Three Conceptions of Triple Bottom Line Business Sustainability and the Role for HRM

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Business firms are placing increasing emphasis on their ongoing "sustainability," which implies a simultaneous focus on economic, social, and environmental performance. A growing majority of organizations have embraced triple bottom line public reporting, alternately termed corporate responsibility or sustainability reporting, and many vie for industry, national, and international honors awarded to the world's "most sustainable" firms. In this article we describe research in which we entered three firms that had publicly embraced a triple bottom line framework, and were recognized as leaders in sustainability in their respective industries. There we conducted in-depth interviews with 66 business leaders, from chief executives to line managers, to capture and describe their conceptions of sustainability. Through thematic and conceptual analysis of the interview data, we present and describe three conceptions of triple bottom line sustainability at work, and outline the implications of each for key human resource management processes.

Changing societal expectations are placing new challenges before business leaders, and are shifting the nature of the business and society relationship. The potential for far greater stakeholder activism, along with a rise in competition from global scale production and trade, have created a significantly more challenging management environment than in the past. The availability and flow rate of information have increased exponentially over the past decade. This has vitalized a new generation of civil society groups, who, along with other business stakeholders—consumers, communities, employees, and governments—are reshaping the set of demands facing contemporary business leaders. Business firms are therefore placing increased emphasis on their ongoing sustainability, which implies a simultaneous focus on economic, social, and environmental performance. A growing majority of corporations (68% of the top 250 global companies on the Fortune 500) has embraced triple bottom line (TBL) public reporting, alternately termed corporate responsibility or sustainability reporting (KPMG, 2005), and many of those companies vie for industry, national, and international honors, such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, awarded to the world's most sustainable firms by industry sector.

What does this mean for the practicing manager and for the human resource function? In this research we explored this question qualitatively and in-depth with a cross-functional, cross-level set of business practitioners, including HR managers. We entered three large firms operating in different industry sectors, each of which had publicly embraced a triple bottom line framework and was recognized as a leader in sustainability in its respective industry. There we conducted individual interviews and focus groups with 66 business leaders, from chief executives to line managers, to capture, interpret, and describe their conceptions of business sustainability.

We discovered that a focus on the triple bottom line can mean many different things to operating managers, whatever the relative clarity of the corporation's public declarations—a relevant discovery, because how an organization's particular approach to sustainability is framed, interpreted, and discussed by its leaders and members will inevitably drive how it is put into practice. Our broad central question in entering these business firms was: What does sustainability, primarily characterized by these firms as a focus on triple bottom line performance, mean to you and to your organization? Within that general question, we explored the relevance of the framework to notions of strategy, leadership, performance, and firm capabilities. Following thematic and conceptual analysis of the interview data, we present and describe three conceptions of triple bottom line sustainability that we observed, and outline the implications for strategy, firm capabilities, and human resource management. By organizing human resource management processes around a set of coherent, mutually supporting principles, a firm has the potential to build a unique resource-based advantage in its industry (Colbert, 2004); by linking those HR principles to the company's triple bottom line sustainability objectives, it can create lasting industry advantage, and build capabilities for positive change—in economic, social, and environmental terms.

At a high level, triple bottom line sustainability is a values-laden aspiration—it is a concept that explicitly acknowledges as important the relationship between a firm's economic performance and its performance in social and environmental terms. That in itself is not a trivial idea. For decades business owners, managers, critics, activists, and academics have wrestled with the question of the role of business in society, often with environmentalists or those calling for greater attention to social justice pitted against advocates for unfettered managerial capitalism. Although those debates continue today, the TBL is a concept that offers an umbrella, a big tent, under which managers can be free legitimately to reconcile, or even leverage, the apparent paradoxes and tensions in running a complex organization.

Many of the executives and managers we interviewed talked about the "usefulness" to them of the TBL construct as a framework in which to rethink their day-to-day business, and their business strategies going forward. What was interesting was that the relative usefulness of the TBL framework, along with some supporting subfeatures, varied across respondents, and we have assembled three coherent conceptions of sustainability to summarize some relevant distinctions. We briefly describe the focus and method of this study, then present some key findings, first in summary, and

EXHIBIT 1

Focal Firms

Key Organizational Similarities:	Key Organizational Differences:
■ Canadian-based, large organizations ■ A declared intent in public communications to pursue greater sustainability (articulated as triple-bottom line focus) ■ Relatively high societal impact (environmental and/or social)	■ Operating in different industrial sectors ■ Variety in organizational attributes (e.g., size, ownership/governance, union status) ■ Diverse in the nature of their social and environmental impacts

Brief Description of Organizations and Data Collection Sites

Emerson Electric
A provincially owned electricity company employing approximately 10,000 people; principal business is the generation and sale of electricity to interconnected markets. The interviews at Emerson Electric were conducted across four research sites: corporate headquarters, nuclear, hydro and fossil-fuel generation plants.

Morrison Metals
A publicly owned metals manufacturer with approximately 7,000 employees. The research was conducted at two research sites: corporate headquarters and the main manufacturing site.

Shelley Science
A diversified science company that at the time of the data collection was a publicly traded, partially owned subsidiary of a US parent company and employed approximately 4,000 people. Interviews were conducted across four research sites including corporate headquarters, two manufacturing sites, and a research and development location.

then in more detail. The article concludes with some implications of our three conceptions of TBL sustainability for firm capabilities and for human resource management.

Study

The research described here represents one phase of an eventually larger study entitled *Leadership for Sustainability*. For this phase we identified a list of potential focal firms operating in different business sectors, and gained access to three of those firms for in-depth exploration. Each organization had a positive reputation in terms of sustainable practices, based on community or national awards, or global recognition on indices such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index. The sites were selected to have some elements in common and some key differentiating factors, the former to allow for a reasonable comparison of viewpoints across industry sectors, and the latter to raise the potential for insight via a cross-site comparison. Exhibit 1 shows common and differentiating attributes of our focal firms, along with a brief description of each under a corporate pseudonym.

As interpretative research, our primary task was to produce descriptions of the meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings (Gephart, 2004), and our goal was to build conceptual frameworks through layered analysis of the data. Qualitative data was collected from each organization through in-depth, semistructured interviews with executives (CEOs, vice presidents: 13), and senior leaders (general managers, directors, business unit managers: 27), for a total of 40 individual interviews, and through focused group interviews with four sets of middle- and line-managers (26 in all). All interviews ranged from 90 minutes to 2 hours in length, were fully taped and transcribed, and were prepared for analysis using qualitative data management software. Documentation in the form of company reports, websites, and news stories helped to inform and fill out the narrative line of each case.

Each site was investigated independently, and data collected from each case was analyzed first on its own (within-case analysis), resulting in a case description of each site centered on the predominant themes arising. A cross-case comparison was then conducted to discern themes and ideas in common across, or contrasting between, the respective individual cases. Several iterations through the data progressed from descriptive, to thematic, to conceptual analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), with the end result being a framework of three conceptions of business sustainability, supported by extensive data and documentation. We have since tested these descriptions in seminar sessions with leaders from the participating organizations, as well as several others, who felt and expressed a high degree of resonance with our organizing frameworks. For the purposes of this article we describe the resulting frameworks, rather than how they were derived, and focus on the implications for HRM.

Summary of Key Findings

The main finding of this research was that, in practice, there are varying ideas of what triple bottom line sustainability means. Careful sifting of the various meanings constructed and conveyed by interview subjects revealed these summary findings:

1. Organizational leaders in sustainability-focused organizations hold discernibly different conceptions of what sustainability means to their company.
2. These conceptions can be described along a number of dimensions, which we have termed dimensions of sustainability *intent*, and those of *alignment*.
3. These conceptions are not defined by the boundaries of the organization, and there may be multiple conceptions at work within a single firm.
4. There is a key role for the HR function to play, in:
   a. Helping to generate dialogue and build consensus on the sustainability intent; and
   b. Building alignment capabilities to help realize that intent.

Conceptions of Sustainability: Intent and Alignment Dimensions

What is a "conception" of business sustainability? We borrow that term from Dobson (1998) and use it here to denote a multidimensional, internally consistent idea of sustainability constructed out of interviews with practicing managers. Each of three conceptions is described along a set of seven dimensions that arose from the data analysis as highly pertinent. These seven can be broadly considered as dimensions of intent or of alignment. Dimensions of intent describe the purpose or objectives embraced in a given conception of sustainability, and dimensions of alignment capture supporting features to help realize the intent of a given conception. Intent and alignment dimensions together form a coherent conception of sustainability. We first outline primary distinctions among these three conceptions in terms of the intent dimensions, and then follow with a description of the alignment dimensions and the role for HRM.

Three Conceptions of Business Sustainability: Intent Dimensions

The intent dimensions in our framework are: first, what is the objective defining a particular conception of sustainability? Clearly from the data, the managers interviewed held different ideas about what the concept of sustainability meant for their business: Implicit or explicit in each definition was an overriding objective for a sustainable company. Second, what is being sustained under each conception? Ideas on what is sustained under a TBL framework ranged from "our current business" to "global human welfare." Third, what is the utility, or usefulness, of adopting a sustainability frame for thinking and talking about the business? Many respondents were explicit about what was usefully gained in adopting a sustainability framework.

Through descriptive, thematic, and conceptual analysis of the data, three mutually distinguishable conceptions of sustainability were evident:

1. A balanced operational conception;
2. An integrated operational conception; and
3. An integrated strategic conception of business sustainability.

Balanced Operational Conception of Business Sustainability

The sustainability objective of a balanced operational conception is to maximize organizational value, most often characterized in terms of shareholder or investor value, subject to the many constraints imposed by organizational stakeholders. Under this conception, the interpretation of the term "sustainability" is closest to its colloquial definition of "to keep the business going," and less value-laden than described by some other managers, and the

managerial focus is on carefully managing tradeoffs among stakeholder interests, or among facets of the triple bottom line.

What are sustained are local stakeholder relationships, which protect the license to operate the current business. In several instances, stakeholder groups were described as entities whose interests were to be traded off—the various needs of stakeholders were depicted as discrete, and mutually exclusive. The triple bottom line represented a set of economic, social, and environmental risks to be managed and mitigated. In the words of one executive: "any one of those, if you mismanage it, can bite you in the ass real fast." The utility of a sustainability framework is that it broadens the concept of the business to include stakeholders as legitimate actors, and provides a negotiating frame to manage the inevitable tradeoffs that need to occur.

> Having a sustainability framework has helped the senior management team, it gives us a place to take all of our diverse thinking and at least put it in a consistent framework and start to have discussions . . . we've all got different views and different perspectives and different biases that we bring to this framework. But it provides a place, it provides a table for you to meet at, and bring these things together.

Integrated Strategic Conception of Business Sustainability

The sustainability objective of an integrated strategic conception is to leverage an inclusive stakeholder view to create value broadly for society—to sense out the critical global issues, and then bring the organization's capacity to bear to help solve those problems, at the same time creating value for the company, an approach consistent with base of the pyramid business development (Prahalad & Hart, 2002). For example, two of the organizations were actively exploring new business ideas in India specifically aimed at ameliorating some of the environmental and social problems occurring among the poor, including the idea of providing bacteria-free packaging for milk, and including needed medicines in the milk at the same time.

What is sustained in an integrated strategic conception is the organization as an economic entity in some form, and the corporate brand rooted in a set of cohering values. This conception is the most outward looking, and so holds a focus on sustaining global human welfare: Social issues form the context for problem-centered business development.

The utility of a sustainability framework under an integrated strategic conception is that it serves as a strategically provocative frame to encourage a re-orientation of the business to new growth opportunities. One executive whose company was in the midst of a strategic re-orientation exercise described this perspective:

> I think what a sustainability framework does is add a significant way of not only looking at how you've behaved in the past, and what your current position is, but how you look at developing your future business strategy. We're more and more now looking at the concept of sustainability and what that's going to mean for fundamental global drivers that are going to change the nature of our business.

These three intent dimensions—the sustainability objective, the idea of what is being sustained, and the relative usefulness of having adopted a sustainability framework—all combine to set out the direction of each conception. Exhibit 2 shows an outline of the three conceptions along dimensions of intent.

How successfully the organization moves toward that direction depends in large measure on the alignment dimensions. We briefly

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Integrated Operational Conception of Business Sustainability

Under an integrated operational conception of triple bottom line sustainability, the overriding sustainability objective is to strive for simultaneous value creation for all organizational stakeholders, and to leverage positive re-enforcing effects among elements of the business. As one executive expressed:

> I think the true philosophy of sustainability is the interdependence . . . it's not about a condescending view . . . I don't know if that's subtle or if people don't get it, but it's very important. It's about interdependence rather than balance. It's about mutual dependence or interdependence, rather than charity. It's fundamental.

What is sustained under an integrated operational conception of sustainability is the success of the current business built on inimitable competitive advantage in its industry, and also the self-image, or "idea" of the organization itself, which one senior manager described as more powerful than any specific strategy:

> [U]ltimately this company is an idea, not a legal creation. It's an idea held in a bunch of people's heads, and the idea of the company is one where always the needs of shareholders and employees and customers were explicitly talked about in the same breath . . . this has become much more pervasive than the current strategy . . . that idea of the company is fundamental and held by many.

The utility of a sustainability framework in an integrated operational conception was that it provided an integrative frame for building mutually reinforcing effects that would contribute to the firm's competitive advantage. It offered a meeting table for disparate parts of the business to come together and seek out complementary points of leverage, a point put forward by another executive:

EXHIBIT 2

Three Conceptions of Business Sustainability

Intent	Balanced Operational (tradeoff management)	Integrated Operational (win-win management)	Integrated Strategic (win-win global leadership)
Sustainability Objective	Maximize organizational value subject to stakeholder constraints	Simultaneous value creation for all organizational stakeholders	Leverage inclusive stakeholder view to create value for organization and broad global society
What Is Sustained?	Current operations Licence to operate Local stakeholder relationships	Current operations Industry competitive advantage Organizational self-image	Organization as economic entity Corporate brand Global human welfare
Utility of a Sustainability Framework	As a negotiating frame: Mitigate business risk by negotiating tradeoffs	As an integrative frame: Build sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging complementarities	As a strategically provocative frame: Re-orient business growth by broadening conceptions of context and capabilities

outline the alignment dimensions under each of our three conceptions.

Three Conceptions of Business Sustainability: Alignment Dimensions

Alignment dimensions help to realize a given intent. Alignment dimensions relevant to TBL sustainability and human resource management processes are: How are capabilities viewed—which kinds of capabilities are important, and how are they conceived? What is the role for organizational leadership? Key leadership competencies are defined somewhat differently under each conception of sustainability. What role is there for organizational values? Values were defined as important in different ways in operational and strategic perspectives. Finally, what is the role of dialogue on sustainability under each conception? In every case dialogue was described as highly important: dialogue with stakeholders to negotiate and appease; dialogue to integrate stakeholder needs and to search for win-win value creation; or dialogue to broaden the company's strategic frame of reference, and to enroll stakeholders in a new organizational direction.

Alignment Under a Balanced Operational Conception

Organizational features to help realize a balanced operational conception would include a focus on capabilities of a technical nature, aimed at enhancing operational excellence of the firm. For example, when asked about critical capabilities for the sustainability of his business, a senior manager at the power generation company spoke of the need for engineers to be accomplished at their profession, and to be concerned with pollution control technology, but also to have commercial skills to understand the relative value to the business of proposed upgrades:

> [I]t's the ability of engineers to do the quick financial math – back of the envelope math and the formal math, and the cost benefit analysis type math – they understand the process technically and they also understand that if I spent X dollars on something, I could get this kind of payback out of it.

A key role for formal leaders in a balanced operational conception is to adopt an open and transparent approach to stakeholder relations, and to respect the need for information stakeholders have about the business. Several managers described a shift in their respective management culture, from a "we know best" attitude to a recognition of the power of stakeholders, and the need to engage with a variety of stakeholder groups transparently. Values under a balanced operational conception assumed more a background than foreground role. Concern for stakeholders was argued for on grounds more instrumental than moral, and values served as criteria for negotiating tradeoffs among them. The capacity and willingness of managers to engage in meaningful dialogue with stakeholders was seen as critical, and not something naturally intuitive for most, but an attitude and skill that had to be learned.

Alignment Under an Integrated Operational Conception

The view of capabilities expressed under an integrated operational conception was that, beyond technical skills to run the business, managers in particular should develop a capacity for integrative thinking to conceive of the business as a system of complementary parts; that is, to search habitually for win-win-win opportunities among constituent groups. If such a capacity becomes culturally embedded in the organization, it moves from being an individual to an organizational capability.

The primary role for leadership is to build integration by engaging (versus simply appeasing) all stakeholders in the business, which includes acting as a "translator" from one form of organizational discourse to another, and to bring together more closely the ideas of "values" and "value"; for example, helping employees translate customer needs, as well as shareholder and community expectations, into meaningful performance goals, or, conversely, connecting the goals and aspirations of employees to the work of the organization, for maximum engagement. Dialogue is a critical means of attuning the organization to an interdependent view of stakeholder needs, rather than seeing them as zero-sum tradeoffs; organizational values form the ground for integration.

Alignment Under an Integrated Strategic Conception

Strategic re-orientation is enabled by moving to an abstract conception of organizational capabilities, shifting toward attention

to the knowledge intensive aspects of the business. For Samuel Science, for instance, the company's long experience as a chemicals company was constraining its capacity to imagine new business opportunities. Interview respondents described their shift toward thinking of themselves more generally as a science company, and that opened them toward their new focus as leaders in biotechnology.

The role of leadership in an integrated strategic conception is to initiate movement in a new direction, and to build and sustain organizational commitment to that direction. One chief executive talked about the role of leadership in initiating broad directional change, and then engaging the organization to develop it further:

> That to me is leadership – it doesn't mean you've got to come up with all the ideas. It means that you put people together like our Sustainable Development group that's looking into our next generation strategy, it means that you recognized a need to do that and said "we're going to do something about that." Now those folks will come up and we'll sit down and we'll be bashing that with a whole team of people, but at the end of it, something will come out of it.

An executive at another company spoke of the need to sustain leadership commitment to the new direction. New business models in new geographies presented significant challenges, and required a deeply held commitment to the principles of sustainability to engender the necessary patience and persistence:

> The other thing you have to remember is that you have to have a lot of tenacity, and patience too. This is not a one trick pony. You can't do it for a day, you can't do it for a month, you can't do it for a year – you have to really believe in it. I've been hanging on to that for several years now, so it's a long term, principled, deep down belief.

The role of values in an integrated strategic conception is as a compass setting the strategic direction of the business. Several respondents said that their deeply held organizational values would play a major role in determining what kinds of business they would get into, as any new direction would have to be consistent with their organization's idea of itself. New strategies would be formed at the nexus of organizational values and a vision for global sustainability.

Dialogue plays a critical role in an integrated strategic view, because both base aspects of this conception—integrative thinking and strategic thinking—are essentially about making connections between and among various elements of the business, and dialogue was described as critical for building shared, integrative, strategic thinking. A senior leader at one organization talked about the shift

EXHIBIT 3

Three Conceptions of Business Sustainability: Intent and Alignment Dimensions

		Balanced Operational (tradeoff management)	Integrated Operational (win-win management)	Integrated Strategic (win-win global leadership)
Intent	Sustainability Objective	Maximize organizational value subject to stakeholder constraints	Simultaneous value creation for all organizational stakeholders	Leverage inclusive stakeholder view to create value for organization and broad global society
	What Is Sustained?	Current operations License to operate Local stakeholder relationships	Current operations Industry competitive advantage Organizational self-image	Organization as economic entity Corporate brand Global human welfare
	Utility of a Sustainability Framework	As a negotiating frame: Mitigate business risk by negotiating tradeoffs	As an integrative frame: Build sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging complementarities	As a strategically provocative frame: Re-orient business growth by broadening conceptions of context and capabilities
Alignment	Strategic Capabilities View	Focus on technical capabilities and community relations	Focus on building advantage in current industry through culturally embedded resources	Abstract derivation of capabilities base—position versus macro view of global opportunities
	Primary Role of Leaders	Strong business management Stakeholder appeasement	Stakeholder engagement Values integration	Opportunity identification Build organizational commitment
	Role of Values	Criteria for negotiating tradeoffs	Ground for integrating stakeholder needs	Compass for setting strategic direction
	Role of Dialogue	Understand stakeholder wants/needs Communicate organizational actions	Attune to interdependent view Search for stakeholder win-win	Broaden strategic reference frame Enroll stakeholders in new direction

in direction initiated at the global level as the executive leadership of the parent company set a new course for the company by engaging in a global dialogue with world thought leaders:

> How are successful businesses going to grow? In 1999, we had what we called a "global dialogue" where key thought leaders from around the world came and met with the senior leadership, so basically, [the CEO] and his staff, for a two-day session, and the question we asked those people was "what does a successful company in the next century need to do"?

Exhibit 3 shows how the alignment and intent dimensions combine to fill out each conception of sustainability.

Value of the Three Conceptions of Business Sustainability Framework

The aim of a typological framework is not to be exactly true but to be pragmatically useful. Although all three organizations in this study made claim and were pointed to as sectoral leaders in sustainability, a range of meanings of sustainability was at work across these companies. This typological approach to organizing the ideas put forward by managers in these organizations has usefully delineated a picture of the range of meanings.

Taken together, these three conceptions hang as a triptych, a three-paneled picture, depicting in bold strokes the various ways of thinking and talking about sustainability in the current of these organizations. Some of our respondents pointed to the vague nature of the concept of sustainability, and of the broad, nonprescriptive nature of the triple bottom line as somewhat problematic, potentially leading to confusion among organizational leaders and members—yet each offered her or his own interpretation of what the concept meant. Others felt that the inherently integrative nature of the concepts allowed for a shift in thinking, and for exploratory dialogue and action. By assembling these three conceptions of sustainability as coherent wholes with dimensions of intent and alignment, we hope to help focus and facilitate the necessary organizational dialogue to explore these ideas, and to stretch thinking.

Implications for Key HR Processes

This three conceptions framework holds a number of implications for the HRM function in an organization that is intent on building thinking, dialogue, and action toward TBL sustainability. Key HR processes could be instrumental in helping to build consensus on the general conception of sustainability within an organization, and could help to build momentum for change by leveraging the alignment dimensions identified in our framework. To illustrate, we offer here some ideas for contribution through processes in organization development/change management, strategic human resource planning, talent management/staffing, and training and development. These ideas are summarized in Exhibit 4, and are intended to stimulate thinking for HR leaders, who can then explore further the implications of our framework for their own organizational context. We have employed this framework within several organizational settings and have found it highly useful as a stimulus to generative and strategic dialogue.

Organization Development/Change Management Processes

Organization development and change management processes could be critical in facilitating generative dialogue framed by the three conceptions framework, allowing senior managers to examine their own conceptions of sustainability, to understand others', and to explore the implications. OD functions—alternately positioned as organization effectiveness or organizational learning roles—often serve as provocateurs of reflective practice and learning in organizations, and are well-placed to initiate exploration or provoke thinking within organizational strategy formulation or business planning processes. General consensus on sustainability intent could be integrated into formal change management processes within projects

EXHIBIT 4

Implications for Key HR Processes

Key HR Processes	HR Process Roles Within and Across the Conceptions of Sustainability
Organization Effectiveness/ Change Management	■ Drive dialogue on triple bottom line sustainability among senior executives and levels of managers to build consensus on conception of sustainability ■ Develop communication/enrollment processes to link functional work of all divisions toward key sustainability intent
Strategic Human Resource Planning	■ Focus HR strategy content to support business directions under sustainability intent ■ Substantively align human and organizational capital to the sustainability vision and the business strategies ■ Develop HR staffing plans to support divestiture and acquisition of new businesses
Talent Management/Staffing	■ Meaningfully integrate sustainability intent and objectives into recruitment and selection processes to seek fit and build commitment in new hires ■ Identify critical talent/job families to support current sustainability intent objectives ■ Build pool of human capital (knowledge, skills) toward sustainability-framed strategies to help create new business opportunities from the inside out
Training & Development	■ Develop leadership capacity toward sustainability alignment objectives—"role of leaders"—under relevant conception ■ Infuse development processes (mentoring, career development) with sustainability intent to give context to future capability building ■ Focus skill-building to support sustainability-framed business objectives

and business initiatives, in order to connect the functional work of employees to the sustainability vision and intent, and to help enroll all employees in new directions.

Strategic Human Resource Planning Processes

HR strategy and planning processes should focus on building HR strategy to anticipate and support the sustainability-framed business strategies, and substantively to connect human and organization capital-building strategies. The latter is done in many organizations through the use of strategy maps (Kaplan & Norton, 2004), which help to draw links from intangible resources to corporate strategy. Framing the corporate strategy under a particular sustainability intent provides context and content for the strategic development of intangible assets. HR planning processes are also critical in helping to implement new directions. One organization we studied had recently divested a significant proportion of its business assets, and had acquired new businesses to support its strategic re-orientation; success of the venture depended on the company's ability to line up the necessary human capital (knowledge and skills) and organization capital (leadership, teamwork, and a positive culture) to manage the change and integrate the new businesses.

Talent Management/Staffing Processes

Companies that perform well on measures of social performance have been found to hold greater attractiveness to job seekers, particularly high quality job seekers with relatively many options (Schmidt Albinger & Freeman, 2000). To that end, sustainability-focused companies would do well to ensure the corporate TBL ethos is meaningfully integrated into talent management processes, particularly in marketing the company to new recruits. Selection processes should be directed toward building a human capital pool to support current and potentially emerging directions. For example, suppose a company was moving toward biotechnology applications in India, a shift from its traditional businesses and markets; selection processes should seek capable recruits for that business who are interested in expatriate assignments, or who reside in the host country. Too often, HR processes significantly lag behind business strategy processes and firms are deficient in the human capital necessary to execute on strategic plans. By anticipating directions based on sustainability-focused dialogue, firms can proactively build the pool of human capital and create new opportunities for the firm from the inside out. Strategic talent segmentation (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005) across value creation modes in an organization's portfolio—current and potential future businesses—will ensure that the HR function stays current, and even leads on organizational direction.

Strategic talent segmentation across value creation modes in an organization's portfolio—current and potential future businesses—will ensure that the HR function stays current, and even leads on organizational direction.

Training and Development

There are different roles for leaders across our three conceptions of sustainability framework, and leadership development processes can be framed in a way that segments today's needs from tomorrow's, in order to support new directions. All development processes, mentoring and career development, for example, can be infused with business sustainability themes. If triple bottom line sustainability intent helps to focus the organization on a range of future options, then that can serve as a context for capability building for the future. Specific skill building can also be directed by the sustainability vision of the organization. As one manager in our study said:

> Over a 20-year time frame, you can build whatever core competencies you want. If food, water, and energy are going to be the things that are really important to the planet 20 years from now, and people are going to be looking to companies to help us out of the bind that we are getting ourselves into, why couldn't we play a big role in there?

Conclusion

In this research we have apprehended the meanings and concepts in use by social actors—managers and executives—in real settings: organizations that had publicly embraced a triple bottom line framework for conceptualizing, managing, and reporting on their business. The three conceptions of sustainability we encountered in these leader organizations, namely balanced operational, integrated operational, and integrated strategic, can be plainly characterized as follows. To practicing managers, triple bottom line sustainability can mean:

1. We optimize our primary objective function, that is, making a profit, by managing the constraints imposed by our stakeholders and thereby sustain our business;
2. We build sustainable competitive advantage in our industry by working to integrate synergistically the interests of our key organizational stakeholders—employees, customers, investors, communities, and suppliers in particular;
3. We leverage our stakeholder integration model at a global level, and seek new ventures in new markets that simultaneously remedy global problems and make a profit in the process.

There is a critical role for human resource management within and across these conceptions, both in building consensus on the sustainability intent (and perhaps stretching thinking in the organization through facilitated dialogue), and on building alignment capacity in areas such as organizational leadership, values

clarification and interpretation, and on strategy-specific capabilities development. Forward thinking HR leaders in triple bottom line sustainability-focused organizations can use the framework offered here to bring clarity to the strategic dialogue in their companies, and can help build the alignment capacity to convert dialogue to action.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Barry A. Colbert, PhD, is a senior partner with Stakeholder Research Associates Canada and teaches strategic management, business and sustainability, and human resource management in Canada and Europe. Dr. Colbert's research is centered on the ways and means by which organizations align a vision for sustainability, business strategy, and the strategic development of human capital. In addition to research initiatives conducted across government, business, and civil society organizations, Dr. Colbert has over 20 years experience in the steel industry where the focus of his work was on organization development, change management, leadership development, team development, and quality improvement.

Elizabeth Kurucz, PhD, is the Associate Director, Academic, of the Erivan K. Haub Program in Business and Sustainability at the Schulich School of Business, York University, and is a senior partner with Stakeholder Research Associates Canada. Dr. Kurucz's research in the area of organizational behavior focuses on understanding mindsets on sustainability, and how they either facilitate or inhibit organizational progress toward more sustainable practice. Dr. Kurucz has conducted research in government, business, and civil society organizations spanning a range of sectors and has written numerous papers and presented at academic forums across North America and Europe.

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