Introduction to Sustainability and the *Accelerator* Tools

And Pre-Reading for Participants in our Courses

What is "Accelerator"?

A set of tools for sustainability. Specifically, it is a set of tools for doing strategic planning, organizational development, training, and analysis, often in a collaborative group setting.

What is "sustainability"?

In general terms, we define sustainability as *the ability of a system to continue working (and evolving) over the long term*. Whether that system is a company, a national economy, a school, the atmosphere-climate system, or one's own body, there exists a set of *conditions and boundaries* that define whether or not the system will be able to keep going and developing positively, or whether it is likely to suffer some kind of shock, decline, or even collapse.

Doing sustainability requires that we understand what those conditions and boundaries are, so that we can help a system to function optimally within them. That often involves change and innovation.

What are the basic elements of sustainability in practice?

The practice of sustainability can be boiled down to these essential ingredients:

1. Systems thinking: Using the tools of system dynamics and general systems insights to understand strengths, vulnerabilities, dependencies, and inter-linkages among components of a system, as well as between the system and the rest of the world.

2. Long-term perspective: Doing sustainability requires thinking well beyond the "next quarter" or even the next fiscal year, and thinking in 5-10 year time horizons.

3. Collaboration across disciplines and boundaries: For sustainability to work in practice, people with different kinds of expertise must work together, share information, develop innovations, and implement them. Working in "silos" runs counter to good sustainability practice.

4. Ethics and accountability: Sustainability involves "doing well by doing good," but it also involves setting clear goals, monitoring performance, and reporting on progress.

5. Initiating, promoting, and managing change: Sustainability involves innovation, and innovation involves processes to help people adopt, adapt, and implement new ideas.

6. Personal and professional development: Management for sustainability places continuous challenges on executives to continuously improve their own capacities to lead, to understand and support their colleagues, and to facilitate innovation and change.

What are the tools in the Accelerator?

The Accelerator is a suite of tools developed over the course of more than two decades of work on sustainability. Each of the four main tools is actually a toolbox in itself, with several different applications. Note that the Accelerator is *not* a set of computer programs. It comes in the form of manuals, slide sets, spreadsheets, and other documents that guide you in running workshops or performing analyses. These tools include:

1. Compass is a tool for sustainability orientation, assessment, stakeholder engagement, training and communication. The tools in Compass are based on the Sustainability Compass, which makes the whole-systems aspect of sustainability easy to remember and to work with.

This tool is named for its core image and framework: a compass with the four directional points, North-East-South-West, replaced by the four key dimensions of sustainability: **Nature** (environment and resources), **Economy** (investment and innovation), **Society** (accountability and responsibility), and **Well-Being** (health, happiness, and quality of life).*

2. StrateSphere. This tool is focused on strategy, and includes many practical applications of the **VISIS Method** (formerly known as the ISIS Method), used for analyzing specific issues or general organizational contexts from a sustainability perspective, and for doing strategic planning. Applying the tools in StrateSphere starts with *creating a foundation* through education on systems and sustainability, and choosing an appropriate vision and framework.

The tools in StrateSphere guide the user through the five stages of reflection and analysis in the VISIS Method:

- **Vision:** Setting clear goals, based on an understanding of sustainability

- **Indicators and Information:** Gathering data (as well as subjective impressions) on key trends

- **Systems Analysis:** Using the trends as a starting point to study linkages and levers for change

- **Innovation:** Identifying the most beneficial and high-impact interventions to make in the system

- **Strategy:** Comprehensively mapping the pathway to successful implementation

The final stage is happens *after* the analysis and planning is complete: **Action** to make it happen.

3. Pyramid. Pyramid is a workshop tool that combines the Sustainability Compass and the VISIS Method in a highly interactive and dynamic group exercise. Often the exercise includes building a physical model of a Pyramid that reflects the stages in the process, and has four sides to reflect the four directions of the Sustainability Compass.

During a Pyramid Workshop, people work in small teams as well as a large group to analyze key issues, share their findings, and develop new ideas for positive and beneficial change that will help lead to enhanced sustainability.


A completed Pyramid workshop in Aqaba, Jordan, Nov 2013, with government officials from five countries. The Pyramid has been used in dozens of countries, by large companies, cities, schools, universities, and governments.

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* The Sustainability Compass is also easy to integrate with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, or "SDGs". Please see the Compass manual and slides for more information.

The conclusion of the workshop involves making a commitment to implementation, which is symbolized by the Capstone of the Pyramid.

4. Amoeba. This set of tools is for understanding organizational and cultural dynamics related to innovation, planning for change, and building competence in the art of "change agentry" (promoting effective change processes). It includes a roll-playing simulation game, and worksheets designed to support strategic thinking, planning, and decision making around how to introduce and spread innovative ideas in a culture or organization. Amoeba is named for its central metaphor: thinking of cultural groups as "amoebas" that absorb new ideas at their edges, and shift position as a result. The tool is based on classic innovation diffusion theory, augmented by fifteen years of consulting experience in sustainable development.
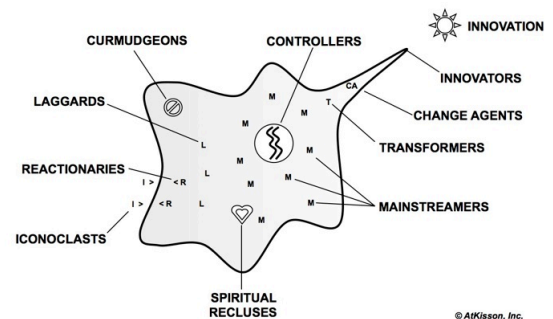
Accelerator helps you make change at leverage points. What is a "leverage point"?

In the systems language that we use in Accelerator and as part of our courses, a **leverage point** is a place within a system where an intervention can have high multiplier effects. For example, if you discover that your workers are routinely doing something that results in a leakage of dangerous waste into the environment, you could establish a clean-up routine. But a higher-leverage solution would be to train the workers to *change* their routines. And even *higher*-leverage solution would be to create a purchasing policy that limits or eliminates the purchase of such waste, and results in a better product or service that has lower costs. Finally, the greatest leverage would come from changing mindsets, so that everyone — from CEO to line staff — understands and acts from an understanding that hazardous waste is to be eliminated. This is a simple example, but often the best leverage points are more subtle and difficult to find in a very complex system. The tools and methods we will use are designed to help you find high-impact leverage points more quickly.

What about standards and guidelines? How does Accelerator work with those?

We believe that there is a core set of generic concepts and skills that are always essential in sustainability work, regardless of which set of standards or guidelines you may also be using. Accelerator provides support for applying those essential concepts, in *any* context. For example, standards vary from place to place and change over time; but sustainability work *always* involves the use of indicators, the application of systems thinking, and innovation processes. Accelerator helps you (and the people you work with) master these fundamental skills and use them effectively.

In our courses, we do not spend a great deal of time reviewing current standards and guidelines for sustainability management. We prefer to invest your precious time in activities that can only happen in a live workshop setting: interacting, sharing ideas and experiences, collaborating to create deeper understanding and to identify high-impact directions. You can absorb technical information about current standards more effectively in other ways.

If you are not familiar with the standard guidelines associated with improving organizational sustainability, here is a short guide to some of the most widely used ones. Accelerator works well with all of these, and many more:

1. Global Compact: A set of guidelines for corporate social responsibility developed and launched by the United Nations in the year 2000. It asks companies to commit to 10 principles in 4 key areas: human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption. Participation is voluntary: companies make a public commitment to the Compact and then are expected to report on their progress in implementation. Non-performing companies can be expelled from the membership roster. Over 8,000 businesses currently participate in the Global Compact. Information including reports and resources are available here: https://www.unglobalcompact.org/

2. Global Reporting Initiative: The "GRI" is a non-governmental organization that develops and promotes standards for organizational sustainability reporting. It defines the indicators that should be used, the standards for materiality, the appropriate format and content for reporting, and provides guidelines for how to have a report certified at various levels alignment and verification. Thousands of organizations have issued sustainability reports that are at some level of alignment with the GRI guidelines. For more information, including a database of corporate reports: http://globalreporting.org

3. ISO 26000: People familiar with the ISO standards may know about the 9000 series (on quality management) or ISO 14001 (the environmental management standard). However, ISO 26000 is different: it is not a standard, but a set of guidelines for how businesses and other organizations can operate in a socially, environmentally, and ethically responsible way. ISO 26000 is entirely voluntary but is spreading rapidly, especially in the European Union. Basic info, a video, and a link to download the guidance document is here: http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/iso26000.htm

4. IIRC - International Integrated Report Council:
The IIRC is a multi-stakeholder, non-governmental process that is defining how companies can integrate their ordinary annual financial report together with their social, environmental, and overall sustainability reporting. They describe it this way: "An integrated report is a concise communication about how an organization's strategy, governance, performance and prospects, in the context of its external environment, lead to the creation of value in the short, medium and long term." 70 countries have participated in the pilot program to produce integrated reports. For information: http://www.theiirc.org/

5. OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises: Aimed at larger organizations, these guidelines "are the most comprehensive set of government-backed recommendations on responsible business conduct in existence today. The governments adhering to the Guidelines aim to encourage and maximise the positive impact MNEs can make to sustainable development and enduring social progress." Governments that commit to the Guidelines must then promote them to multi-national corporations within their jurisdiction — though adherence is "non-binding." The topic areas are very similar to the Global Compact. For information: http://mneguidelines.oecd.org/

AtKisson Group resources that are also available to you

As a participant in one of our training courses or a licensee to our Accelerator tools, you gain access to a wide network of expertise in sustainability around the world. We have a presence in over a dozen countries, and our affiliates and associates include centers of expertise in business schools, systems thinking consultancies, experts in ISO 26000, engineering and chemistry, organizational management, and more.

Alan AtKisson's books — used in university courses and in companies — can also provide you with a very readable introduction to the field, if you want to take a "deep dive" into the topic. And please check out our free resources for learning about the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at 17Goals.org.

Believing Cassandra: How to be an optimist in a pessimist's world (1999, Routledge/ Earthscan new edition 2010)
Alan's first book — a sustainability bestseller in 1999, completely updated for the new edition in 2010 — remains one of the most comprehensive, engaging, and readable introductions to sustainability available. Paul Hawken, in his foreword to the second edition, likened the book to a "neurotransmitter" that helps readers make the connections between sustainability, their professional work, and their own lives. *Believing Cassandra* was called "Book of the Year" by the *Seattle Press*.

The Sustainability Transformation: How to make positive change in challenging times (updated paperback edition Routledge/Earthscan 2010)
Alan's second book is an exciting introduction to the professional practice of sustainability. Again the style mixes personal stories with clear explanations, tools, and case studies. The Sustainability Transformation introduces the reader to the VISIS Method (formerly called ISIS Method), developed by Alan in the late 1990s, and the Accelerator tools, which have spread around the world, helping people do sustainability more quickly and more effectively. The book's middle chapters also dig deeply into the ethics of sustainability practice, the business case for pursuing it, and the challenges and opportunities facing anyone who decides to become a sustainability change agent.

Sustainability is for Everyone (2013) is a little book (50 pages) that was originally written for other sustainability professionals, but it was quickly adopted as an introduction to the topic. It has been translated into several languages and used by business schools and companies as a way of orienting their employees, students and even alumni to what sustainability means in practice. The book helps you "lift your thoughts above the fray" and discover new ways to think about, and to communicate, the real meaning of sustainability.

We would also like to make you aware of the business and sustainability simulation game, **"Green & Great,"** in which players work with a team and a computer interface to manage an imaginary global consulting firm, in a very competitive market. Sustainability demands increase over time (as they do in the real world) ... so your team had better be able to adapt! You can find out more about the game, and the one-day training workshop that can also be run with it (Competitive Sustainability), here:
https://greenandgreat.games4sustainability.com/

For more, please see http://AtKisson.com, and especially the "Blog" feature. You can also sign up for our free newsletter, *WaveFront*.