How Can One Align Environmental, Social and Business Values?  
(Lost in Bendigo*)

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Have you ever been in a car (or organization) that is making good time (or working people very hard) but is not heading in the direction to reach the desired destination? I have – in Bendigo. The tendency is to speed up, not ask directions or turn around.

Many companies and organizations have sustainability efforts and programs that live in a vacuum or are at the fringes of the ‘real business.’ These companies have sustainability meetings and then everyone goes back to their real jobs, much like what happened in the early days of building organizational diversity. While these meetings create ideas, excitement and activity, the real issue is that no one can make the ‘tangible’ business case and, in many cases, the business management, innovation/technology and marketing people are not even in the room.

In the diversity case, the solution was to become organizationally diverse. The result was an unleashing of the full potential of the organization into every business activity and process. Companies learned that receptionists and operators have great ideas if given information on the business objectives and the opportunity to participate with their ideas and energy. Region and country leaders were given both authority and responsibility to run their local businesses since they knew the markets, customers and culture better than people from ‘corporate.’ What a difference when human potential is unleashed!

The power of sustainability in business can be viewed in much the same way. Why keep sustainability frameworks, practices and empowering human energy based on personal values in one pocket of the organization when it can contribute to all aspects of the business?

Let’s explore one way to do this using the ‘business connect’ framework shown below.

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*Bendigo is a beautiful Victorian city about two hours by car NW of Melbourne, Australia.*

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*GEMI Metrics Navigator™  Online Appendix – Full EAG Perspectives*
How Can One Align Environmental, Social and Business Values? (Continued)

To use this framework, simply list your top three business or organization objectives along the top – the picture above uses generic objectives that include doubling revenue, expanding capacity and improving margins. Next, in the ‘financial benefits’ row, list the expected financial benefits that will occur when you meet each of these three business objectives under the current set of actions.

Now, and here is where the fun begins, engage a diverse cross-section of your organization to identify actions that will create environmental and societal values and, at the same time, also increase the financial outcomes. For example, reducing energy in energy-intensive businesses lowers costs and improves margins. For businesses with life-protecting / saving products and services, like pharmaceutical products and safety consulting, creating new and improved products and services in those areas will also increase revenues. For businesses wanting to expand capacity, lowering total waste and emissions while expanding and creating new jobs / income for the community, will generally accelerate community acceptance of the expansion (versus rejection or lengthy delays). Increasing the ‘knowledge intensity’ of your products through design and application know-how, improved product properties through technology and added value through service, generally moves you from commodity to specialty and improves business margins with less physical raw materials.

Using this approach, the framework has now been populated with some example actions that align business objectives and sustainability values.

One caution: creating environmental values that add cost to the business is called ‘environmental regulation or stewardship,’ not sustainable business growth; creating societal values that add cost is called ‘charity,’ not sustainable business growth. Both may be worthwhile and an important part of company values, but call them what they are.

Now, back to Bendigo. Once we asked directions, we arrived at our destination within minutes and began our dinner with a wonderful group of private and public sector leaders. Both wanted to see Bendigo grow in the future by finding good solutions to deal with current and projected severe water shortages. Following the dinner, I was sure that they would do just that in a way that the community, the private sector and the environment will benefit – because their business and sustainability interests were one and the same.