

# Engaging People

## Organisational development for a sustainable society

*Transforming our organisations or our clients' organisations into pioneers at the vanguard of creating a sustainable society is not easy, but some people are giving it a go. Penny Walker spoke to three people who are using insights from the world of organisational development to push the boundaries.*

### Organisational Development (OD)

OD is a long-range effort to improve an organisation's problem solving and renewal processes particularly through more effective and collaborative management of organisational culture. (Wikipedia) Its focus is on how the organisation goes about its work.

### Listening as communicating

Jim Hopwood's degree was in engineering and he worked in a series of management roles in the chemical industry. He specialised in environmental management later, and is an MIEMA. His organisation started on the organisational development road very early. This was useful to him when he was supervising a group of technical experts.

"People don't behave like bits of machinery. Claiming overriding authority for your concerns doesn't work. The most important thing I did was to get the experts to listen to other people, their concerns and priorities. The quid pro quo is that they then listen to yours."

Organisational development (OD) had helped generate a culture of learning and listening. OD workshops helped doubts, assumptions and cynicism to surface, and results included a clearer statement of values and priorities. Hopwood says, "Messages mostly don't get through the first time. You need to give people the opportunity to talk it through and flush out where the changes are working and where they're not. In small groups managers can be questioned openly about whether they really mean it, and can confirm that yes, they do!"

### Climbing Mount Sustainability

Interface is an organisation where the top people say – again and again – that they really mean it. Charismatic CEO Ray Anderson is well-known on the lecture circuit. He calls Interface's journey 'climbing Mount Sustainability'. The commitment is to whole-organisation transformation, with talk of becoming not just a sustainable but a 'restorative' enterprise. This kind of strategic approach to sustainable development goes hand-in-hand with a sophisticated understanding of how to create the right organisational culture.

### Interface Vision

To be the first company that, by its deeds, shows the entire industrial world what sustainability is in all its dimensions: people, process, product, place and profits by 2020 and in doing so we will become restorative through the power of influence.

I saw this first-hand when working with Interface in the mid 90s. The strong organisational development approach included the infamous high ropes course, with people jumping off poles to help develop teamwork and courage.

Interface understands its place as a sub-system within a wider system – that's cutting-edge organisational theory – and faces up to what that implies. In their case this includes an explicit aim to help 'redesign commerce' to help achieve sustainable development.

Nigel Stansfield is Interface FLOR's Innovations Director, and he talked to me about a twin-track approach, with incremental operational improvements being made at the same time as creating imaginative visions of the future.

Interface has brought together a group of sustainability thinkers from different disciplines – biochemistry, architecture, education – and got them talking freely with its technical and financial specialists. The focus of those conversations was

what sustainable flooring would look like at the top of Mount Sustainability – as Stansfield put it, the Valhalla of flooring. From that inspiring and idealistic view of the future, product and service ideas emerged which are being taken forward in the business.

For more immediate improvements, Interface has developed an internal tool based on streamlined life-cycle analysis, which designers use to assess products against an index of environmental performance. The software enables them to play around with different formulations and designs, seeing which give the biggest environmental improvements. High-performing new products and targeted improvements to existing products means that the portfolio of products continuously improves. The tool has shown the importance of transportation in a product's impact, a reminder of how sometimes the change needed goes beyond the boundaries of the organisation. That's not a reason for not doing it, however, and a project in Europe is looking at miles travelled per m<sup>2</sup> of carpet. Shipments from their Scherpenzeel factory to Rotterdam now take place by barge.

### Climate change responses

From his practical, direct experience, David Ballard has developed a framework for assessing where an organisation is now in its response to climate change (mitigation and adaptation). And, Ballard says, most of them are "largely missing the point".

Ballard's early career was in general management. In 1990 he took on the environmental management role at Thorn EMI, before ISO14001 and when reporting was in its infancy. "It was an exciting time, and there were lots of opportunities to improve things." He quickly got to work, creating a closed loop recycling system for EPS packaging waste and removing ozone-depleting substances to the equivalent of 250,000 tonnes of

carbon dioxide emissions in the supply chain. Award-winning environmental reporting followed, giving the Chairman “something to be proud of”.

But, says Ballard, “the more I worked on environmental issues, the more serious the issues seemed to be. Our responses – although ahead of the field – were clearly not good enough. It seemed to me that the issues were so important that a business as usual approach wasn’t enough and that step change was needed”.

A decade and a half later, Ballard sounds dismayed to see the same lacklustre responses in most businesses and public bodies. “It’s not enough to get strategy changed, in government or business – you have to make sure it gets implemented.” In his consultancy work, Ballard has insisted on access to the client’s main board and that climate change be tackled as a strategic issue.

How has understanding organisational development helped his work? “Most change processes in the environmental field assume that change is straightforward and mechanical, as if the organisation is a machine. Then change stalls and people don’t understand why. But if you see the organisation as a system, then you realise that you need to look at the underlying system and find the problem there. If you see change as a process of people learning, then you realise that you need to

intervene to change the way people think and what they learn.”

Most importantly, “you have to see change as something that you do too – where you are, to yourself and your own system”. People need to believe that change is possible, and ask themselves “under what circumstances can we make this change happen?” and then work to create those circumstances. This may involve spotting the right opportunities to make technical, capital changes and bringing the right people together. “When trying harder doesn’t help, you need to try something different.”

He has developed diagnostic frameworks to help people assess where their organisation is and to identify the critical next steps along nine pathways for transformation. “People don’t necessarily need to understand the theory of change, but they do need a route map to the next step. That’s what we’ve developed.”

## Next steps?

If you’d like to flex your OD muscles, then there are a number of next steps. Hopwood advises: “Build up your listening skills. Run small-group discussions, perhaps with outside facilitators working with hand-picked insiders who can progressively do more of the facilitation and build up their skills and experience over time.” He recommends ‘Making a Difference’ a

book which he credits with helping him see organisations in a new light.

Hopwood also runs the IEMA accredited programme ‘Sustainable Leadership’ with Chris Bull Associates. “The Sustainable Leadership workshop is designed for Environmental Managers, Sustainability Coordinators and anyone who leads a team of staff or volunteers in the general area of sustainable development. We focus on the skills needed to involve, enthuse and get results through others.”

Hopwood and Ballard have both contributed to the current Sustainable Development special edition of ‘Organisations & People’, a peer-reviewed journal in the OD field. For more details see [www.penny-walker.co.uk/id24.html](http://www.penny-walker.co.uk/id24.html)

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[www.interfaceflor.eu](http://www.interfaceflor.eu)  
\* ‘Making a Difference: Strategies and Tools for Transforming Your Organisation’ by Bruce Nixon, Management Books, 2001.



## The BS8555/Acorn Scheme Workbook

This joint IEMA/BSI publication provides a user-friendly companion document for SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises) and larger organisations wishing to implement an Environmental Management System (EMS) using the process outlined in BS 8555 *Environmental management systems - Guide to the phased implementation of an environmental management system including the use of environmental performance evaluation*.

Volume one covers Phases 1-3, giving practical help and support. Further details can be found overleaf.

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