada. 4th April.


Titiz, Serra. 2014. Skype interview by authors. Sweden/Turkey. 3rd April.

Van Arkel, Geanne. 2014. Skype interview by authors. Sweden/The Netherlands. 7th April.
### Appendices

**Appendix A: Survey Questions & Interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Survey (For Confirmation of Interviewees)</th>
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<tr>
<td>* Required</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Question 1</strong> * :</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which option applies best to you?</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>(Choose one which is revealing your current situation.)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) I work / have worked within a company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) I work / have worked as a consultant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Neither a nor b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Question 2 if first answer is a (Company)  * :</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your company have 200 or more employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Yes, 250 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) No, less than 200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*<em>Question 2 if first answer is b Consultant</em> :</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you been involved in a change process towards sustainability for a large company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Information:**

**Can you confirm your full name?**

**What is your Skype user name?** *(Please write your e-mail address too, if we didn't reach you directly.)*

**When is a Skype call best suited for you?** *(Please write one or two time slots and...*
mention where you will be for time zone concern. Ex: March 20th Thursday between 11:00-11:45, Boston US time)

Can you confirm your email address?

---

**Interview Guide and Questions**

**Introduction (5mins)**

- Agreement to record the interview (confidential, can be anonymous)

- Briefly introduce the team and programme:

This is a thesis research towards completion of a master degree (MSLS) at BTH in Sweden

Names, origins. We have various interests, and it is an inter-disciplinary program.

- Explain the purpose of the interview

We are looking to get insights about the experience of sustainability practitioners who’ve had direct support or leadership roles in change towards sustainability, by which we mean projects, programs, policy development or other initiatives.

We would like to focus on the social interactions and dynamics with the company.

We want the practitioner’s personal experience to shine through, with all the challenges and victories of being part of the change process. We invite you to focus on one particular experience during that change process and share the story of what it was like for you.

- We will be asking semi-structured questions

- The interview will last about 45 minutes

- Allow interviewee to clarify any doubts about the interview

- Confirm any agreements made about confidentiality

**Let’s start the interview with some basics:**

1. What type of sustainability training do you have? (MSLS? TNS? other graduate programs? professional certificates?)

2. Can you please confirm the way in which you are/were involved in a change toward sustainability? Please briefly describe the type of change it was (policy, innovation program, collaborative project)?
3. At this point, how long have you been working in a sustainability role in this company? Was it in an external or internal? What was your position at that time? Broadly, what are/were your responsibilities?

We want to get the big picture first of the context. So let’s take that step back and look at the situation as it.

Sustainability in the company (how does it look like? what shape does it take?)

Lead question:

4. How does sustainability tie into the essence of what the company stands for, in your opinion? Put another way, how does it relate to the culture, shared values, policies, collective knowledge? Is sustainability important or is it a foreign concept to most?

(follow-up questions to go deeper)

5. How would you describe sustainability in the organisation? Is there common language around it? Is there consistency across the organization?

6. What form of sustainability training, if any, is given in the company?

7. Do the employees have opportunities or incentives to get engaged, learn, and take on responsibilities?

8. How do you describe the level of sustainability/CSR engagement throughout the organization?

9. Which of these processes has the company experienced until now: building sustainability strategy, sustainability structure, sustainability systems, programs and actions?

We now have a snapshot of sustainability in the company at the time in question. Next we are inviting you to think about the change initiative - the sustainability project or program you are working on in that broader context.

10. Broadly speaking, what do you encounter as challenges and opportunities for the initiative, in the structure of the organisation and your place in it?

11. What about interpersonal challenges and opportunities?

12. How do your and other employees’ / departments’ perception of the sustainability initiative, its value (and trade-offs or costs) differ or overlap?

We’d like your help mapping the interactions. Keep in mind formal and informal interactions are equally important...

Lead question:

13. Who are the stakeholders involved in the change initiative?
14. Who are the critical stakeholders you need while communicating the need for change, mobilizing others to support the change, and evaluating the change implementation?

(follow-up: try to have these covered)

15. Who else plays an important role in sustainability in the company, besides you?

16. What are your interactions with the core group of decision-makers?

17. Who do you have the most interactions with; in other words who do you work with?

18. Who did you talk to, get on board first? How did this connection occur?

19. Who are your to-go persons to increase buy-in for the initiative?

20. Who supports you in crisis or when roadblocks occur?

21. For change implementation part, who do you need in order to see whether the initiative worked and to determine the next steps?

22. Do you have relationships or interactions that were strategic for the initiative?

23. Are/were there any relationships or interactions supported by the company’s sustainability/CSR strategy (if exists)?

24. Who should be that isn’t involved?

25. What resources, external to your position, do you need in order to progress in sustainability initiatives?

26. How is your network important for the initiative?

(Individual change and lessons learned)

27. In your opinion, how have interactions and relationships influenced or changed you personally over the course of the project or program?

28. Are there patterns in what you experience in the interactions during this sustainability initiative?

(Optional question: having found that there are challenges and opportunities that keep coming up, both professionally and personally...)

29. Are there structures or practices that the organization can have in place to support your work on the initiative?
### Interview roles of Researchers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Interviewer</th>
<th>2nd Interviewer</th>
<th>1st transcriber</th>
<th>2nd transcriber</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leads the interview</td>
<td>Makes sure the form is answered</td>
<td>Does the transcription</td>
<td>Listens according to the form, finds the gaps, sends the Questions</td>
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### Interviewee Form

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<td>Date and time:</td>
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<td>Method:</td>
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<td>Cluster:</td>
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<td>MSLS/TNS:</td>
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<td>Experience company:</td>
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<td>How many employees:</td>
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<td>Sustainability training for employees:</td>
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<td>Level of Sustainability in the company:</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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<td>Importance of Sustainability:</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does sustainability relate to the culture, shared values, policies, and collective knowledge? Is it important or is it a foreign concept to most?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Position:</td>
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<td>Level of management position:</td>
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<td>Sustainability training at the time:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change Initiative:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges, Barriers of the initiative: (structure)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunities &amp; Enablers of the initiative:</td>
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<td>Who else plays an important role in sustainability in the company, besides you?</td>
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<td>Who are the critical internal stakeholders you need while communicating the need for</td>
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<td>How strategic:</td>
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<td>Do you have relationships or interactions that are strategic for the initiative?</td>
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<td>Are there patterns in what you experience in the interactions during this sustainability initiative?</td>
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<td>Are there structures or practices that the organization can have in place to support your work with others on the initiative?</td>
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Appendix B: Data Coding & Analysis

Data Analysis Guide 1

- Read the transcription (Take general notes)
- Write Quotes from transcriptions to related parts of the form
- Attach keywords / key phrases
- Group in larger categories / themes

Data Analysis Guide 2

- Repeat the process for 20 interviews
- Organize the data
- Group data
- Interpretation & illustration
- Telling the stories by descriptive examples

Emerging keywords / Categories
Consistencies & Differences
Ex: Consultants vs. practitioners
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