

The Integral Approach, its Sustainability Applications & Influences

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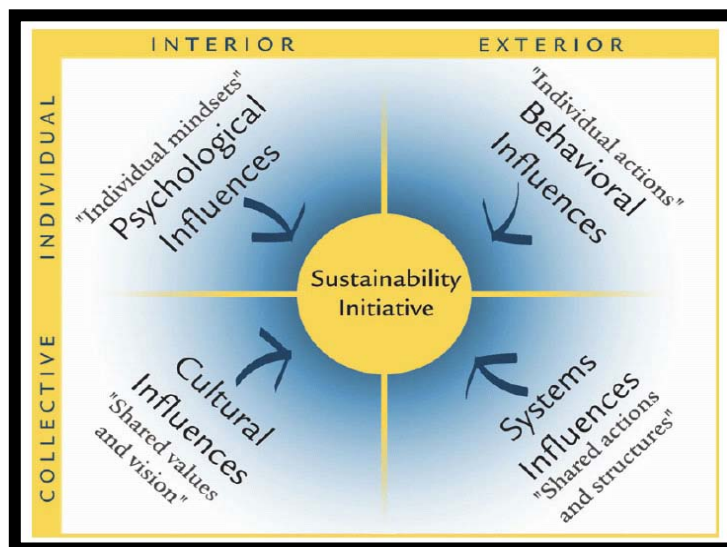
In an age of fragmented and short-term policies, the 'integral' approach is a welcome breath of fresh air – with its attempt to ensure that we always bring our attention to as many salient factors as possible. Little wonder, perhaps, that it has attracted praise from some of the most far-sighted political thought-leaders, including Bill Clinton – who spoke about it at the World Economic Forum – and former Tony Blair Policy Unit guru Geoff Mulgan, who once urged a meeting of the UK Government’s key strategic thinkers to learn about the integral approach and seek to apply it in government policies.

In the sustainability arena it has influenced figures including L. Hunter Lovins, who co-authored "Natural Capitalism - Creating the Next Industrial Revolution" and "Factor Four Doubling Wealth, Halving Resource Use". (And Al Gore even named one key integral book as a favourite, after Bill Clinton had given him a copy).

The four quadrants: engaging with all perspectives

One simple yet encompassing model at the heart the integral approach - that many people find particularly valuable - is termed the '4 Quadrants' - or, in other words, the four views that can be taken of any strategy or issue: from the 'I', 'we', 'it' and 'its' perspectives.

The four Integral Quadrant perspectives - as they impact on a sustainability initiative.

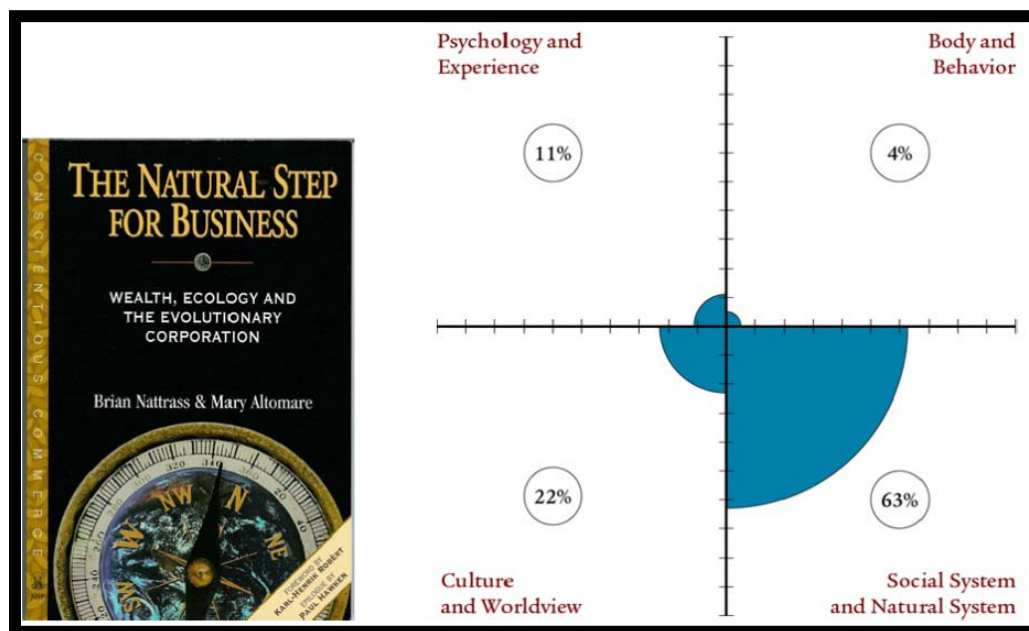


Graphic: Barrett Brown, The Four Worlds of Sustainability - drawing upon four universal perspectives to support sustainability initiatives (Integral Institute, 2007).

We all use these four perspectives - though perhaps without exactly realising it. The 'I' quadrant covers an individual's interior world: personal values, meanings, feelings and states of mind (the subjective or intentional). The 'we' quadrant is our shared interiors of cultural worldviews and organisational values (the intersubjective or cultural). The 'it' is the measurable and visible aspects of the individual body and our behaviour and skills (the objective or behavioural), and the 'its' quadrant is the external systems of organisations and nature (the interobjective or social).

One example of the usage of the quadrants to analyse sustainability initiatives was contained in a report called "Leadership and the Corporate Sustainability Challenge: Mindsets in Action", by Avastone Consulting. The report undertook a corporate sustainability study of ten companies - and included a scan around all 4 Quadrants to uncover where organisations have faced the biggest problems 'getting here' [i.e. where they currently are, in sustainability terms] - as well as where their focus should be in 'moving forward' to a greater level of sustainability.

Out of balance: the results of an analysis of a leading business sustainability book, showing what percentage of content focuses on each of the four quadrants.

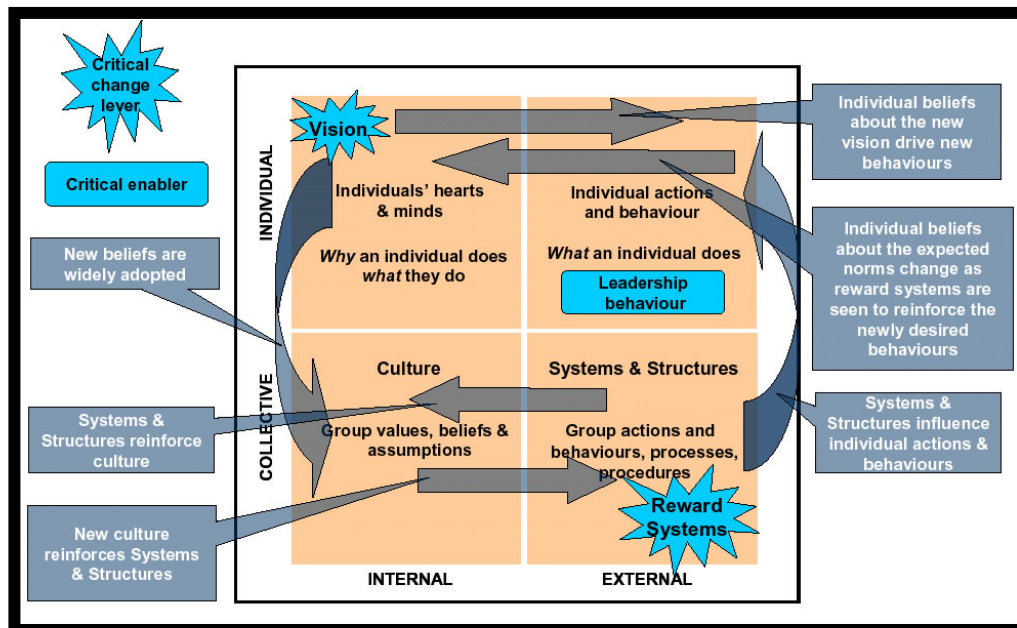


Graphic: Barrett, Brown, "The Four Worlds of Sustainability - drawing upon four universal perspectives to support sustainability initiatives, Integral Institute, 2007.

So often, however, one quadrant will get almost all the attention – as shown in the chart by the Integral Institute’s sustainability researcher Barrett Brown of the relative quadrant emphases of the content in the book *The Natural Step for Business*. (Though very unbalanced, that book actually gives greater emphasis to the often-neglected left-hand quadrants than most other sustainability approaches, and has become “arguably the most successful and popular sustainability framework used worldwide.”)

The disastrous consequences of neglecting one or more quadrants, though, can be all too real. For instance, a university and an FE college, near Article 13’s offices, recently merged – but the left-hand quadrants were overlooked, with the focus instead only on the merging of information and technological systems, such as finance and payroll systems. This is not an uncommon occurrence, as the left quadrants are not made up of visible and easily measurable ‘hard’ systems, in the way the two right-hand quadrants are. The result of the neglect of cultural and attitudinal differences, in this case, was that the merger has now failed – and the two institutions are currently undergoing de-merger.

What does an organisational culture change effort look like - if it engages all four quadrants, in an integral way? Integral coach Stuart Black outlines one answer for us.



Source: Stuart Black, XCD Services Limited.

One way that organisations have used the integral approach's four Quadrants to illuminate problems is to run an issue-focused participative group brainstorm covering first problems, and then solutions, around all the Quadrants. I've run one such Integral Quadrants workshop with Article 13, looking at all the facets of the problems, and then the solutions, around the topic: "Why are organisations failing to make a step-change to respond flexibly/creatively to the opportunities within the sustainability agenda?"

Given the clarity and comprehensiveness of the integral approach, it is little wonder that people are using it in this organisational context. Renowned management guru Prof. Warren Bennis has said: "[Leading Integral theorist Ken] Wilber has created a unifying system for this chaotic age we're living in. The Integral approach to organisations and management is the wave of the future...the direction the most exciting research, new methods and action will be going in."

Spotlight on the upper left quadrant: the hidden mindsets of leaders that could determine sustainability success

The Integral approach has also helped to highlight how leaders' ways of thinking have the potential to grow and mature through a number of increasingly complex mindsets.

In a finding that is laden with implications for those who are responsible for driving sustainability strategies, research has found that those leaders with the more complex - later stage - mindsets are far more likely to be able to successfully transform their organisations than others. This leadership development level has also been found to predict leadership effectiveness, using a 360-degree feedback measure. Such leaders have also proven to be better at "creating a compelling vision and managing performance."

Leaders who inhabit these less common, more mature stages are also better at thinking over the long-term - a key component in planning for sustainability: "Strategists [i.e. late stage leaders] tend to have long time-frames - up to 20 years - and don't aim for short-term gain", explains Integral Institute member

Professor Bill Torbert, who described this research in an award-winning 2005 Harvard Business Review article - Seven Transformations of Leadership - co-authored with David Rooke.

Interestingly, leaders at the 'Strategist' stage of maturity show a rare combination of 'fierce resolve and humility'. Such leaders are dubbed - in Jim Collins' management bestseller Good to Great - Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't - 'Level 5' leaders. They are humble yet tenacious - and highly successful.

The hidden power of the developmental assessment of CEO maturity level was emphasised by strategy + business journal's respected 'Culture and Change' columnist Art Kleiner in one recent article: "there's a European investment firm that predicts its share values by evaluating the strata [i.e. leadership maturity stage] of various CEOs. But like many [leader developmental level-aware] business groups, it doesn't advertise its method."

The importance of leadership maturity is becoming more widely known, if gradually. It was at the heart of a report called Flying High - A new look at local government leadership, transformation and the power of conversation, produced by a think-tank put together by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers. Amongst the think-tank members was Michael Pitt, the Chief Executive of Kent County Council, where the top layer of 90+ managers all undertook a leadership maturity assessment.

"An important step for chief executives is to be aware of their own leadership 'maturity', explains the report, "especially if they want to transform their organisation and work through many of the dilemmas of the 'transition zone' within which there are periods of intense uncertainty and risk taking."

"It is not always necessary for the chief executive to be post-conventional [i.e. mature/late stage] but it is important that they develop or recruit this capacity or give more time and space for those who demonstrate post-conventional behaviour. This is sometimes difficult, as quite often postconventional individuals, by their very nature, will be challenging, disturbing of the status quo and more likely to be seen as 'mavericks'."

There are other stage development assessment tools available too: Brian Hall's 'values technology', for instance, can automatically scan CSR reports, mission statements, annual reports and suchlike to determine exactly where the content is situated across an 8-stage model with a universal list of the 125 common values. When combined with assessments of an individual's values, it becomes possible to identify the gaps between an individual's values and the organisation's values, between the organisation's values and its sustainability mission statement, and so on.

The late Elliot Jaques, a veteran researcher on complexity levels in both people and organisational roles, and author of Executive Leadership - a practical guide to managing complexity, has suggested that if a CSR executive role is placed at too low an organisational level, the strategy will fail.

Unfortunately most training of leaders is skills-based, or informational, rather than transformational - and any growth into these higher levels of leadership maturity is likely to be rather superficial and 'brittle'. The good news, though, is that there are also a number of examples of successful transformative trainings, that have led to real - empirically-verified - shifts.

How well does the sustainability message play with people at different values stages?

Sustainability messages are - unfortunately - often conveyed in the language beloved of people at one value level, even though this can deeply alienate exactly the people they are supposed to appeal to. Or - to use the language of one Maslow-based values segmentation model that is often used by experts to guide sustainability initiatives - so-called 'concerned ethical' advocates of sustainability often badly mis-

communicate to the segment known as the ‘prospectors’, and their leading edge, the ‘now people’ - one of the most sought-after targets for retail brands.

“The prospectors don’t like to be told they are doing anything wrong, or that they ought to give anything up,” explain the behaviour change strategists Chris Rose, Pat Dade and John Scott.

“‘Concerned ethicals’ are likely to do both, and particularly annoy or intimidate ‘now people’. All in all, if an effort becomes led by concerned ethicals, or is versed in their terms, it is likely to appear ‘worthy’ and unattractive to the 40% [of the UK population] who are prospectors.”

This particular levels segmentation model – developed over decades by Pat Dade - is being put to use by organisations including The National Trust, The Centre for Sustainable Energy, the RSPB, the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Energy Saving Trust, ActionAid, Sony BMG and Henley Management College. The general insight here is summed up in this sage advice from one of the veteran researchers on differences in people’s values, Dr Don Beck, the founder of ‘Spiral Dynamics’: “If what you are about to say or do looks and sounds good to you, don’t do it! (Unless, of course, your listeners or readers have the same value systems as you)”.

Fortunately, commercial organisations are increasingly coming round to these insights. MTV, for example uses a fictional but hyper-real-looking young woman called ‘Cherry Girl’ to push socially responsible causes: “The idea with Cherry Girl is to show a lifestyle that is fun and fulfilling, and, as a by-product, happens to be sustainable”.

The future of CSR will see a shift from “being preachy and telling people what they should be thinking,” says John Jackson, MTV’s vice-president of social responsibility.

The future for sustainability initiatives?

I hope that this brief overview might prompt you to join others in applying the lenses of the 4 Integral Quadrants when analysing problems and developing new strategies. And it has also highlighted the importance of later stage leadership and the innovative and post-conventional perspectives – and capacity to transform organisations - that it can offer to sustainability. How might your recruitment and training practices reflect these leadership insights? Finally, don’t forget to become aware of the values of those you are communicating to, as they may be very different to your own.

Case study: The green building industry

Founded in 1992, ‘What’s Working’ has built its reputation on showing both builders and homeowners “the importance of integrating exterior social, economic, and political systems with the interior motivations and value systems of each set of stakeholders,” explains Barrett Brown, co-director of the Integral Sustainability Centre at the Integral University. What’s Working founder David Johnson described his approach in a paper titled Green Building Market Transformation through Integral Communication. David conducts training for hundreds of building industry professionals each year and his Integral approach has influenced the construction of tens of thousands of green homes built across the United States.

Further reading:

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