Responsible Management Education: Debating Sustainability

**Date:** Friday 29 July 2011  
**Time:** 12:30pm – 2:00pm  
**Venue:** Building N, Room N1.22, Caulfield Campus, Monash University

On the last Friday of July (29 July 2011), 18 people gathered to hear four speakers discuss and debate “sustainability”. The speakers were Wendy Stubbs, an academic teaching at Monash including in the MBA; Patrick Ross, Regional President of Robert Bosch (Aust) and also Advisory Board member of the Department of Management; Janet Stanley from the Monash Sustainability Institute and previously at the Brotherhood of St Laurence; and Geoff Rose from the Monash Sustainability Institute and also the Faculty of Engineering.

Convener: Ken Coghill  
Speakers: Janet Stanley, Wendy Stubbs, Patrick Ross and Geoff Rose

Wendy began proceedings by succinctly outlining definitions of sustainability development and the inclusion in this definition of economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainability.

Patrick had prepared a case study which he used to illustrate how sustainability is impacting on the business world. He used a real-life case he was familiar with from his work at Robert Bosch. The case identified how competition, legislation and changing expectations had impacted negatively on a medium-sized local business when it did not adapt to a changing environment. He observed that this was a lost opportunity for an Australian business which had not foreseen the changes required to adapt to “sustainability” expectations and legislation.

Janet’s presentation approached the topic by outlining the fuzziness of some of the definitions of sustainability. She also linked sustainability and poverty in developing countries as well as the different impacts sustainability goals have on the individual, household, neighbourhood, groups within society eg organisations and government, national, and international arenas. Janet also discussed the complications which ideology and politics bring to the under-researched area of the sustainability debate. Janet finished her presentation on a positive note by outlining a number of positive approaches which might be taken to ensure a sustainable future.

The final speaker was Geoff whose presentation used a number of models to explain the sustainability phenomena. He used the three-legged Sustainability Stool: People, Planet and
Economy. Another conceptual tool he used was the Sustainability Ladder which identifies a way to categorise people’s ideas about sustainability. The ladder has five rungs beginning with the Counter Sustainability rung – people located here illustrate opposition to sustainable approaches. Superficial Sustainability is the second rung of the ladder – this is the superficial or limited effect approach (Greenwash). The third rung is Weak Sustainability, where people on this part of the ladder take the approach that all forms of capital are interchangeable and that they reduce the rate of depletion or damage to natural capital. Moving up the ladder, is the Strong Sustainability rung when there is a retention and growth of natural capital. At the top rung is a Very Strong or “Ideal” Sustainability – at this level, there are developing ideas; steady state economics, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and environmental justice.

After the formal presentations, the debate was opened up to the audience where a number of pertinent questions were asked of the speakers. Wendy was asked to identify what differences there were between the concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development.

In response to a question about sustainability in Australian businesses, Patrick responded that in his experience Australian businesses were very laid back in their approach to a long-term horizon, which was impacting on how businesses often didn’t treat sustainability as a serious threat to the way they were doing business. Patrick noted that Universities had a strong role to play in training the current and next generation of managers to understand the large shifts which the managers of the future need to understand and be able to put into action.

If you are interested in more detail, see the presentations by Patrick, Janet and Geoff linked on this PRME site.