

RioPlus Business Focus: What does it take to be a sustainability leader?

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Politicians make the policy. But it's often left to business to implement it. For this reason RioPlus Business is featuring submissions from the private sector across the globe in the lead up to Rio+20.

The aim is to demonstrate how Sustainable Development is becoming a reality in every continent, country and city. Today's article asks, what does it take to be sustainability leader?

By Gillian Martin Mehers

People are the key to change and in order to truly achieve sustainable development, we must invest in leadership.

For the past 20 years, LEAD has helped emerging leaders from around the world to develop the skills to steer humanity onto a sustainable path.

We have learned that leadership is a complex topic and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. There are, however, several key behaviours that are demonstrated by successful sustainability leaders.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is about seeing opportunities where others see challenges. Adeolu Odusote, a LEAD Fellow from Nigeria, saw an opportunity to reduce his country's dependence on crude oil and develop a more sustainable source of energy.

He realised that the cassava, a staple Nigerian crop that is easily converted into ethanol, could be used as an alternative to fossil fuels. Adeolu's plan to create biofuel plantations initially faced opposition due to fears that the nation's food and water security would be put at risk.



Adeolu Odusote, from Nigeria, saw an opportunity to reduce his country's dependence on crude oil.

He was able to show, however, that sustainable management of the plantations would protect the local ecosystem and water supply and ensure that food production was not compromised.

Work started on the \$122 million pilot ethanol facility – the first of its kind in Nigeria – in 2008 and as a result of Adeolu's entrepreneurial thinking, the country now has an innovative and scalable business model for alternative energy generation.

Advocacy

To bring about transformational change, an effective leader must have strong advocacy skills.

Scientist and LEAD Fellow Olga Speranskaya believes that the most effective way to pressure governments into taking action on toxic chemicals in the environment is to empower civil society.

Over the past decade she has worked with NGOs in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA), bringing them together to form a single, more effective, advocacy network campaigning for the elimination of the persistent organic pollutants (POPs) left over from the Soviet regime.

Working together the NGOs have sought to address the legacy of chemical pollution on both local and national levels, focusing on identifying chemical stockpiles and reducing their impact on human health and the environment.

The EECCA NGO campaign towards a toxic-free future was extremely successful, persuading 10 out of the 12 governments in the region to ratify the Stockholm Convention and agree to eliminate or restrict the production and use of POPs.

The civil society network fostered by Olga has now grown to include NGO groups, governmental bodies and academic institutions in 11 former Soviet states and in 2009, Olga was awarded the Goldman Prize in recognition of her outstanding achievements.

Learning

Leadership and learning are intertwined; a successful leader will always learn from a situation and apply this learning to create change.

Rachel Madan, a LEAD Fellow working as a corporate sustainability consultant in the UK and US, had identified a number of enthusiastic people pushing for change within the cultural sector but felt that they lacked the skills and knowledge to advance the sustainability agenda.



Rachel Madan saw an opportunity to use education to create sustainability leaders for the future.

The LEAD Fellowship programme helped Rachel to identify the need for a new generation of sustainability leaders and in 2008 she founded Greener Museums in order to address this gap.

Inspired by LEAD's learning techniques, Rachel developed a leadership programme to empower green champions within museums, encouraging them to share ideas and work collectively to solve real challenges.

Over the past four years, the Greener Museums programmes have helped participating museums save more than \$500,000 in costs, reduce carbon usage by 1000 tonnes, and attract more than \$200,000 in new sustainability funding.

Vision and communication

The ability to create a clear vision and communicate it in a way that inspires and engages others is critical for any leader.

Goldman Prize winner and LEAD Indonesia Fellow Yuyun Ismawati saw that poor communities needed a safe waste-management initiative that provided economic benefits and empowered them to protect the environment.

Yuyun worked at a grassroots level in Indonesia to share this vision, training women in low-income urban areas to use waste separation and composting techniques so that waste could be collectively and sustainably managed.

Yuyun's 'decentralised solution initiative' has now been adopted as a national programme and has halved waste production in 100 urban clusters, while also providing additional income to women through the sale of compost and recycled materials.

A critical element in the success of Yuyun's project was her ability to articulate her vision in a simple way that empowered the local population to take action, thereby leading to sustainable change.

Her approach has also been successful on a larger scale and Yuyun is now working with national agencies to craft Indonesia's first-ever bill on waste management strategy.



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Innovative thinking

Leaders need to take an innovative approach to problem-solving. Like many Brazilians, LEAD Fellow Leonardo Martins Dias has long been aware of the social exclusion faced by residents in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

He also knew of a number of companies that were eager to invest in social projects but unable to implement these programmes without the support of grassroots leaders in the favelas.

Drawing on his experience as a strategic advisor to European businesses and the support of the LEAD Network, Leonardo designed an innovative solution to this problem: a government-funded training programme to develop a new generation of community leaders committed to the principles of sustainability.

This programme will empower local people by equipping them with vital business and project management skills, and the experience to work with investors to co-create and implement projects that meet the needs of the community.

The Rio Government has responded enthusiastically to Leonardo's creative proposal and plans for a pilot programme in four favelas, to be run in partnership with LEAD Brazil, are under discussion.

As these powerful examples demonstrate, leadership is about inspiring and enabling change. Whether at a grassroots or governmental level, the successful leader must be able to set out a vision for a sustainable future and motivate others to work towards this shared goal.

The ability to devise innovative solutions to long-term problems and establish cross-sector partnerships is also central to achieving success where others may fail.



LEAD identify several key behaviours that are demonstrated by successful sustainability leaders

A good leader will inspire, and be inspired by, other leaders.

Indeed, many LEAD Fellows feel that the support of the LEAD Network – a dynamic community of like-minded individuals – helped them to realise their vision for change.

The notion that leaders create other leaders is one of LEAD's core beliefs; if we are to secure lasting and sustainable development, we need leaders with the skills, vision and commitment to drive change, and we need them in greater numbers than ever before.

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