

Leadership Is Cause; Everything Else Is Effect: Recognition and Initiation of Sustainability as a Competitive Advantage

Betsy Allen
Gaining Results Inc

Imagine being asked to join an effort to create the very first strategic plan for the County in which you live, pay taxes, and vote for county officials. This request stimulated a conflicted reaction. I was alarmed there had never been a collaborative strategic perspective applied to running our county and thrilled to be part of initiating such an effort.

Where to Start? Who is the Customer?

In the case of many large organizations, it might be easier to answer who *isn't* a customer. Our planning processes define the customer early on. For example, in a hospital system, there are many—the referring and on-staff physicians and surgeons, executives, employees at all levels, vendors, patients, etc.

During a Microsoft Branding project, strategic alignment was an intriguing challenge. The customer differed from division to division as the branding needed to be both unified and unique. The branding needed to be aligned with Microsoft and yet distinct by following the consistent messaging guidelines while appealing to distinctly different audience needs. In the midst of this alignment issue, Microsoft wanted to project a “protecting the planet” image that has come to be known as Sustainability today.

For Lee County, Florida, it was no less complicated. Stakeholder input for a strategic planning process is the wind behind the sails just as the vision is the destination and your values serve as the rudder correcting the course. We needed at minimum three perspectives to gather 360 degree feedback: an organizational diagnostic to poll county employees, a citizen survey to poll constituents, and conceptual guiding principle's input from the five County Commissioners to whom the County Manager reports.

The most insightful of the three perspectives was the Employee Organizational Diagnostic. It is based on the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Criteria and gathers perspectives about leadership, decision-making, engagement, metrics, planning, and customer connection.

The questions ask employees up, down, and across the organization to rate leadership's ability to engage them in the vision, mission, and day-to-day decisions. Yet, the most telling question of all was to ask whether the employee would recommend this county as a place to work. Depending on the department, between 29-50% of the employees as of the fall of 2009 would not recommend the County to family and friends.

Lack of Engagement Is a Leadership Red Flag

These results led new Lee County Manager, Karen Hawes, to initiate an Executive Leadership Development Process. The leaders of the 29 departments had little, if any, leadership, team building, and goal setting learning and development. Over the course of a year, that all changed and has resulted in a refined, yet living, balanced scorecard of monitored metrics driving the activities of every county employee today and tomorrow.

Lee County Government, the Office of Sustainability was founded as a result of this process of becoming a transparent, accountable, and community-centered. This was a big step forward for the county.

Yet, to share the story of Recognition and Initiation of Sustainability efforts at Lee County, we must rewind the tape and focus on Facilities in 2002. When Rich Beck took over as Facilities Services Division Director. He recognized and initiated sustainability efforts in the Facilities function and forever changed how they are operated.

What Rich discovered upon arrival was skilled competent mechanics who walked onto the job with nothing more. The only infusion of “new strategies” came from “new people.” Nobody went to training. Furthermore, the department had just barely survived an attempt to privatize. Rich started a five-year continuous improvement program. The goals were simple: give the trades people the opportunity to upgrade skills, institutionalize solar technology, and make preventative maintenance the standard. Up to that point, the department responded to fires and when something broke. With preventative maintenance, there were fewer fire drills. The cost of managing facilities went from \$4.72 per square foot in 2002 to \$1.30 in 2010.

Rich Beck says, “I am not an environmentalist or even crazy about sustainability. Yet, when I see a viable sustainability idea, it seems to ALWAYS makes good business sense.” He is quick to add when people comment on his hybrid car, “Of course I drive a hybrid, I get 48 miles to the gallon.”

Energy Coordinators, Marco Danno and David Pinheiro, have led the charge under Rich Beck’s directive to reduce energy usage.

In 2005, Lee County became one of initial members of United States Green Building Council LEED (Leadership Environmental Efficiency of Design). Dave Pinheiro is an LEED AP (Accredited Professional) who is charged with finding energy saving opportunities throughout the county.

Enjoy this partial list of changes that have contributed to the five-year savings of over 207 million kilowatt hours for Lee County:

- **Automated System** controls air conditioning, lighting, and thermostats, etc.
- **Limited range thermostats** employees can only adjust one to two degrees
- **Proactive preventative maintenance**
- **Replaced T-12** fluorescent bulbs with T-8 bulbs
- **Installed room occupancy sensors** on vending machines, etc.

- **Infrared cameras** used on a membrane roof at sunset to look for water intrusion or improperly connected power lines feeding a motor
- **Established an indoor environmental quality shop** to investigate employee complaints about their work areas. Complaints such as, “Every time I come to work my eyes itch,” may not be a result of air quality. Their discomfort may be due to improperly adjusted lighting or their chair height in relation to the work surface.

Sustainability Is Not an Event ...

Rich’s mantra: “Sustainability is not an event, it is a process and a journey. It begins with a small step which can result in big outcomes!” He has integrated his people’s learning and development, process improvement, and environmental consciousness. Rick is now helping the Office of Sustainability take the journey countywide. Leadership truly is cause!