# Holistic Environmental Leadership: Living Sustainably Beyond 9-to-5

## Mark Starik

**George Washington University**
**School of Business**
**Department of Strategic Management and Public Policy**
**Environmental and Social Sustainability Initiative**
**Washington, D.C. 20052[1]**

Most contributors to and readers of this journal and volume probably consider themselves leaders in some aspects of environmental issues. We environmental researchers, teachers, practitioners, students, writers, and activists pride ourselves in performing a vital service for society — finding, processing, and acting on information we think will positively influence our stakeholders to adopt more environmentally-sound decisions and behaviors. And, without a doubt, this is a vitally important, and often successful, endeavor. But, we environmental leaders might also on occasion wonder whether we're doing enough to advance sustainability beyond our most immediate, directed efforts at work. Given that many, including the most critical, indicators of environmental sustainability, such as climate change and biodiversity impacts, are still headed in the wrong direction after decades of environmental attention by many professions, it could be argued that we environmental leaders need to be doing more, in the sense of more fully incorporating sustainability into our non-work lives to encourage more of society, not just our clients, students, and other work stakeholders, to join us in our planetary rescue mission.

Unfortunately, for many environmental leaders, doing significantly more on the job is probably not very realistic. While environmental professionals, in general, are doing their utmost to "fight the good fight" throughout our environmental careers, most of us likely already feel overworked but only partially as effective as we'd like to be. And, probably very few of us are content with the amount of time we can devote to our non-work lives, including to ourselves, our families and friends, our neighborhoods and social clubs, and our societies and natural environments upon which we all depend. Given our all-consuming environmental work passions, we just don't have much "spare time." And, many of us don't want to spend what little precious spare time we do have continuing our workday environmental struggles. During those few weekends of the year that we consider "ours," lounging on the beach sounds much more attractive than picketing to save the wildlife just off-shore. So, what's the well-rounded environmental leader to do?

The theme of this essay is an answer to that question — we, you and I, can do quite a lot more, actually. While I deeply respect and appreciate the environmental research,

teaching, planning, implementing, and campaigning that have been accomplished over the last several decades, I'd like to suggest that many of us environmental professionals, perhaps all of us, could do more by being more comprehensive and consistent in aligning our environmentally-responsible work lives with most everything else we do. Basically, we, including yours truly, could probably practice what we preach (and practice) at work more often and in more innovative ways when we aren't on-the-job.

But, is it really necessary to green the rest of our lives beyond work? Don't we do enough "Earth-saving" in the office, factory, field, lab, and classroom? These introspective questions might be answered by just looking around us — at whether the natural places we inhabit and visit are truly sustainable and whether we and the people with whom we interact couldn't do more to make these places more sustainable. Many of our stakeholders share our frustration in being overburdened at work, and, unless we set the example otherwise, some will look for escape from, rather than answers to, the world's environmental problems. When they see our big (and multiple) houses and cars (including the trucks we have euphemistically re-named sport utility vehicles), when they hear we are taking vacations that are not especially environmentally-responsible, and when they notice that we accept (and create) just as much energy and material waste as they do, we send signals that can encourage us all to engage in even deeper environmental crisis denial. We are the environmental leaders, the opinion-makers, the professionals in our society, and, if we, the "eco-experts," aren't green, why should our stakeholders be? Few experiences are more disheartening than to witness our environmental professional colleagues either on- or off-the-job engaging in blatantly non-environmental behaviors.

Happily, in addition to providing a number of individual non-work benefits, adopting more comprehensive and consistent environmental behaviors can also allow environmental professionals to advance a number of at-work interests, such as upgrading corporate and other organizational environmental policies and practices. First, environmental leaders who develop and practice leading-edge individual behaviors protect themselves from "greenwashing" charges, just as do those organizations that not only espouse but genuinely im-

plement environmental policies. Second, holistic environmental leaders can acquire and apply more environment-related information and knowledge on a wider set of environmental topics than their counterparts. In our modern post-industrial society, information is power, so the more an environmental leader gathers, processes, and uses information to engage in environmentally-protective behaviors during off-hours, the more influence he or she is likely to leverage at work. Third, to the extent that most of the readers and contributors of this volume are associated mainly with developed country cultures, environmental leaders from these areas may be less uncomfortable in suggesting proactive environmental measures to developing country business, government, and non-profit organization representatives. Virtually nothing cuts into a developed country experts' credibility more than the perception that the expert and his/her compatriots are even greater environmental violators than their developing country advisees. Finally, personal environmental behaviors practiced by environmental professionals allows them to make additional potentially valuable environmental contacts and cite more personal examples in advocating for proactive environmental organizational policies and programs, both of which can be valuable resources in moving organizations, including the environmental "champion's" own employer, to adopt and implement environmental best practices.

So, this essay suggests a number of environmental decisions and actions that those of us who aspire to, or want to maintain societal environmental leadership, can consider in our non-work lives. Of course, the total number of such possibilities, given the complexity of modern life, can be potentially mind-boggling. This plethora of opportunities likely exists not only for each of us as individuals in our personal lives and at home, but also in our networks, social organizations, communities and interactions with society and nature. To assist the reader in managing the ever-growing set of eco-options, a multi-level approach to environmentalism is one of two organizing strategies employed here, ranging from personal through organizational to global perspectives. The other is the use of several systems aspects — inputs, processes, and outputs — which, together with the multi-level perspective, can provide each of us with a more comprehensive and consistent, and perhaps, more strategic and successful, framework, for holistic environmental leadership.

This multi-level/systems approach has been previously suggested for application to environmentally sustainable organizations by a co-author (Gordon Rands) and me (in the October 1995 issue of the Academy of Management Review). In that article, we suggested that organizations could interact dyadically with five different levels regarding six systems elements that could assist businesses, governments and NGOs

in moving more effectively toward environmental sustainability. Individuals were one of these levels, and we highlighted several individuals working within their organizations who contributed to environmental sustainability by starting recycling programs, developing environmental projects and structures, and founding businesses based on environmental principles. But, since levels and systems are ubiquitous in all of our lives, both at work and away from work, this multi-level/multi-systems approach can be applied to individual environmental leaders seeking a more holistic, "24-7" environmental orientation, as well. The remainder of this essay suggests a number of environmental decisions and actions each of us can consider, by describing the environmental options resulting from combining one level and one systems aspect at a time, using a more workable, reduced list of each phenomena. Of course, many other environmental elements could be addressed and a multitude of other decisions and actions could be recommended in addition to those that follow. My hope is that whatever the framework, element, or suggestion, readers will resolve more seriously, urgently, and frequently, to adopt one or more of the recommended environmental practices beyond the environmental leadership they exercise in their "day jobs."

## Personal, Household, and Network Level Potential Environmental Resolutions

The first category identifies environmental inputs, whether principles, resources, or motivators, that those of us who deal with environmental issues in our work lives can consider accessing as private individuals and as members of our households and personal networks. Values, such as sustainable consumption, animal welfare, and human health, which, depending on our particular work positions and projects, we may not have the opportunity to develop on-the-job, could be explored and developed in some depth and breadth during our personal time. These "micro" environmental values have many sources, including parents, peers, teachers, our own environmental experiences, fiction and nonfiction writing and media arts, religious and spiritual investigations, and dialogues and seminars focusing on environmental ethics and related topics. Even testing or stretching one's concept of what "the natural environment" is (for instance, does nature include outer space and/or human mental and emotional health?) can be another way to increase our range of or to explore more deeply environmental micro-level inputs.

A second category in the recommended framework focuses on the processes in which individuals who deal with environmental issues at work can also more comprehensively and consistently develop them at other times and in other places. These processes might include strategies, approaches, or activities we use when we purchase and use products

and services, such as electricity and other energy forms, when we reduce, recycle, or otherwise dispose of wastes, and when we ensure our children and pets don't contribute to environmental problems. Associated with the business-related topic of this volume, most environmental experts outside of work probably have mostly either customer-oriented or investor-oriented relationships with businesses, so selecting and purchasing environmentally-preferable products and services, including investments, would be a key resolution to practice during non-work hours. Several helpful websites related to these efforts are www.sustainablebusiness.com, www.greenbiz.com and www.newdream.org/consumer/. Many other individual actions are possible for us to practice what we preach at this micro level "on our own time," and these have been catalogued in any number of "what you can do" self-help guides. Several that can be accessed on-line include those developed by The Natural Step (www.naturalstep.org/learn/docs/guides/tips.pdf), Coop America (www.coopamerica.org/business/b44million.htm), and the New American Dream (www.newdream.org/tttoffline/).

But, how many of us eco-experts have given these lists serious enough consideration to apply more than a few of these eco-suggestions in our own homes or have encouraged our friends and family members to join us in putting them into practice in their homes? Do those of us who advocate or practice pro-active, voluntary environmental programs carry forward that environmental voluntarism and pro-activity, not only symbolically but substantively, into our personal lives?

A third environmental leadership category at the individual, household and network level is outputs, which can be thought of as the results of the environmental inputs and processes in the first two categories, respectively. These individual environmental outputs might include the admiration of one's family and friends, reductions of our own guilt for not being more environmentally-consistent, and, of course, the improved quality of our respective micro-environments, such as healthier, safer and more energy-efficient homes. These outputs could also include increases in demand for, say, organic foods, and reductions in demand, for, say, oversized (or too many) homes and cars. A number of "personal sustainability" tools, such as EarthAware (www.donlotter. com/earthaware.html) and "the environmental footprint" (www.redefiningprofress.org/footprint/), are now available for any of us to determine the ultimate impacts of our own non-work environmental behaviors. For all those of us who have argued that business (and other organizations) should monitor and report the results of their environmental actions, perhaps it's time we ourselves monitored and reported on our own environmental "performance." If nothing else, doing so would really "bring home" the complexities and costs of our corporate environmental management recommendations.

## Social Organization and Community Level Potential Environmental Resolutions

Three additional categories of environmental decisions and actions in this holistic environmental leadership framework can be forwarded for those of us seeking to set examples for our non-work stakeholders. These can be described as "meso-level" elements, since they relate to each of us individual eco-experts in our roles as members of our social organizations and of our local and regional communities. Again, the inputs-processes-outputs systems perspective can provide an integrated, wide-scoped view of what can be done at this level to increase our environmental leadership capacity and delivery.

First, we can identify the financial and non-financial inputs that our churches, clubs, and recreational teams, leagues and other groups could use to help expand their own environmental orientations and actions. Since many foundations fund only non-governmental organizations (NGOs), we might use our environmental expertise to periodically assist the NGOs to which we belong in securing resources for saving energy, using renewables, starting green teams and recycling efforts, and otherwise upgrading their environmental programs and reducing their negative environmental impacts. Other environmentally related principles and motivations that we as individuals might encourage in our social organizations and communities are environmental awareness, literacy, innovation and collaboration. Since some of us belong to at least one environmentally-oriented NGO and at least one socially-oriented NGO, efforts directed toward getting members and decision-makers of these two different types of NGOs to interact might pay off in the transference of values between them and in cooperation to achieve their mutual social/environmental visions.

In the category of individual activities, approaches, or strategies that could be employed with these meso-entities, helping in the development of environmental education programs, assisting with new ecopreneurial startups, and participating in environmental, social, and/or energy audits of local schools, places of worship, youth centers, and other community buildings would be possible for many of us. Organizing environmental "field trips" for youth, adult, and/or elderly groups might also be included here, and highlight a key characteristic of many off-hours activities — having fun and enjoying ourselves in whatever social/environmental activity we engage. In addition, these processes can help build and spread environmental skills throughout local communities and can increase the demand for these skills, contributing to locally-based corporate and other organizational economies, sectors and industries.

And, in thinking about the outputs of our individual efforts to help "green" our social organizations and communi-

ties, following from the discussion above, the successes of NGOs and localities that use less non-renewable energy (with the resulting dollar savings that are potentially re-investable), and a greater level of environmental appreciation among their stakeholders, would be ideal end-results from this individual effort. Others might be increased green employment in local and regional communities, a reduction in exporting resources outside the community for non-renewable products and services, and, a triggering of increased competition and collaboration among local communities to become "the greenest" communities in the area. Once again, on-line and other resources have become available in recent years to assist individuals in moving their communities toward sustainability (e.g. the Sustainable Community Network at www.sustainable.org, and, the Global Action Plan at www.globalactionplan.com). Many other positive environmental outcomes are also possible at this level, including, of course, our own individual satisfaction in having participated in the green success of one or more of our own social organizations and communities.

## Societal and Human Species Level Potential Environmental Resolutions

A final set of categories, the macro-perspective, focuses on the individual eco-expert who has the opportunity to apply his or her environmental work interest and skill set off-the-job to advance environmental inputs, processes and outputs at the societal and human species level. Since each of the previously described categories and suggestions would contribute in the aggregate at this level, the present section will be briefer, since the holistic environmental leader who adopts several of these with success at the other levels will already be attempting to make a positive impact at this macro-level.

The values, resources, motivators and other individual environmental inputs at this society/species level could include, among many other possibilities, the land ethic, carrying capacity, eating low on the food chain, biophilia, profound respect for nature, and the energy, enthusiasm, experience, and interest that follows from years and decades of developing our own and others' environmental "awakening." Two sets of many possible environmental societal motivators have been developed by the Friends (Quakers) (www.fcun.org/sustain/understanding.html) and the Institute for Deep Ecology (www.deepecology.org/deepplatform.html). The resulting actions and designed and implemented processes or strategies that could be associated with inputs at this level could include our individual non-work involvement or support of greenhouse gas inventories and reduction planning nationally and worldwide, as well as better urban development design and execution to reduce, and even reverse, the sprawl of slums and suburbs alike. Personal active involve-

ment in local, regional and national political campaigns that include attention to environmental issues is another avenue for individual eco-intervention at this level. And, finally, the outputs of such decisions and approaches ideally would move beyond averting the latest global environmental crisis toward the greater recognition of the need for and realization of quality living conditions for ourselves as individuals, for our fellow humans and for other species.

## Conclusion or Harbinger?

This essay suggested a number of ways that we individual environmental experts, the main producers and consumers of this journal, no matter our profession, discipline, or experience, can extend our at-work environmental interests and influence beyond our chosen places of employment and careers. None of the recommendations made here is intended to be novel, radical or especially innovative. What these proposed resolutions and the levels and systems framework within which they are organized are intended to do is to provide one additional appeal to this volume's readers that each of us individually needs to and can adopt one or more of these environmental resolutions for our non-work lives and to do so without further delay. These and other categories and elements could be forwarded for encouraging us all to practice more of what we preach (and practice) in our environmental jobs and do so in the rest of our lives, more fully and with greater effect. [Another excellent multi-level environmental suggestion site developed at the University of British Columbia can be found at the website URL http://sustain.ubc.ca/sustainable_u/personal.htm and in the Green Guide newsletter (www.thegreenguide.com]. Lest the reader feel overwhelmed by this essay's theme of doing more outside our main jobs, I humbly forward the example of a five person group of environmental management academics to which I belong who co-founded the Organizations and the Natural Environment (ONE) interest group within the Academy of Management a decade ago. This extra-curricular activity has generated 10 conference and pre-conference programs, including associated newsletters, awards, webpages, and other activities, and garnered the support of more than 500 academic and practitioner members worldwide, who are interested in promoting sound environmental management policies and practices in businesses, governments and NGOs. In addition, this small band of environmental organizers as individuals, primarily outside of work, also launched other environment-related organizations, engaged in organic farming, worked in environmental political campaigns, purchased hybrid vehicles and energy-efficient appliances and other products, provided free environment-related consultation to various groups, organized and participated in environmental service projects, and otherwise were engaged at multiple levels in ad-

vancing environmental sustainability systems aspects during that time. Though it's sometimes a challenge to do so, sustainability can be, and indeed is, practiced not only during, but also beyond our regular 9-to-5 jobs.

The recommendations forwarded here are not intended to replace or devalue the vital work each of us does in our respective professions and careers to advance environmental sustainability. Nor are they advanced without due recognition that the change management approaches of starting slowly, proceeding carefully, and continuously building support are applicable also in our non-work lives. Rather, were we to get more eco-politically involved, participate in setting up or improving NGO or community environmental programs, genuinely begin to consume more sustainably, and/or seriously adopt any of the resolutions presented in this essay, we might find that both our non-work stakeholders, as well as those at work, will be more responsive to our more comprehensive, consistent environmental decisions and actions. Just as importantly, we might also enhance overall both our own and our colleagues' and coworkers' environmental enthusiasm, stamina, creativity and success. Finally, if enough of us begin moving toward holistic environmental leadership, it is my belief that we may be able to tip the scales at the personal, organizational, and societal levels toward, rather than away from, environmental sustainability. Those of us who have long-supported proactive, voluntary environmental management and policy (along with prudent, rational environmental regulation), and have eschewed corporate "greenwashing" and anti-environmentalism can speak with greater knowledge, confidence and credibility the more we can provide environmental advice, based on our own individual experience and example, not just to "do what we say" but rather to "do what we do."

## Endnote

1. Author to whom correspondence should be directed:
   E-mail: starik@gwu.edu