

Examining the Changing Sustainability Mindset in Practice

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This research explores the mindset among business executives concerning sustainability. Interviews were conducted in two rounds over eight years with non-profit hospice care executives. They were asked about their organization's sustainability efforts. Drawing on institutional and systems theories, it is predicted that a gradual change in their mindset will be observed. In the first round all executives thought of sustainability only in long-term financial terms. Eight years later their views had changed to include social elements of sustainability. As hypothesized, a slow change in executive mindset is occurring, however it is also being offset by ever-increasing short-term financial pressures.

Keywords: mindset, practices, hospice

INTRODUCTION

A mindset is a worldview relating to a concept comprised of assumptions about objects or ideas (Merriam-Webster, 2019). This research explores the mindset among business executives concerning sustainability. The contemporary approach toward sustainability focuses on triple bottom line of the firm (Elkington, 1997). The triple bottom line "captures the essence of sustainability by measuring the impact of an organization's activities on the world ... including both its profitability and shareholder values and its social, human and environmental capital" (Savitz, 2006). This approach gives equal weight to economic, environmental, and social dimensions. The basic premise of the triple bottom line performance is its voluntary nature which pays off in the form of competitive advantage for the sustainable firms (Porter, 1991).

In the twenty-first century, businesses are increasingly acknowledging that their policies and practices have societal consequences beyond the traditional short-term economic outcomes (Draman, 2016). This acknowledgement stems, in part, from the fact that businesses are increasingly financially impacted by a myriad of social and environmental costs. Many of these are associated with climate change; including water and food shortages, biodiversity loss and ecological damage, financial system insecurity, and resource scarcities that poses considerable social risk and negatively impact the stability and sustainability of the global population and economy (Gasbarro, Iraldo, & Daddi, 2017). The World Economic Forum's annual survey of business and government leaders named "the failure of climate change mitigation and adaptation" among the most likely and impactful risks to business in 2018 (World Economic Forum, 2018). Modern organizations also face instability risk, which includes interruptions associated with

shutdowns and supply chain disruption and operational cost increases due to rising heating/cooling costs which reduce profitability and therefore stock prices (CDP, 2014). There is even speculation in the scientific community that global climate change is linked to devastating infectious diseases like COVID-19 (Zohdy et al., 2019). These company-level costs aggregate into economy-level costs as well when we realize that companies are not accurately characterizing climate change risk in their reporting nor adequately preparing for its physical impacts (Goldstein, Turner, Gladstone, & Hole, 2019).

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding the assumptions executives have with the concepts surrounding sustainability as defined by the triple bottom line literature. In academics we tend to think of sustainability being comprised of three interrelated factors: economic, social, and environmental (Weybrecht, 2019). Sustainability is premised on creating economic value in a manner that also creates value for society in both social and environmental terms. It involves the interaction of social issues, institutions, and the impacts of management. This research explores whether this sustainability mindset is also shared by executives and how it may have changed over time.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

To evaluate how executives conceptualize and understand sustainability, we draw upon systems and institutional theories. System theory posits that organizations operate in ecosystems comprised of a multitude of interrelated components (Scott, 1981). Systems theory is effectively the study of society as a complex interaction of components as they relate to an even more intricate whole. This school of thought has a long history, dating from well over 100 years ago with the works of Emile Durkheim (1893/1997), among others. It is useful for understanding how multiple social factors connect and influence one another. For organizations to be successful they need to understand and consider how the sometimes seemingly disparate factors actually affect and are affected by each other (Starick & Rands, 1995).

Systems theory has been widely employed to explain and understand sustainability (c.f., Allen, 2019; Bowman et al., 2015). Given the myriad of external and internal factors impacting the long run sustainability of an organization and its actions, it is helpful to consider how all of the components interact and influence one another. For example, Michelon and Parbonetti (2012) found that ethical corporate governance enhances firm–stakeholder relationships by fostering sustainability. They consider good governance and sustainability as complementary mechanisms for better stakeholder management. Thus, systems-based thinking is necessary to develop a holistic and sustainable long-term future (Draman, 2016).

Institutional theory, on the other hand, is concerned with similarities among organizations. Unlike many other theories which seek to explain why organizations are different, institutional theory examines homogeneity. However, to refer to institutional theory as if it were a single theory is inaccurate; institutional theory can best be thought of as a collection of theories. While a common theme of these theories is the examination of the way in which institutions provide stability and meaning to social behavior, theories and theorists differ in explaining how this phenomenon occurs (Scott, 1995).

Based on Scott's (1987) examination of varying formulations of institutional theory, this study uses the version of the theory which emphasizes that institutionalized belief systems form a unique class of elements that can explain the existence and/or the continuation of organizational practices. Such belief systems provide the appropriate means of pursuing goals. Institutional environments are characterized by rules, requirements, values, and norms to which an organization must comply to receive legitimacy and support. Organizations are rewarded for using "proper" structures and following "appropriate" procedures. Institutional theory is useful to understand how sustainability mindsets spread. As executives receive similar training and face similar competitive pressures, they tend to come to resemble one another through isomorphism (Scott, 1995). For example, in the health care industry there has been a significant increase in the number of administrators and executives with training in business, bringing with them the common body of knowledge that comes from an undergraduate or Masters-level training in business administration (Castano, 2014).

The first step in influencing a sustainability mindset and implementing successful policies is to understand current thinking. How do executives think about sustainability? We need to understand their current sustainability mindset in order to achieve meaningful impact through our teaching and research. We need to begin by ‘broadening our sight’ in terms of the current level of thinking about sustainability among practicing executives.

METHODS

This study is set in the health care industry. The health care industry was chosen because over the past few decades the field has been one of the largest and fastest growing in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). It currently accounts for 17.9% of the United States’ gross domestic product (GDP) and is expected to reach 19.4% by 2027 (CMS, 2019). There have been several studies recent focused in sustainability in the health care industry, particularly for hospitals (cf., Mello, 2019). This study focuses on the sustainability mindset of executives in the non-profit hospice care segment of the health care industry. Hospices are in a sector of the health care industry that provides end-of-life care to dying patients. The emphasis is on palliative care rather than curative treatment, with the goal to provide the best quality of life to the patient and their families. This care is often provided in a patient’s home, hospital, nursing home, or specialized care unit.

Over 4,500 hospice programs have opened since 1974 (NHPCO, 2019). In 1975, hospices in the U.S. admitted about 1,000 patients. The first modern hospice to operate in the United States was The New Haven Hospice, which began in 1974. The federal government began providing hospice benefits over the next several years. Medicare began covering hospice care in 1983, and military hospitals and patients under the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS) began receiving hospice benefits in 1991. This was also the same year it was recommended for the Veteran’s Administration (Bennahum, 2003). By 2014, the number of patients admitted to hospice had climbed to over 1,600,000 (NHPCO, 2019). As hospice has developed, there has been an increase in utilization rates, improvements in insurance coverage, and increasingly innovative approaches to providing care.

As the population grows older, palliative care provision has become increasingly profitable. As of 2017, Medicare expenditures accounted for 20 percent of the total national health expenditures in the United States (CMS, 2019), with direct hospice costs accounting for 2.6% of Medicare expenditures (NHPCO, 2019). With the aging of the Baby Boomer segment of the population, Medicare expenses are expected to grow by 7.4% per year over the next ten years (CMS, 2019), with direct hospice expenditures currently increasing at 6.3% per year (NHPCO, 2019). In response to the rapid growth of the marketplace, the industry is experiencing a significant increase in the number of for-profit providers and an increase in the size of providers through acquisitions and mergers. Currently, for-profit hospices account for approximately two-thirds of the marketplace (NHPCO, 2019).

Traditionally, health care has been dominated by the logic of health care providers and has only had to face the pressures of other industries for the past few decades (Dranove, 2000). As a result, there has been an increase in business-training for executives to bring newer ways of thinking about the industry by adopting business models (Russo, 2013; Castano, 2014). The way in which hospice care organizations are run has also changed significantly over the past 40 years. These changes have primarily focused on improving the hospice organization’s efficiency in order to be more cost effective and competitive, while also becoming more patient-care focused in the delivery of care as a means of better responding to the needs of patients and their families (Pietroburgo & Wernet, 2004).

The data for this study comes from interviews with non-profit hospice care executives. To control for differences in the competitive landscape, licensing, and regulations from state to state, all interviews were conducted in one state in the United States, which contains a total population of 37 Medicare-certified non-profit hospice agencies. The study was conducted in two rounds, approximately eight years apart. The initial round of interviews were conducted in 2010. The hospice executives were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of competitive pressures and sustainability issues facing their organizations. In 2018-2019, they were contacted again for a follow-up round of questions. The people

holding the same positions at the same organizations were asked the same series of questions in order to see if their perceptions of the competitive landscape and sustainability had changed over the time period.

Round 1

In 2010, interviews were conducted with 29 executives, all of them at the President, CEO, or director level, for a sampling rate of 78% of the total population. The participants were not specifically asked their ages or sex, but approximately two-thirds were female and the vast majority appeared to be between 35-60 years of age. This executive sample allowed an exploration of how practicing senior leaders understand sustainability and what actions their organizations have taken to operate in a more sustainable manner. Sustainability was not defined, nor were participants given any specific examples of sustainable actions. Executives were asked what actions their organizations were undertaking in order to operate in a more sustainable manner.

Round 1 utilized open-ended questions to gain a sense of how executives understand the concept of sustainability. The analysis for this studies consisted of finding themes in the data and clustering the responses utilizing the three general categories identified by the AACSB for overall structure and grounding (Huberman & Miles, 1994). As recommended by Heilman (1976), a collaborative analysis with a colleague familiar with the subject followed the initial independent analysis. After individually assigning the data to broad and general thematic categories, we came together to discuss the categories, identify points of agreement and disagreement, and reach a consensus about a list of common elements. Lastly, an independent judge reviewed the initial team categorization for consistency and validity (Bogdan, & Biklen, 1992). Through this analysis, a basic picture emerged of their assumptions and how they defined and understood sustainability. The 29 interviewees discussed a total of 69 different themes, which were further distilled into five broad categories. The following sections provide the percentage of comments in each category, as well as representative excerpts from the data, illustrating typical responses.

Improving the Quality of Services and Programs

Thirty-six percent of the comments discussed how the organization had invested in quality improvements, employee training, and the addition of new employee skill-sets as a means of becoming more financially sustainable. Specifically, comments included assumptions around investing in strong clerical support, becoming members of state and national organizations, efficiency training, and “continuing to provide the best quality of care possible.”

Reducing Expenses

Twenty-six percent of the comments addressed ways the organization had attempted to reduce their expenses in order to be more financially viable in the long run. The executives discussed actions like “monitor costs in specific areas to move in [the] direction of doing more with less” and “all efforts are toward doing long term things that reduce costs.”

Seeking Feedback

Nineteen percent of the comments concerned activities directed at seeking feedback, benchmarking, and improving awareness of various financial outcomes. The executives made statements like “became cognizant of [the] percentage of revenues for each cost category,” “use benchmarks as model guides,” and “[employ] best practices to eliminate waste.”

Increasing the Customers

Fourteen percent of the comments covered ways the organization had sought to increase their customer base as a way of improving their revenues. Some sample comments include “increased marketing and trying to reinvent a good product,” “create new feeder programs,” and “[improve] outreach to the community.”

Increasing Financial Reserves

Four percent of the comments mentioned programs designed to improve the organization's financial reserves to allow them to better weather downturns. While none of them discussed specifics in this area due to the sensitive nature of this material, a few commented that they "built cash reserves," "increased reserves," and "built up financial reserves."

Synthesis of Round 1

When considering the three overarching categories of sustainability (corporate financial performance, social concerns, and environmental impact), every theme identified by every hospice executive focused solely on corporate financial performance (profits). None of them appeared to consider people or planet when talking about ways their organization had become more sustainable. Instead, they repeatedly asked, "does this give us financial sustainability and longevity?" They often talked about their collective "slowness to move to a viable business model" and the need for "further efficiencies."

What is interesting is that the hospice executives interviewed appear to be aware of broader environmental and social factors. For example, it was observed that there were hybrid vehicles in the parking lots and recycling bins throughout the offices. Several organizations also had pamphlets on their community outreach programs designed to improve quality of life for the community, not just their patients. Some of the executives discussed their personal involvement in a variety of charitable organizations. However, as a collective, the executives interviewed did not seem to make the connection between these activities and business sustainability as defined by the triple bottom line. They know about 'being green' and helping to build a better community, but sustainability is only about long-term financial viability.

Round 2

As institutional theory posits, we should see increased isomorphism due to the spread of business school trained executives. In the roughly eight years between the two interviews we expect to see an improved level of understanding of the interconnectedness of the factors involved in sustainability. Our proposition will be supported if we find the spread of a sustainability mindset among health care executives.

The same procedures and methodology used for the Phase 1 survey conducted in 2010 were for Phase 2 in 2018-2019. The people holding the same positions as in the 2010 interviews were contacted again. This time interviews were conducted with 15 hospice executives, all of them at the President, CEO, or director level, which represents a sampling rate of 41% of the population. The participants were not specifically asked their ages or sex, but approximately half were female and the vast majority appeared to be between 40-65 years of age. The executives were asked what actions their organizations were undertaking in order to operate in a more sustainable manner. However, sustainability was not defined, nor were participants given any specific examples of sustainable actions so as to not bias their responses.

Like in the first round, Round 2 also utilized open-ended questions. The analysis for this studies consisted of finding themes in the data and clustering the responses utilizing the three general categories identified by the AACSB for overall structure and grounding (Huberman & Miles, 1994). As recommended by Heilman (1976), a collaborative analysis with a colleague familiar with the subject followed the initial independent analysis. After individually assigning the data to broad and general thematic categories, we came together to discuss the categories, identify points of agreement and disagreement, and reach a consensus about a list of common elements. Lastly, an independent judge reviewed the initial team categorization for consistency and validity (Bogdan, & Biklen, 1992). Through this analysis, a basic picture emerged of their assumptions and how they defined and understood sustainability. This time the 15 interviewees discussed a total of 47 different themes, which were further distilled into five broad categories. The following sections provide the percentage of comments in each category, as well as representative excerpts from the data, illustrating typical responses.

Reducing Expenses

Thirty-eight percent of the responses discussed efforts to reduce organizational expenses. This represented the largest category of comments. Sample comments include “better financial analysis,” “renegotiating supplier contracts,” “closely monitor overtime,” and “decrease non patient-related costs.”

Improving Internal Business Activities

Thirty-six percent of the comments dealt with improving a variety of internal business processes. These comments included “maintain alignment with large health care system,” “partner with non-profit hospital to accept all non-funded patients,” “expand leadership training,” and “use more data to drive operations.”

Increasing Marketing Efforts

Thirteen percent of the comments focused on increasing the organization’s marketing efforts. Statements included “learn to tell our story better,” expansion of social media presence,” and “tougher marketing.”

Improving Community Involvement

Ten percent of the comments concerned activities directed at improving involvement with the community. The respondents made statements like “increase community presence,” “use benchmarks as model guides” and “offer educational programs to the community.”

Improving “Sustainability”

Two percent of the comments focused directly of sustainability programs. The lone comment was “formulation of a Board-driven sustainability taskforce.”

Synthesis of Round 2

When again considering the three overarching categories of sustainability (corporate financial performance, social concerns, and environmental impact), the vast majority of the themes identified by the executive respondents focused solely on corporate financial performance (profits). This segment accounted for eighty-eight percent of all of the comments. Ten percent of the comments dealt with the community improvement segment of sustainability (people). Finally, one respondent made one comment about putting all elements of sustainability together to create a sustainability taskforce. While most of the executives focus on financial sustainability and longevity, a few are seeing a relationship between this and improved community involvement. However, none of the executives mentioned anything about their organization’s environmental impact or the importance of the physical environment on their success.

DISCUSSION

As posited by both institutional theory and systems theory, in the eight years between the two rounds of this study we have witnessed a small movement towards an integrated, systems-based thinking towards sustainability. In the first round of interviews conducted in 2010, every comment by every executive focused solely on the financial aspects of sustainability. They seemed to conceptualize sustainability only in terms of financial longevity and were not making any connections between community development and environmental stewardship and their long-term financial viability. We suspect that this was due to ever-increasing financial pressures faced by the industry, such as a dramatic increase in the number of for-profit hospices and changes in federal reimbursement (NHPCO, 2019). These pressures have been causing the executives to ‘double-down’ on financial performance and see environmental and social programs as short-term costs to be minimized rather than long-term opportunities and benefits to be achieved.

However, in the second round conducted in 2018-19, we are seeing a small increase in the perceptions of interconnectedness of the sustainability components among hospice care executives, which

is consistent with systems thinking. Five of the responses discussed community outreach efforts or liaising with external stakeholders. They are increasingly seeing the importance of developing community relations and improving community awareness as being important aspects of sustainability. Additionally, one of the executives specifically discussed the importance of establishing a Board-led sustainability taskforce. This seems to indicate an awareness of the importance of taking a more holistic view of sustainability and it being important enough to their long-term success to justify the efforts of the board of directors. Effectively we are seeing a small movement towards including the 'people' component of sustainability with the 'profit' component.

However, none of the executives explicitly connected financial performance with efforts to operate in a more environmentally sustainable manner. Just like during the 2010 round of interviews, the executives seem to be aware of the importance of environmental responsibility. Whether it was driving more environmentally friendly vehicles, using recycling bins, or refillable water bottles, some small personal efforts were being made to reduce resource consumption. However, this does not seem to transition to the organizational mindset of environmental consciousness and sustainability. Again, we suspect that the increasing financial pressures to 'do more with less' are driving this. Almost every executive mentioned that the biggest trends facing the industry were the rapid influx of for-profit hospices and reductions in federal reimbursement (cf., NHPCO, 2019). Although there are many opportunities for improving sustainability in health care organizations (Mello, 2019), these ever-cognizant pressures may be causing the executives to focus on short-run financial performance and see environmental efforts as long-run investments that may not pay off enough to justify their costs.

This seems to mirror related research findings. Executives are aware of systems-based components of sustainability, but in practice they focus almost exclusively on improving the financial components of the business. According to a 2011 McKinsey survey 3,203 for-profit business executives discussed how they understand complex systems and manage sustainability. Their mindset defined sustainability as a combination of environmental, social, and governance issues. Compared to prior surveys, respondents reported a well-rounded understanding of sustainability and its expected benefits. While they expect to gain benefits associated with their corporate reputation, they also expect operational and growth-oriented benefits in the areas of cutting costs and pursuing opportunities in new markets and products. However, the areas where most executives say their companies are taking action are reducing energy usage and reducing waste in operations, ahead of reputation management (McKinsey, 2011).

Assuming our goal as both organizational scholars and educators is to improve the sustainability efforts of businesses, the first step in influencing a sustainability mindset and implementing successful policies is to understand current thinking. How do executives currently think about sustainability? We need to understand their current sustainability mindset in order to achieve meaningful impact through our teaching and research. We need to begin by making their invisible mindset visible and broadening their sight.

A second step is measurement. There are several approaches to designing a triple bottom line framework that includes stakeholder input: developing a decision matrix to incorporate public preferences into project planning and decision-making (Soderbaum, 1982); companies can also utilize a "narrative format" to solicit shareholder participation and comprehensive project evaluation, (Satterfield, Slovic and Gregory, 2000); or have stakeholders rank and weigh components of a sustainability framework according to community priorities (Sheppard & Meitner, 2005). Despite the acknowledgment of its importance; however, sustainability measurement is still a voluntary act for firms in most parts of the world (Cheng & Courtenay, 2006).

A third area is reporting the results of sustainability practices to stakeholders. Triple bottom line reporting can act as an instrument to clarify and define what is meant by social, economic and environment activities. Transparency and accountability for economic, environmental and social corporate performance are the core notions embedded in the triple bottom line. While relatively few companies formally issue triple bottom line reports, the interest is growing across the business community (Goel, 2010).

Additionally, sustainability and the triple bottom line is not limited to for-profit companies. Some non-profit organizations have adopted a sustainability mindset and have partnered with private firms to address broad sustainability issues that impact their stakeholders. This relationship can provide mutual benefits. The non-profits gain business expertise and the for-profit companies see legitimacy gains by aligning with nonprofit organizations, particularly those nonprofits with goals of economic prosperity, social well-being and environmental protection (Fell, 2007). In Round 2 of this study, we found evidence of this very practice. Some of the executives mentioned efforts to partner with other firms to improve efficiencies and coordination throughout the value chain.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has some significant strengths, namely its qualitative and longitudinal nature. However there are some limitations. The most important being the limited sample size. Because this study focused only on non-profit hospice executives in one southwestern state there is a limited population. Additionally, the need to follow up eight years later with the people holding the same positions further limited the available pool. Further research could attempt to broaden the pool to include other regions of the country and other industries. It is possible that the competitive pressures in other industries are different than in the hospice segment of the health care industry, thereby leading to differing assessments of the importance of the components of sustainability.

CONCLUSION

At the time the first round of this study began, Hubbard (2009) noted that triple bottom line thinking had not been widely accepted by practicing managers. He suggested that dominant economic thinking may be in part to blame. This was further evidenced by an exhaustive PricewaterhouseCoopers survey conducted around the same time of 1,198 CEOs across 52 countries which revealed that 62 percent of them were not very concerned or not concerned at all about global climate change (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008). Executives tend to focus on financial definitions without considering social and environmental issues. Given the importance to shake off old ways of thinking as broaden our sight, it is critical that executives and students, as future business leaders, learn about the importance of integrating all three components of sustainability. In the roughly eight years that passed between the two rounds of interviews, the increasing institutional pressures towards sustainability have born some fruit. Although the movement is small, we are seeing health care executives begin to see the interconnection of other external factors to financial performance. An increased adoption of triple bottom line measures of performance may help this development. While there is still a long way to go to fully realize a systems-based perspective on sustainability, there are some small promising signs that the process has begun.

This research will potentially benefit organizational scholars interested in how executives think about sustainability as well as health care researchers exploring factors affecting long-term organizational success. We, as scholars and educators, will benefit from a richer understanding of how practicing executives think about sustainability so that we can better refine our research and instruction to promote sustainability efforts and help us 'broaden our sight' to see the importance of system interdependence for long-term success. Making the current invisible sustainability mindset visible is a necessary precondition to helping us understand how firms can simultaneously promote all elements of sustainability, including financial performance.

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