

Title: “The Business Guide to Sustainability: Practical Strategies and Tools for Organizations”

Author: Darcy Hitchcock & Marsha Willard

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Reading time: 4-6 hours (selected chapters)

Reading rating: 8

Overall rating: 3

Perhaps the first thing to note about “The Business Guide to Sustainability: Practical Strategies and Tools for Organizations” by Darcy Hitchcock and Marsha Willard is its timeliness. Talk of sustainability is suddenly blooming like a thousand biospheres across the land. The second point to note is—reach for the oxygen tank—the price: \$49.95 (in soft cover). Is the book worth it? Deep breath.

The concept of sustainability has been around for longer than you might guess. According to Wikipedia the term was first used in a book published in 1712 by a German forester and scientist. Other European scientists subsequently used the concept in association with the term “sustained yield forestry.”

Citing relatively recent reports, authors Hitchcock and Willard offer several contemporary definitions of sustainability—or sustainable development—including “meeting our needs while not compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs” and simply “living well within the limits of nature.”

Before diving into some other specifics of this book it is probably worth a paragraph or three to frame the context of this book.

The concept of sustainability is sympathetic to social causes that have been largely associated with the political left over the past several decades: the green movement, strong ecology, solutions to global warming, the Kyoto Protocol. However, despite this sympathy the authors are careful to draw a distinction.

Sustainability is different from the ecology movement, they point out, in that “it recognizes the need for a healthy economy.” And sustainability is no longer a fringe issue. As Hitchcock and Willard posit in an early chapter, “the fastest growing segment of the energy sector is wind power; in the travel industry, it’s ecotourism; in the investment community, it’s socially responsible investments; in agriculture, it’s organic farming.”

The timeliness of this book is fertilized by very recent news items. In October of this year the WWF and the Global Footprint Network made international headlines with the release of a scientific trend analysis declaring that by 2050 humanity will demand twice the amount of natural resources as the planet will be able to supply.

Even larger media headlines sprouted more recently in reaction to the Stern Report, written by a former vice president of the World Bank, which declared that impending climate change threatens “the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen” and predicting that inaction will lead to an economic depression greater than the Great One.

In response, and closer to home, several universities in the Asheville area have undertaken campus sustainability initiatives—including Warren Wilson, UNC Asheville, and, recently, Western Carolina University. And Asheville, of course, has long been known for its sustainability sensitivity. As recently as mid-November the public discussion surrounding the idea of growing a living roof on the Civic Center continued to stimulate the popular imagination.

This provides a convenient segue back to Hitchcock and Willard’s “Sustainability”, as one of the chapters in the book is titled “Sustainability in Government Agencies.” Yes, the chapter subheadings are predictable. They include, for example, conserve energy, employ green building practice, design effective public transportation, and “See the municipality as a whole system.”

What sets this book apart is the way the authors manage to build and maintain reader enthusiasm, or at least thoughtful consideration, through their use of examples, resource guides, occasional but appropriate statistics, and, at the conclusion of each chapter, a scoring rubric that attempts to assign points to level of effort directed towards sustainability across multiple categories.

At the conclusion of the chapter titled “Sustainability in Services and General Office Practices,” for example, the self-assessment scoring matrix addresses questions concerning office supplies, energy consumption, employee transportation, food services, and building remodeling. Does your place of business use recyclable materials? Does your employer promote alternative transportation? Does your business pay the full cost of public goods such as water and power?

Proponents of sustainability agree that businesses should take into account three realms of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental—domains that economists have referred to as the “triple bottom line” for years.

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