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A permaculture primer: Using eco-theory to promote knowledge acquisition, dissemination and use in the sales organization

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ABSTRACT

Responding to evidence in Dixon and Adamson's (2011) "Challenger Sale" that the sales management system employed by most of today's sales organizations failed to detect and respond to significant changes in the sales environment years ago, this research examines the concept of sales system sustainability. Borrowing from the field of eco-science where the concept of sustainability has been largely developed, this theoretical research introduces Holmgren's (2002) permaculture principles to the sales literature and offers a conceptual application of these principles in the context of industrial selling. It posits that application of these principles will aid the sales organization's acquisition, dissemination and application of knowledge, effectively positioning the organization for greater endurance and sustainability going forward. In addition to offering managerial implications throughout, this paper concludes by providing a road map for future research inquiry.

1. Introduction

Environmental scientists first introduced the concept of permaculture a generation ago and with it emerged the now oft-used term, "sustainability." In eco-science, sustainability refers to the desirable state of a living system whereby conditions are favorable for long-term viability. Today market forces largely encourage the adoption of solutions that are environmentally sustainable. Activists encourage producers and developers to use materials that do not upset the sustainability of surrounding ecosystems and consumers are prompted to choose sustainable products. Some large corporations have created the position of "Chief Sustainability Officer" (Strand, 2014) and have adopted pro-sustainability messages and platforms (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). Other employers actively consider the benefit of hiring "green collar workers" who value sustainable business practices (Harvey, Bosco, & Gregory, 2010). On the academic side, business researchers herald the ethics of taking steps to support environmental sustainability (c.f. Chakrabarty & Wang, 2012) and dedicate a great deal of time urging organizations to simultaneously pursue financial profitability and environmental and societal advancement and sustainability, or what has become known as the "triple bottom line" (Elkington, 1998).

However, while the term sustainability has become commonplace, its focus has become somewhat limited. Hollingworth (2009) points out that relative to the amount of time spent studying environmental sustainability, considerably less effort has been dedicated to understanding organizational system sustainability. This distinction is worth noting; whereas environmental sustainability considers the design and long-term viability of eco-systems, organizational system sustainability considers the design and long-term viability of various organizational systems. Accordingly, Hollingworth (2009) and others (c.f. Porter & Kramer, 2006) contend that sustainability's focus needs to be broadened and suggests that scholars could advance our understanding of the latter through better consideration of the former. These researchers believe that doing so will enable companies to better appreciate whether their human resource infrastructure is sustainable and designed for the long-term, whether they have sustainable relationships with other members of their community and whether the company's various marketing, sales, logistics and management systems are sustainable.

This last point should resonate with sales researchers: in their international best-selling book "The Challenger Sale," Dixon and Adamson (2011) provide evidence that most business-to-business sales organizations have been using sales strategies that are not sustainable. Their central premise is that the recent financial crisis revealed that sales organizations suffer from an outdated understanding of what constitutes effective customer relationship building and that they must fundamentally "evolve" or be "left behind" (p. 13). Specifically, Dixon and Adamson (2011) analyze a dataset of over 6000 business-to-business sales reps to reveal that while sales organizations have spent years designing a sales system aimed at producing salespeople who are "relationship builders," the stereotypical relationship builder is among the worst type of sales performer in today's market. While these researchers offer a specific prescription for how to evolve to meet the ***present*** environment, the more sobering point is that many sales organizations never noticed that their approach had apparently fallen significantly out-of-touch several years ago. In effect, it appears the sales

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systems within these organizations had effectively stopped learning: the customer had redefined what it was looking for in a salesperson but the sales system had failed to acquire, share and act upon this vital market information. For companies who are committed to not repeating this mistake going forward, it is critical to understand that the key to sales system sustainability is continuous learning through better knowledge acquisition, dissemination and use (A-D-U).

Environmental scientists explain that A-D-U plays a critical role in eco-system sustainability. For example, research on "food forests" indicates that when plants are left to grow on their own, they exhibit a tendency to grow in clumps. What may look like a disorganized mess to the uninformed observer is actually an outcome of system learning. This "lumpy texture" drives up bird and insect population diversity, while also discouraging destructive pest activity. In effect, as a result of these naturally occurring interactions, the ecosystem is self-learning by gathering information, disseminating it and acting upon it, thus enhancing the sustainability of the system. Observations like these motivated Mollison and Holmgren (1978) to develop a set of eco-system design principles aimed at improving sustainability; they call this collection of principles "permaculture." While those examining environmental system sustainability have studied these principles a good deal over the years, more recently researchers from other disciplines have demonstrated that the principles of permaculture can be used to address sustainability in various organizational systems. Aspects of permaculture have been borrowed by organizational scientists (c.f. Wirtenberg, Lipsky, Abrams, Conway, & Slepian, 2007), applied econometricians (c.f. Rota, Reynolds, & Zanasi, 2012), supply chain (c.f. Wolf, 2014), corporate finance (c.f. Soppe, 2004) and strategy researchers (c.f. Bansal, 2005), among others.

The present research asks: can the principles of permaculture be applied to business-to-business selling to help the sales system better acquire, disseminate and use information? In response, this research introduces Holmgren's (2002) permaculture principles to the sales literature and offers a conceptual application of these principles, in effect, providing a new lens through which sales researchers and managers can view sales system design and understand how design is critical for system sustainability. As this research will elaborate, the permaculture framework uniquely pulls together system design elements like sales technology with previously unexplored constructs like mutual support guilds, the finance-accounting-technology interface and a "psychological climate for innovation." In so doing, the research synthesizes and organizes what might otherwise be disconnected tactics into a sound strategy for sales system design. As will be explained, a permaculture approach will encourage better observation of the macro-environment, heightened self-regulation, greater receptivity to feedback and a slower, more deliberate process for executing solutions, which will facilitate better knowledge acquisition, dissemination and use. Because permaculture is rooted in the view that some simple but purposeful steps in terms of system design can encourage the sustainability of the system, the emphasis of this research is on the sales manager as sales system designer and, as such, will endeavor to challenge sales managers to apply these design principles to their sales organizations.

The roadmap for this theoretical research is as follows: after briefly reviewing the history of permaculture, explaining its key tenets and how it has been integrated into other business disciplines, we will offer a conceptual model positing that application of these principles will encourage greater knowledge acquisition, dissemination and use in the business-to-business sales organization. The research will conclude by offering implications for practitioners and a roadmap for future scholarly inquiry.

2. A brief history of permaculture

Permaculture is an approach for designing eco-systems that is based around the concept of sustainability (Mollison & Holmgren, 1978). Defined as consciously designing landscapes that mimic the patterns found in nature, the concept posits that a permaculture-based system will demonstrate a propensity for internal learning, self-renewal and sustainability (Holmgren, 2002; Jacke & Toensmeier, 2005; Mollison & Holmgren, 1978). Permaculture's focus is on mindful and purposeful system design; its central premise is that when human beings can design systems that capitalize on the system components' inherent abilities and the natural interactions between these subcomponents, the system will be more resilient, enduring and sustainable. In this sense, the philosophy behind permaculture is that by adhering to a set of design principles, man-created eco-systems or cultures will enjoy greater permanence.

2.1. The principles of permaculture

Permaculture pioneer, David Holmgren (2002), offers 12 design principles. They are briefly explained here and listed in Table 1.

(1) ***Observe and interact.*** If individuals want to create man-made systems that are sustainable, Holmgren (2002) suggests that this must begin by gaining an intimate knowledge of how the components of the system exist and naturally interact. This approach is essential for "discovery" and will motivate new – even "heretical" – insights that are critical for long-term thinking and problem-solving.

(2) ***Catch and store energy.*** System designers should aim to replicate nature's ability to gather today what might be needed tomorrow. As when a root system collects water to use later, landscape design should aim to exploit natural efficiencies. Hugelkultur is a practical application of this tenet and involves burying large quantities of wood in the ground that will, over time, decompose and soak up rainwater (Thorpe, 2014). The decomposed wood enables the soil to better absorb and retain natural moisture that is needed during dry seasons.

(3) ***Obtain a yield.*** Systems should be designed such that what is labored for and produced is enjoyed. A garden should be designed with the goal of enabling the gardener to gain an abundant supply of vegetables that can be picked and eaten.

(4) ***Apply self-regulation and accept feedback.*** Effective system design discourages inappropriate activity and promotes the ongoing functionality of the system. In agriculture, the use of sheet-mulching demonstrates this principle. Instead of introducing external herbicides to prevent the growth of undesirable plants that could choke out competing desirables, organic sheet mulch can mimic what naturally occurs on forest floors, effectively starving the undesirable of light and discouraging its growth.

(5) ***Use and value renewable resources and services.*** Systems should exploit inherent efficiencies. For example, landscape design should situate a garden so as to maximize on-site water capture (as opposed to requiring additional watering from an external source).

(6) ***Produce no waste.*** Sustainable systems are mindful of the reality that the waste of one organism in the eco-system is food for another. In a garden, bushes and trees will cyclically shed their leaves and these leaves will decay, providing food for earthworms and helping to enrich the soil.

(7) ***Design from patterns to details.*** Holmgren (2002) posits that careful observation and reflection can uncover nature's patterns. System designers should use these patterns as the basis for their design. For example, beekeeping businesses have observed a pattern among honey-producing bees; bees typically prefer to expand their brood nest as an integrated whole and to have space at the edge of the brood nest for nectar. Observing this, smart hive managers allow the bees to maintain these patterns to maximize productivity.

(8) ***Integrate rather than segregate.*** Well-designed systems place complementary system components in close proximity;

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