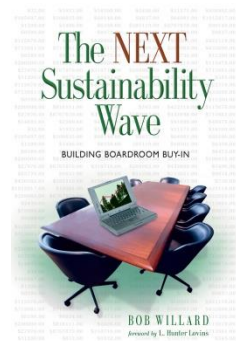


Making sustainability mainstream

Not everyone's convinced that sustainability belongs on the agendas of the C-suites. *The NEXT Sustainability Wave* explains how it is becoming a strategic imperative

A review of The NEXT Sustainability Wave: Building Boardroom Buy-In, by Bob Willard, 2005, 368 pages

Reviewed by Anne Papmehl



Most people who retire after 34 years of service with a company spend their days indulging in leisurely pursuits. Not Bob Willard. This Ontario resident and IBM retiree has launched not one post-retirement career but three: author, scholar and environmental activist. However, Willard's environmental activism is guided by his insider's knowledge of business management. His goal is to show business professionals how proper environmental stewardship can enhance profits.

His first book, *The Sustainability Advantage: Seven Business Case Benefits of a Triple Bottom Line*, published in 2002, was one of the first books to quantify the business benefits of environmental sustainability.

His second book, *The NEXT Sustainability Wave: Building Boardroom Buy-In*, published this year, in conjunction with his doctoral thesis, explains how to achieve those bottom line benefits, and, more importantly, how to sell the idea to very skeptical and busy senior executives. One could easily call it a sustainability sales manual, but that would do a disservice to the scholarly rigor and research that supports the book. A more appropriate description would be a business field guide that gives sustainable business advocates the tools to bring sustainability into the business mainstream.

Common Goals

Willard hopes to bring sustainability into the mainstream by explaining the goals environmental activists and business professionals actually have in common. He has nothing against the profit motive. On the first page of the book, he identifies a common goal among corporations, societies and the environment to survive and prosper and be sustainable enterprises, social systems and ecological systems, respectively.

But Willard is equally cognizant of the world's troubling ecological challenges, and their risks to business. He asks rhetorically: "Are the sustainability goals of corporations,

societies and the environment mutually sustainable? If not, who dominates this complex and dynamic interplay of systems?"

The answer is clear. "Business is a direct or indirect contributor to most 21st century ecological and social challenges." The solution? Sustainability strategies that give corporations the opportunity to get ahead of the curve, define new rules, and be rewarded by their stakeholders for behaving responsibly. Bringing sustainability into the mainstream, considered this way, is simply good for the environment, society and the long-term survival of the business.

Of course, it's not easy to change the mindset that sees environmental stewardship as the cost of doing business rather than a bottom line enhancer. Willard spends considerable time analyzing why companies have resisted for so long sustainable strategies that could profit both the planet and the firm.

Finding a common language

The trouble with sustainability and its many semantic cousins, like corporate social responsibility, corporate responsibility and environmental stewardship, is that the terms carry more of a 'saving the planet' than 'saving the business' connotation. For this reason, hard-core bottom-line only types find it hard to accept sustainability as a business driver.

Willard learned this from professional experience. In 1997 he wrote a letter (excerpted in the book) to then-president of IBM, Lou Gerstner, asking him to embed sustainable development into IBM's business strategy for the good of the company and the planet. "It failed," writes Willard. "My proposal was treated as a philanthropic request, not as a strategic business suggestion." But Willard learned a valuable lesson. "This frustrating experience reminded me that it is important to speak executives' language and relate any proposition to their current business challenges."

Saving the planet doesn't make the list of what results drive a company these days. Here's what does: revenue improvement, expense reduction, profit, share price, growth, market share, leadership, vision, attracting and retaining good customers, good employees, regulatory compliance and quality of products and service, and a host of others enumerated by Willard in the introduction.

The good news, says Willard, is that sustainability is a means to achieve these business ends, and he provides a wealth of information on how to help business decision makers see that, in a language they understand. Sustainability proponents "need to help executives tune into the WII-FM (What's in it – For Me?) instead of WII-FW (What's in it – For the World)."