

SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFLECTION: A GOOD COMBINATION?

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Abstract

In the current global business environment companies continually face a range of very complex and multi-faceted challenges. Consequently, directors, members of corporate boards and managers need to implement innovative resources, capabilities and strategies to ensure both short and long term success and survival. One possible strategy is a tridimensional approach to Sustainable Development (SD) which includes economic, social and environmental dimensions at an equal level combined with practical SD initiatives, programs and strategies. In addition, reflection is a crucial skill in fast changing business environments as managers and practitioners who use reflection take more thoughtful, purposeful and value-driven action. The author accepts that reflection is a deliberate and complex analytical process to integrate knowledge with the demands of the situation as part of innovative practice, to integrate past experiences and consider influence of future hopes and fears to open a range of possible alternatives while simultaneously taking into account other people's perspectives. The paper highlights the possibility to combine SD and reflection and describes generic guidelines to enhance practical implementation and highlights both management and research implications relevant to a practical context.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Reflection, Practical implementation

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1. Introduction

Companies continually face very demanding, fiercely competitive and unstable economic conditions within a changing global environment as daily realities which necessitate that they learn, adapt and increase performance. These challenges are combined with ongoing technological development and corporate restructuring. This means that directors, members of corporate boards and managers are implementing new and innovative resources, capabilities and strategies to deal with and manage the turbulent environment and ensure success or even survival of the company over both the short and long-term (Weldy and Gilles, 2010; Weldy, 2009; Kriegesmann *et al.*, 2005; Pfeffer, 1994). One such strategy is an integrated and multi-dimensional approach to Sustainable Development (SD). This multidimensional approach is combined with practical SD initiatives, programs, strategies, policies and procedures to develop and maintain a competitive advantage and address both global and long-term challenges (Baumgartner and Korhonen, 2010; Clulow, *et al.*, 2003).

In the context of this paper, the author adopts an integrated, tridimensional and triple-bottom-line approach to SD with the implication that SD includes economic, social and environmental dimensions at an equal level and implies that equity, growth and

environmental maintenance are simultaneously possible. This approach is similar to the view of the United Nations (UN, 1992; UN, 1997; WCED, 1987) and several authors (Elkington, 2006; Hart and Milstein, 2003; Linnenluecke and Griffiths, 2010; Henriques and Richardson, 2004). This clarification of the definition provides consistency of understanding throughout this paper. SD is not a new concept and in the current global, dynamic and competitive business environment it is imperative that companies incorporate SD at all levels and into all initiatives to respond to both internal and external demands. This line of thinking needs a creative approach and the view by Einstein that "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it" (<http://www.einstein-quotes.com/ThinkingKnowledge.html>) provides both an inspiration and a challenge.

Managers and practitioners work in a constantly fast changing world that demands action, multitasking through different technologies, and competition in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly shifting world. Managers and practitioners need to quickly learn new skills, make independent decisions and find creative solutions (Barlett and Ghoshal, 2002; Khandekar and Sharma, 2005; Brooks 2005; Pemberton, *et al.*, 2001). Reflection is a very important skill to managers and practitioners in fast

changing business environments as it is through reflection that practical experiences become meaningful and they are enabled to analyse a situation, collect relevant facts, sort through alternatives and develop creative solutions (Bannigan and Moores, 2009; Barlett and Ghoshal, 2002; Khandekar and Sharma, 2005; Brooks 2005; Pemberton, *et al.*, 2001). Managers and practitioners who build reflection into their decision making processes take more thoughtful, purposeful, meaningful and value-driven action (Hedberg, 2009). Furthermore, the intellectual capital or the knowledge of people is a crucial strategic resource to develop and maintain competitive advantage (Weldy and Gilles, 2010; Weldy, 2009; Kriegesmann *et al.*, 2005; Pfeffer, 1994). Another line of reasoning emphasizes effective management and sharing of knowledge combined with organizational learning enhances not only competitive advantage but also business performance. Consequently, companies need to develop a culture of learning and reflection (Pemberton, *et al.*, 2001). Raelin (2001) added that although managers and practitioners are operating in very fast-paced environments, action without reflection (or reframing) can be fatal to the success of a company.

For the purpose of this paper, the author accepts the definition that reflection is a deliberate and complex analytical process to integrate personal and professional knowledge with the demands of the situation as part of innovative practice, to integrate past experiences into the present situation and consider influence of future hopes, dreams and fears to open a range of possible alternatives while at the same time taking into account other people's perspectives and perceptions. This view is consistent with the view of various authors (Minott, 2009; Hedberg, 2009; Mintzberg, 2004; Seibert and Daudelin, 1999; Thompson and Pascal, 2011).

Based on the previous discussion, the author advocates that the implementation of an integrated SD approach combined with reflection by directors, members of corporate boards, managers and practitioners should assist companies to develop and maintain a competitive advantage.

Following this logic, the following question arose:

- What are the advantages of using ongoing reflection within a SD context?
- What are the generic guidelines that could assist directors, managers and practitioners to implement SD and reflection to maximize tangible and intangible value and impact for the company, practitioners and the community in which the company operates?

The value added contribution of this paper is fourfold. Firstly, although most directors, managers and practitioners understand the importance and crucial role of SD within the company, the paper aims

to further emphasize an integrated and tridimensional approach.

Secondly, the paper discusses the implementation of reflection within the SD business context and highlights the benefits to the individual and the company. Thirdly, the author offers practical suggestions in the form of generic guidelines for directors, managers and practitioners who want to implement SD and reflection. Lastly, the author provides both management and research implications applicable within a practical context.

This theoretical paper is divided into three parts, namely:

- The literature overview which forms the basis for the arguments used in this paper.
- Practical suggestions in the form of generic guidelines which could assist directors, business managers and practitioners to implement SD and reflection.
- Management and research implications with a focus on practical implementation.

2. Literature overview

Sustainable Development (SD)

SD is not a new concept, originated in relation to explicitly environmental (green) issues, has evolved over time and is one of the most widely used words today (Brundtland in Hoverstadt and Bowling, 2005; Baumgartner and Korhonen, 2010; Becker, 2010; Patra, 2009). SD strategies (including economic, social and environmental dimensions) stem from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 which aimed to address urgent environmental protection and socio-economic development problems and the Rio Declaration (Agenda 21, chapter 8.7) which followed and advocated for a National Strategy for SD. This conference was followed by the Commission on Sustainable Development with the aim to monitor and report on implementation (UN, 1992; UN, 1997). As early as 1987 the Brundtland Commission's Report proposed a SD description to include economic, social and environmental dimensions (WCED, 1987). In general SD focuses on the longer term and covers a time span of several generations. One of the key issues in SD is that companies need to work with and fulfill the needs, demands, aspirations and commitments of current generations and stakeholders without compromising the needs, demands, aspirations and commitments of future generations and stakeholders (Becker, 2010; Jabbour and Santos, 2009; Steuerer *et al.*, 2005; Garvare and Johannson, 2010; Patra, 2009; Nguyen and Slater, 2010).

As there are multiple definitions for Sustainable Development (SD) it creates a degree of confusion to the discussions and many challenges to directors and managers who want to implement SD. In addition, some authors regard SD as a value judgment, it means

different things to different people depending on their knowledge, background, perception and values (Becker, 2010; Jabbour and Santos 2008; Wallis, *et al.*, 2010; Velazquez *et al.*, 2011; Prugh and Assadourian, 2003; Filho, 2000). For example, from an economic theory view, SD involves a shift from a growth economy to a steady-state economy. From an environmental view, it means the long-term viability of resource usage and limitation to human impact on ecosystems. Within a socio-biological view, a SD approach should maintain cultural and social interaction systems combined with respect for nature (Velazquez, *et al.*, 2011; Daly, 1996; Edwards, 2005; Gallopin, 2003).

In addition to different perspectives, SD became an intuitive concept that might be mentioned as a goal in any company regardless of what the core business is. Despite the lack of a precise definition of SD considerable consensus has evolved over time in support of the overall view that it is both morally and economically wrong to treat the world as a business in liquidation (Velazquez, *et al.*, 2011; Kliucininkas, 2001; Prugh *et al.*, 2000). Within a practical context SD is sometimes not clearly defined within the company. To further complicate understanding, some areas of SD can only be assessed by inference from the observable and there are not always tested and validated frameworks relevant to a particular company and its context (Becker, 2010; Jabbour and Santos 2008; Wallis, *et al.*, 2010; Velazquez *et al.*, 2011; Prugh and Assadourian, 2003; Filho, 2000). Although there is not complete agreement about the definition of SD due to different and sometimes incompatible interpretations (Esquer *et al.*, 2008) there is a growing consensus that such a definition and understanding must contain economic, social and environmental dimensions (Valezquez, *et al.*, 2011; Byrch *et al.*, 2007).

SD is currently regarded as a critical part of most companies and most directors, managers and practitioners acknowledge its importance. The Accenture and UN Global Compact conducted a survey in 2010 among 766 CEO's worldwide and 93% of these CEO's stated that sustainability is crucial to the long-term success of the company. Furthermore, three quarters of the participants mentioned that they select sustainability strategies to build and protect the product, enhance corporate reputation, grow revenue and potentially decrease cost (Boerner, 2010).

The social, economic and environmental dimensions of SD are interlinked and need concurrent focus and investment to add value. Based on this line of thinking, SD has become popular as it offers the possibility to integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions in a tridimensional and triple bottom line approach during the performance evaluation of businesses. Nevertheless, the implementation presents many challenges. One of those particular challenges is to find a balance among

and achieve excellence in the economic, social and environmental dimensions. While economic performance is usually more easily measurable, the social and environmental impacts are mostly longer term and not always so easily measurable. Furthermore, companies might have particular measures for improving the environmental and social dimensions, but these measures are not always linked to the economic dimension. Although SD is an urgent long-term challenge and despite many efforts (and implementation of sustainable development initiatives at global, national and local levels) varying levels of practical and realistic progress have been made and effective long-term outcomes have been attained in the day-to-day functioning of various companies. SD has in some companies been attained to only a small degree. Furthermore, varying levels of progress have been made regarding development and implementation of national, regional and international policies (Baumgartner and Korhonen, 2010; Hart and Milstein, 2003; Velazquez, *et al.* 2011; Jamali, 2006; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Epstein, *et al.*, 2010).

The focus of SD is more than only accounting for social and environmental impacts. There is evidence that sustainable companies are resilient and that they create economic value, healthy ecosystems and stronger communities. The result is that these companies are better able to survive external changes and shocks. SD needs to integrate economic, social and environmental goals and at the same time draw on the economic, social and environmental information to ensure effective and relevant choices. This approach demands a range of relevant and suitable managerial, technological and institutional innovation (Laughland and Bansal, 2011; D'Amato and Roome, 2009).

Reflection in Business Environment

In the current world (and therefore business context) problems increasingly defy specialized solutions, knowledge and culture is constantly remixed, patterns of employment necessitate flexibility and independence. Although managers and practitioners are operating in a very dynamic and fast-paced environment, action without ongoing reflection can be detrimental to the success and/or survival of a company (Raelin, 2001). Skilled and motivated people are central to create and maintain competitive advantage and sustainable organizational development (Barlett and Ghoshal, 2002; Khandekar and Sharma, 2005). The challenge for practitioners is to move ideas from conception to action and implementation which means to move beyond knowing to doing. Self-reflection and reflective skills are very important when a person tries to act on new information. Tools and techniques that assist individuals to think through ideas and concepts, analyze and probe, make judgments and position the

new content within the person's own context are useful (Hall, 2009).

Reflection is an active, deliberate, structured and purposeful discovery and exploratory process often with unexpected outcomes. This process includes processing information and complicated ideas for which there is not always an obvious solution. In addition, this process needs analysis of knowledge and feelings which usually leads to a new and/or different perspective. Furthermore, reflection needs probing, pondering, wondering, connecting, analyzing and synthesizing (Gray, 2007; Mintzberg, 2004). Raelin (2001) echoed these thoughts and described reflection as a way to ponder recent events and the immediate environment. It is the ability to uncover what was planned, observed and achieved in practice and inquiry into understanding experiences (actions, beliefs, feelings) which may be overlooked in practice. It encourages practitioners to confront and challenge themselves to uncover and explore alternative interpretations to the constructed reality. Gray (2007) and Pavlovich, *et al.*, (2009) stated that the practice of reflection allows practitioners to challenge assumptions and develop more collaborative, ethical and responsible ways to manage companies and become receptive of alternate ways of behaving and reasoning. Furthermore, Gray (2007) added that reflection is more than understanding as a person needs to absorb a particular concept in his/her knowledge structures, and then relate this concept to other forms of knowledge and experience.

Reflection is a process of disengaging from an experience and taking the time to deliberately and carefully think about it, review it and construct meaning from it. This notion seems to be contradictory to the idea that managers and practitioners and the current business context are

required to act, provide quick answers and solutions rather than ask more questions and look for underlying problems. This is a shortsighted view as action without reflection could have very negative consequences for both the individual and the company. Although it is difficult for managers and practitioners to slow down in a fast paced world, reflection assists them to handle urgent demands and to learn quickly. Reflection occurs during different situations and on a time continuum which has past, present and future elements. Reflection on past events could lead to enhanced knowledge benefiting current or future events. Reflecting on current and unfolding events assists with identifying and working through problems as soon as they occur, leading to enhanced solutions. Reflection on future events has the advantage that possible problems could be identified before they occur and suitable solutions found. Reflection during the different times could lead to different insights (Hedberg, 2009; Doyle and Young, 2000; Seibert and Daudelin, 1999; Raelin, 2001). For example, reflection before a situation could draw on similar situations and the learning that occurred from that situation while reflection on past experiences could lead to learning to be applied in the future (either to manage the situation differently or to avoid the situation at all).

Reflection is regarded as a process of reviewing an experience with the aim to describe, analyse, evaluate the experience and inform learning about practice. This implies that reflection is a way to both learn about and change practice. It is through reflection that practical experiences become meaningful. One of the difficulties is that the implementation of reflection needs a definite shift in thinking about where the knowledge was generated (Schutz, 2007; Hedberg, 2009).

Table 1. Characteristics of reflection (Minott, 2009; Hedberg, 2009; Mintzberg, 2004; Seibert and Daudelin, 1999; Thompson and Pascal, 2011)

What reflection is	What reflection is not
Process of disciplined intellectual critique which combines research, content knowledge, a balanced judgment about previous, present and/or future job related actions, events and/or decisions. It is an active cognitive process to analyse, synthesize, form connections, and understand the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of a situation and/or experience	Musing and a casual or abstract approach Pausing from time to time to just ponder and think about 'anything' and 'everything'
A complex analytical process to integrate personal and professional knowledge with the demands of the situation as part of innovative practice	A mechanistic and descriptive process
Opening a range of possible alternatives	Exploring and discovering the underlying truth of a particular situation
Take into account and consider other people's perspectives and perceptions	Focusing on a person's own perspective and perceptions
Integrate past experiences and meanings into the present situation and consider the influence of future hopes, dreams and fears	Focusing exclusively on the here and now

It is through reflection that experiences gain meaning and both managers and practitioners make sense of their world (Minott, 2009; Hedberg, 2009; Mintzberg, 2004; Seibert and Daudelin, 1999). In practical terms, reflection means to critically examine the underlying assumptions of a person's own actions, beliefs, values, assumptions, the impact of these in relation to tasks, actions events and/or decisions and the overall meaning of what constitutes good management practice (Cunliffe, 2004; Zeichner and Liston, 1996).

Advantages of reflection within a SD context

Ongoing reflection has advantages for both the individual and the company. Managers and practitioners work and compete in demanding, rapidly shifting and interconnected business environments which demand action multitasking through a diverse range of technologies. Practitioners need to be able to quickly learn new skills, make independent decisions and find creative solutions. Reflection assisted with this process (Barlett and Ghoshal, 2002; Khandekar and Sharma, 2005; Brooks, 2005; Pemberton, *et al.*, 2001). However, reflection is not a substitute for action or a strategy for procrastination. Current managers and practitioners need to gather relevant information, sort through this information, analyse the situation, sort through alternative and develop creative and systemic solutions. Managers and practitioners who build reflection into their decision making processes take more thoughtful, purposeful, meaningful and value-driven action (Hedberg, 2009).

SD is a dynamic concept indicating an adaptive learning and flexible process rather than a fixed state enhance continuous improvement to financial, environmental and social dimensions of companies (Harris, 2007). This flexible process requires reflection to be effective.

There are different types of reflection (pre-reflection, reflection-in-action, reflection-after-action) each with its own advantages. Setting personal learning goals is an example of pre-reflection and encourages managers and practitioners to become more engaged in their own learning. Reflection-in-action has the advantage that experiences and be constantly analysed and actions could be redirected as needed. Reflection-after-action allows the person to analyse a particular happening and/or experience and draw valuable conclusions and learning from it (Hedberg, 2009).

Reflection can be done on both a group and personal group level. Reflection within peer groups (as a social process) has the benefit that it increases interpersonal and cultural understanding. Consequently, both personal and group reflection adds value to the learning in the company. On the other hand, reflection on a personal level (when the person reflects alone or with the assistance of a

trusted tutor) assists with gaining self-insights which assists with personal understanding and growth (Hedberg, 2009; Raelin, 2001; Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 2002).

Vince (2002), Doyle and Young (2000), and Hedberg (2009) contended that reflection assists managers and practitioners to:

- develop new understandings, appreciations and challenge assumptions,
- continuously examine the impact of decisions and actions,
- analyse past experiences and dilemmas from multiple perspectives, develop insights and learn from these,
- think differently and construct knowledge in differing ways, apply new learning and perspectives to future endeavours, goals and professional development activities,
- connect the different professional activities required in a practical business context,
- cope with the demand for constant learning,
- see possibilities, make connections and gain important perspective, and
- build reflection into their decision making process leading to thoughtful and value driven, more purposeful and meaningful action.

One line of reasoning emphasizes effective management and sharing of knowledge combined with organizational learning enhances both competitive advantage and business performance. Consequently, companies need to develop a culture of learning and reflection (Pemberton, *et al.*, 2001). Another line of reasoning emphasizes that reflection is a crucial skill in dynamic fast changing business environments as it is through reflection that day-to-day practical experiences and situations become meaningful and people make sense of the world. In addition, it is a very important skill to enable managers and practitioners to analyse situations, collect the relevant data and develop innovative solutions for effective problem solving.

Other benefits of reflection are that it assists to develop more responsive, collaborative and ethical ways of managing companies. Both managers and practitioners become more effective organizational citizens, critical thinkers and moral practitioners who will then influence internal and external stakeholders. Overall, people find it easier to deal with constant change, uncertainty, ambiguity, politicized companies and a variety of ethical issues. Managers and practitioners using reflection examine and challenge the assumptions that decisions are made based solely on profitability and efficiency, that there is only one rational way of managing, that maintaining the current management practice is crucial, and that managers know what is best for everybody in the company. Through reflection managers and practitioners are less prone to complacency and ritualistic thoughts and actions and they think critically regarding their own personal growth,

relationships with their colleagues, social and moral dimensions of the work place. Consequently, people develop a greater awareness of different possibilities and perspectives and of the fact that they need to transform outdated ways of management to suit the ever-changing business environment. Furthermore, they will implement ethical criteria, including equality of opportunity and social justice in the work place (Minnott, *et al.*, 2011; Cunliffe, 2004). People do not only apply reflection in their professional lives only but they apply reflection in their day-to-day lives as social individuals (Collin and Karsenti, 2011).

Managers and practitioners who use reflection reinvest in their professional learning, participate in continuing education, seek greater challenges in their work, examine more complex solutions to recurrent problems and work collaboratively. Resulting from this investment, these managers and practitioners continually expand their solution database and do not use the first solution that comes to mind (Raelin, 2001).

From the previous discussion it is clear that there are definite advantages to both the individual and the organization. However, to reap the benefits ongoing reflection needs to be promoted and implemented. In the next part of this article the author provides guidelines for practical implementation.

3. Guidelines for implementation

The implementation of SD and reflection necessitates a combination of different and integrated approaches and strategies to maximize value for the company, its practitioners and the community wherein it operates. This means that a company needs a varied and multifaceted range of approaches and strategies to the current and most likely future local, national and global demands. The author discusses these approaches and strategies separately for practical and structural reasons of this paper. However, she advocates that these need to be implemented in an integrated and interconnected way. Furthermore, the author acknowledges that some authors, directors, managers and practitioners will group some of the discussed detail under different headings. Within the confines of this paper, the guidelines for implementation are written in a linear format but as each company is unique managers need to decide which of these guidelines are suitable to their particular company as well as in which order they want to implement the guidelines. Although the author advocates a flexible and company specific approach, it is highly advisable that the company defines the concept of SD as it is relevant to that particular company. By defining the concept it provides a basis and common understanding to work from.

Define SD and reflection and implement at all levels

It was described earlier in this paper that there is a wide range of SD definitions which means that it is crucial that companies, internal and external stakeholders, and community members (such as policy makers) develop a commonly agreed upon, well-defined and bounded definition for SD within the context of that particular company. All stakeholders need to clarify which overall approach is used, for example a triple-bottom line and tridimensional approach. Similar to SD, the company needs to define and be clear how the concept reflection is understood and interpreted. After clarifying and defining SD and reflection as concepts within that particular company, it is important to implement this interpretation and understanding consistently throughout all levels of the company (Montiel, 2008; Bansal 2005; Daub and Scherrer, 2009; Naudé, 2008; Naudé, 2011).

Ensure effective communication

In the current competitive and fast changing business environment companies, directors, managers and practitioners need to manage very large amounts of information in an accountable, transparent, and responsible manner. Consequently, communication with both internal and external stakeholders is very important. In an effort to be effective, managers and practitioners need to decide how and when to use and manage communication strategies to moderate risk, while at the same time communicating the message clearly and with integrity. By implication, companies need to clearly communicate their SD focus (Hopkins, 2009; Reilly, 2009; Waddock and McIntosh, 2009; Laughland and Bansal, 2011) and effective communication needs to be supported by the relevant infrastructure, policies, processes and procedures (D'Amato and Roome, 2009).

The tri-dimensional view to SD needs a global and integrated approach which implies the company needs suitable knowledge-oriented information and communication technology. Furthermore, a global and integrated approach implies that companies need to share relevant knowledge and information across different individuals and groups within the company and move away from a silo approach (Mohamed, *et al.*, 2010). This shared approach is a strategy to encourage effective communication.

Reflection enhances personal understanding and understanding between different people, increased understanding of one's own and other people's perspectives and perceptions (Thompson and Pascal, 2011). All these enhance communication. The result is that allowing time and encouraging reflection will enhance communication both internal and external to the company.

Implement an integrated approach

A company needs to clarify and understand its responsibility to its stakeholders (in particular) and society (in general) and gain adequate and applicable knowledge regarding the economic, social and environmental context where the particular company operates. This clarification and understanding supports the development of an integrated approach in the effort to effectively operationalize SD (Daub and Scherrer, 2009). Furthermore, the company needs to both develop and implement the needed policies (with the support from top management) to encourage the selected approach (D'Amato and Roome, 2009) and develop and maintain a relevant structure with formal systems for measuring and reporting outcomes (Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Epstein, *et al.*, 2010). Throughout all these processes and decision making reflection is a valuable tool to use.

To enhance the implementation of SD it needs an integrated internal management system where SD forms part of the core business plan, programs, strategy, management decisions and daily activities of the company. This integration creates and maintains a competitive advantage and addresses both global and long-term challenges (Baumgarten and Korhonen, 2010; Clulow, *et al.*, 2003). In addition, this line of thinking necessitates integration of economic, social and environmental goals and objectives combined with a clear link to existing planning processes, goals (long, medium and short term), the budget and investment initiatives. This integrated approach should lead to both a basis for decision-making and framework and for the operational business plan of the company (Hazlett, *et al.*, 2010; Samy, *et al.*, 2010; Epstein, *et al.*, 2010; Hopkins, 2009; Wirtenberg, *et al.*, 2007; Meadowcroft, 2007). Within an integrated internal management system, SD initiatives are build and embedded into every aspect of the management system and through an integrationist thinking approach a SD business case is developed for each unit in the company (Hopkins, 2009; Rocha, *et al.*, 2007; Patra, 2008; Cho and Roberts, 2010; Hazelt, *et al.*, 2007). A company, directors, managers and practitioners need to carefully consider the role of reflection in daily practice and give reflection the needed priority and time (Schutz, 2007; Driessen, *et al.*, 2008; Vince, 2002).

Build, develop and maintain a capable and committed workforce

Capable and committed practitioners (although not the only resource) are crucial to the competitive advantage of a company and by implication the SD of that particular company (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2002; Brooks, 2005; Khandekar and Sharma, 2005; DeSaa-Perez and Garcia-Falcon, 2002). A three-dimensional approach (including recruitment and selection, development and training, retention) will support the

building, development and maintenance of a capable and committed workforce.

Firstly, the company needs to recruit and select the practitioners who not only have the required knowledge, skills, expertise and experience but who have an attitude and approach compatible with and supportive of the company's line of thinking (Wirtenberg, *et al.*, 2007; Naudé, 2011). By implication it means that the employee should support the concepts of both SD and reflection as defined and accepted within the company.

Secondly, the formal and informal development of the practitioners needs to focus on increasing understanding and implementation of the triple bottom line and three-dimensional approach to SD. The training related to SD could be done as a stand-alone activity or integrated into and combined with other training sessions (D'Amato and Roome, 2009). Reflection is a skill that managers and practitioners can learn and develop. Managers and practitioners need to develop the needed skills, such as analysis, evaluation, self-awareness, synthesis to be able to implement effective reflective practice. Managers and practitioners need to be able to reflect both as an individual and as a member of the company team (Doyle and Young, 2000).

Thirdly, retaining capable and committed practitioners is as important as recruiting new practitioners and training existing practitioners. It is known that organisations which successfully retain valuable practitioners create a participative and engaging company culture. This culture contributes to improved business performance and outcomes (Malensek, 2008) and contributes to sustainable competitive advantage and SD (Hatch and Dyer, 2004). Furthermore, practitioners initiate, create and implement ideas, plan tactics, recognise and utilise other assets which in turn create and/or maintain value for the company, shareholders, stakeholders (Anonymous, 2007; Bridges and Harrison, 2003; Ledwidge, 2007; Naudé, 2009). Directors and managers need to provide the SD direction but they also need to support the initiative, creativity and reflection by the practitioners.

Link performance and outcomes to accountability

There needs to be clear and measurable goals to enable managers and practitioners to manage and measure outcomes with a balance among the economic, social and environmental dimensions. Economic performance is usually based on short term outcomes and more easily measurable than the social and environmental outcomes which are usually longer term and not always easy to measure. Systems that measure outcomes and performance should be linked to accountability of managers and practitioners. Top management should involve managers and practitioners in discussions and decision-making

processes. During these, discussions, managers and practitioners must be made aware of their role and responsibility in the development and maintenance of SD. In some companies performance outcomes are linked to reward systems. For any formal system to be effective it has to be based on the principles of objectivity, measurability and fairness (Baumgartner and Korhonen, 2010; Hart and Milstein, 2003; Velazquez, *et al.* 2011; Jamali, 2006; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Epstein, *et al.*, 2010).

Embed a relevant company culture

In an attempt to effectively implement and embed SD, the company needs to establish, develop and maintain a culture which supports a tridimensional SD approach throughout all goals, programs, strategies, policies and procedures (Kerr, 2006; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Epstein, *et al.*, 2010; Hopkins, 2009). To support a SD culture experimentation, innovation and reflection that encourages sharing of crucial information, knowledge and skills are advocated. Consequently, this means a shift from conventional and hierarchical models to more open models that allow fresh thinking and new ideas (Hopkins, 2009; Garavan, *et al.*, 2001; Waddock and McIntosh, 2009; Naudé, 2011).

Management culture has traditionally been to encourage and value action and managers' work has been characterised by a fast pace and a tendency for interruptions. This could create problems for those managers who wish to reflect because reflection needs time. Following this logic, managing should be more than just doing but should focus on doing things well. Reflection can assist managers to see possibilities, make connections, gain perspective and understand ethical implications of both actions and inactions. Therefore, a company culture that values reflection should be developed and maintained with senior managers as positive role models. Reflection is not a once off event but an ongoing process. Once reflection is embedded as part of the culture it becomes part of the daily operation of the company (Hedberg, 2009; Doyle and Young, 2000). Through reflection values within the company are challenged, changed, developed and maintained and this approach forms the basis for SD and a new culture (Packalén, 2010; Naudé, 2011). The main characteristic of a reflective culture is that people are allowed and encouraged to challenge aspects in the company without fear of retaliation (Raelin, 2001).

Implement long-term approaches and outcomes

The directors and managers need to form a long-term vision. This long-term vision must be underpinned by community values and principles suited to the global interconnected world (Waddock and McIntosh, 2009;

Naudé, 2011) and the local context where the particular company operates.

Effective SD initiatives and implementation necessitate long term approaches such as scenario planning and identification of patterns because effective SD depends on understanding long-term trends (Hopkins, 2009; Meadowcroft, 2007).

Similar to SD implementation, reflection needs a long-term approach as it requires time to learn the skills. Reflection is not a once off event but needs to be developed, practiced and shaped. However, the effort is worthwhile as reflection combined with analysis and action forms a very powerful skill set for managers and practitioners (Hedberg, 2009).

Utilise a flexible approach

Within the context of a very fast paced and constantly changing business context, objectives need to be both flexible and adjustable. Slow changing bureaucracies might encounter many difficulties and challenges (Waddock and McIntosh, 2009; Loorbach, 2010). SD initiatives and strategies should be regarded and managed as repeated cycles of analysis, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and not as an inflexible or fixed process or a list of demands that need to be fulfilled. A SD approach is a compass for an ongoing process of investigation, analysis, and continuous improvement related to current and future situations (Packalén, 2010; Naude, 2011; Meadowcroft, 2007). Within the framework of a flexible approach it is valuable to use reflection to analyse the SD initiatives and strategies. During reflection, events themselves are critically analysed. In addition, reflection pays attention to how all involved parties contributed to the event, consequences and outcome (Schutz, 2007; Driessen, *et al.*, 2008; Vince, 2002).

Implement specific steps and strategies to embed reflective practices

Schutz (2007), Cunliffe (2004); Driessen, *et al.*, (2008) and Vince (2002) described several specific steps and strategies that practitioners can use to implement reflective practices, namely:

- Find a suitable and trusted facilitator/ mentor to provide guidance, input, challenges and feedback.
- Carefully consider the role of reflection in daily practice and give reflective practice the needed priority and time.
- Select a suitable reflective framework but adapt to suit personal and company needs.
- Maintain a reflective diary or journal and decide how much information will be shared.
- Read, explore the literature and apply suitable information.
- Separate the performance from the person by paying attention to the actual even and what

happened instead of to the perceived event or what the practitioner wished what happened.

- Identify and deal with feelings. Focus on both negative and positive feelings equally.
- Analyse the event critically paying attention to how others but also the practitioner personally contributed to the event, consequences and outcomes.
- Analyse and reflect on an individual basis on how you (in combination with others) construct identities and realities.

Develop and maintain effective leadership

Leaders must analyse and understand the current trends, impact on their particular company and the community in which it operates to shape business decisions while forming strategy (Harmon *et al.*, 2010). Based on this understanding directors and managers need to develop and maintain effective leadership to provide direction, create the suitable context, initiate, implement and evaluate SD initiatives and outcomes through a process of continuous improvement (Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Epstein, *et al.*, 2010; Rocha *et al.*, 2007; Naudé, 2011). In all actions, leaders need to maximise potential rewards while minimizing the risks (Laughland and Bansal, 2011). Leaders need to provide the conditions, advocate for and act as role models for the implementation of reflection in the day-to-day functioning of the company.

Authentic, transformational and ethical leadership styles are all either directly or indirectly linked to SD (Angus-Leppan, *et al.*, 2010). In combination with a particular leadership style, leaders need particular leadership skills such as innovation, analysis, cross-cultural understanding, reflection, change management, flexibility, adaptiveness and a holistic systems thinking approach (Jackson and Nelson, 2004; Waddock, 2007; D'Amato and Roome, 2009; Waddock and McIntosh, 2009). Current leaders need ongoing support to remain effective but future leaders also need to be developed. All leaders (current and future) need to be challenged to utilise opportunities, foster creativity and embrace holistic problem solving skills (Waddock and McIntosh, 2009).

4. Management implications

At a practical company level, it would be advantageous if managers (in consultation with directors and practitioners) develop a framework for the implementation of both SD and reflection within their particular company. This framework should be unique to the particular company as each company and both its internal and external stakeholders are unique. However, this framework needs to include generic principles for the implementation of SD and

reflection (for example relevant aspects from the guidelines for implementation presented in this paper).

It needs to be acknowledged that a framework does not necessarily guarantee success. Following this line of thinking, the notion is that a framework acts as a tool to identify linkages, compare current approaches and practices, and gain an understanding of the required changes. Therefore, a framework could assist to identify the different dimensions included in SD, develop a systematic and structured approach, create indicators and assist towards ongoing quality monitoring and improvement to evaluate outcomes against indicators (Becker, 2010; Wallis, *et al.*, 2010; Mori and Welch, 2008; D'Amato and Roome, 2009). Regarding reflection the framework could include aspects such as strategies to enhance reflection.

Once a framework is designed it will be tested, evaluated and refined in the company. After a few rounds of testing, evaluating and refining a company will have a framework best suited to their internal and external stakeholders and business environment.

5. Research implications

Researchers, in direct consultation with directors, managers and practitioners need to develop, test and validate theoretical frameworks for practical implementation of SD and reflection by different companies, within different industries and countries. Effective consultation will ensure that the frameworks have practical value and are not only applicable at a theoretical level. Once the relevant frameworks have been developed and validated they are useable to provide direction for action within a company. Furthermore, these frameworks could form the basis for further empirical research where researchers develop and test their own hypotheses within a particular industry and context.

6. Conclusion

It is very clear that SD and reflection are mutually supportive strategies to increase competitive advantage and company performance. Furthermore, it seems clear that SD and reflections is a good combination.

At the start of this paper the author mentioned the view of Einstein that "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it" (<http://www.einstein-quotes.com/ThinkingKnowledge.html>) provides both an inspiration and a challenge. The author advocates that by implementing a combination of SD and reflection the words of James Levin "Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action" (<http://quotations.about.com/cs/inspirationquotes/a/Reflection3.htm>) will ring true.

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