

Introduction

Positive deviance: A 21st century revolution

Don't go round saying the world owes you a living. The world owes you nothing. It was here first.

Mark Twain

Positive deviant: a person who does the right thing for sustainability, *despite* being surrounded by the wrong institutional structures, the wrong processes and stubbornly uncooperative people.

Perverse: obstinately in the wrong; wrongheaded; against the evidence; turned aside from right or truth.

The odd title of this book was born of much frustration and not a little anger. For over 40 years I have campaigned for a great awakening from the fantasy that the natural world's capacity to support unconstrained demand from us humans is infinite. 'Think of your grandchildren', we used to argue, 'think of your children'. Now the cost of those decades of inaction means worrying about future generations has been overtaken by worries about this one. University leavers, where most of tomorrow's leaders are being prepared, can expect over 60 years of healthy active life. Yet long before the end of that time, scientists predict possibly catastrophic rises in global temperature – unless, that is, we change our carbon-addicted ways. We've got about ten years to kick the habit and avert the worst case scenarios. United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has made a parallel between the economic crisis and the ecological one: 'continuing to pour trillions of dollars into fossil-fuel subsidies is like investing in sub-prime real estate. Our carbon-based infrastructure is like a toxic asset that threatens the portfolio of global goods, from public health to food security.'¹

Most people admit something must be done – and quickly. But what and how remains unclear. Coming out of a senior management masterclass on sustainability, one participant complained: ‘But I still don’t know what to do differently on Monday!’ She is not alone. If survey after survey is to be believed, many people are ready to get cracking on finding more sustainable ways of living and working, but don’t feel confident they know the right way to go about it. What they learnt at school or college has simply not equipped them with the right knowledge or skills. Missing too are unambiguous leadership signals from government or workplace. UK cabinet members, like the boards of most firms large and small, are split on whether climate change is (a) happening; (b) urgent; and (c) their responsibility anyway. Bewitched by the pond-skaters of public opinion – the pollsters, focus groups and the twittering media – leadership everywhere seems to have lost its macro-political compass. The poor preparation and chaotic process at the 2009 Copenhagen UN Climate Change Summit epitomized what is wrong with global leadership. As does the weak ambition of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) where *halving* global poverty by 2015 is deemed to be a legitimate target, and all goals are imperilled by the perversity of a global economic system that is dependent on overdosing on resources and underperforming on basic human rights.

Hence the title of this book. We have left it so late to put our human house in order, that the only strategy left is that of positive deviance. We can’t wait for the international treaties, institutional reform or wise government leadership that will be too long coming. The only option is for as many people as possible to get on and do the right thing – wherever we are. It is a very positive revolution: *against* everything that leads back to behaviours that caused the ecological (and economic) breakdown in the first place, and *for* a stampede towards a future that puts improving the quality of life for people and the environment as the primary purpose of everything we do. In a Robin Hood sort of way, I’m inviting you to join the growing and merry band of positive deviants committed to doing the right thing, despite everything and everyone, and recruiting like mad as we go. A sense of urgency and passion about sustainability are the only joining qualifications.

But what about that Monday question? How do we work out what are the right things to do? There are next to no courses and no single

book to help you get going quickly. You are likely to have some ideas and knowledge already, but perhaps do not yet feel sufficiently confident in your decision making. This book aims to fill the gaps – in your confidence as well as in the marketplace for such books. An early warning though – it will not tell you *what* to do. My purpose is to stimulate you and help you build or refresh your own leadership ‘persona’ so you are confidently sustainability-literate and effective as a positive deviant. In my experience one size rarely fits all, particularly when it comes to leadership. To be authentic, and therefore trusted and worthy of being followed, you have to be true to yourself. Your personal sustainability leadership model is therefore as unique as a snowflake, and in the case of an organization, as singular as its logo. With this book as your companion you should find all you need to work out *how* to identify the right thing to do, in whatever circumstances you find yourself. Plus some tools so you can get started straight away.

As sustainability leadership may be exercised from everywhere in an organization, this book will be relevant to people in very different sorts of jobs. And I hope it will provoke a revolution too in those places where management and leadership development takes place. In fact, I hope it has a broader influence on education in general. If I had my way no one would leave any publically funded educational institution who isn’t sustainability-literate. Ideally, it will become one of the things good parents, teachers and friends inculcate in children from the earliest age so they become responsible and happy adults capable of bringing up the following generation in much the same way.

Box 0.1 What is sustainability-literate leadership?

Keith Grint says leadership 'is not a science, but an art; it is a performance not a recipe; it is an invention not a discovery'. And I agree. As I agree that it is primarily a product of the imagination. A leader imagines a better future and persuades people to follow (Grint, 2000). There is, however, a difference between leadership for anything else, and leadership for sustainability. Leadership for sustainable development (SD) is definitely about imagining a better future, but not one that is constrained by an organizational or geographical boundary, as most leadership is. It is for something far greater than an individual, his or her organization, or even family and country. It is for a greater good that embraces all life on Earth, including all humanity and future generations. As we recently celebrated the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth, it seems appropriate to say that sustainability leadership is about the continuing participation of our species in evolution. Get it wrong and we are fossils.

You will note from the Contents pages that the book is in four sections. The first deals with the symptoms of *unsustainability*, how it has come about and the choice we have about where we go from here, the second with what is unsatisfactory about the way leadership (mostly as management) education is done (including a critique of corporate responsibility). Section Three is devoted to the ways of thinking, knowledge bases, some principles of practice and key tools for any sustainability-literate leader, particularly those in positive deviant mode. A final section provides a overview of what needs to happen at global level, in a way that makes it easier to see how many local actions can all add up to globally significant contributions. Keeping faith that local efforts can make a difference is critical to being a successful positive deviant.

It may seem perverse of me to end with a Prologue, but that is simply because the future really does start now. It's what we do in the next decade that will determine whether we can speak with pride about our efforts or not.

First, though, I need to introduce you to a couple of overarching themes and some threading concepts that influence how I look upon

sustainability leadership and therefore shape this book. They will explain my spin, if you like, on where we went wrong, where we want to end up, and how.

Introducing Adam Smith, James Hutton and the compound error theory of history

When I first became involved in thinking about how unsustainable patterns for human development came about, I was living in Edinburgh, where I learnt about two of the city's former denizens: Adam Smith and James Hutton. Lifelong friends (Hutton was executor of Smith's will) and born within a few years of each other in the 1720s, both produced blockbuster books: Smith on economics, and Hutton on the geophysics of the Earth.

Today, Adam Smith's head adorns the £20 note and some of the ideas he set out in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) dominate the way we run the global economy (e.g. the invisible hand of the market). Less well known is James Hutton, who was a farmer, doctor, geologist and philosopher. Yet he attracted headlines too for his *Theory of the Earth* (1795), which punched an early hole in the Bible-based belief that the Earth was only 6000 years old. Hutton observed that 'this world has neither beginning nor an end' and described the continual renewal cycles of the natural world as having one purpose – that of life itself. 'We are thus led to see a circulation in the matter of this globe, and a system of beautiful economy in the works of nature.' His conclusion was called 'sublime' by contemporaries, because it represented 'nature as having provided for a constant succession of land on the surface of the earth, according to a plan having no termination ...'.²

For me, these two Enlightenment heroes symbolize choices made 23 decades ago about what rules would govern the way we humans ran our lives. Even though Adam Smith saw his marketplace contingent on people and natural resources ('... the demand for men, like the demand for any other commodity, necessarily regulates the production of men') it is clear neither he, nor his disciples, nor even Hutton himself, viewed Hutton's natural marketplace as a better model upon which to base the human economy. The historical and still compounding error is the ongoing separation between the two models. Throughout the book, I

use the terms **biogeochemical economy** and **human economy** to differentiate between, respectively, the workings of the physical world, of which we are a part, and the workings of the human economy, of which nature is not a part, and which has been constructed out of oversimplistic theories about how we humans think and behave.

What is the purpose of life?

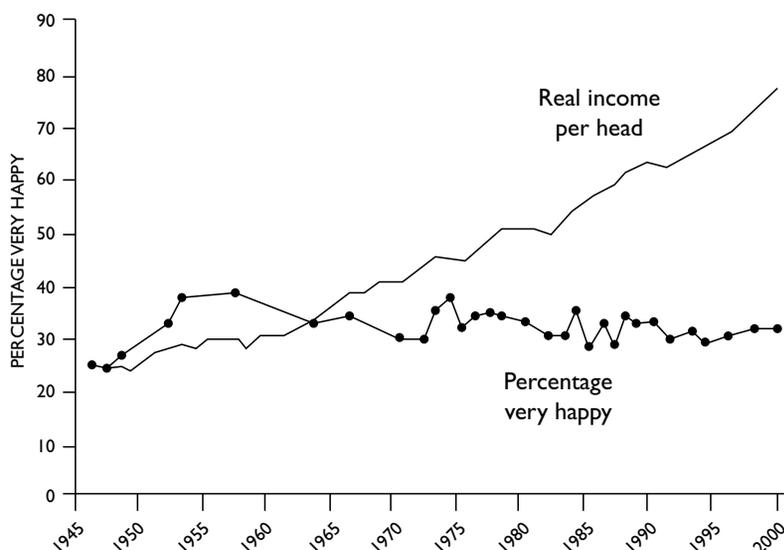
Though I know this puts me into a minority, I am chronically unable to think in anything but outcomes. Even fewer people contemplate what they would like to say about their life when it reaches an end. It might well be that because so few of us have an idea of what ‘good’ would look like for our own life journey, that we struggle to do it collectively – as a community, country or as a species. It really should be no wonder that politicians flounder within their five-year horizons, if we – their citizens – are unable to articulate what we want for the longer term.

Obviously, the immediate purpose of life is to avoid death. Few would disagree with that. But as our current ways of life – even in the richest of countries – does not seem to provide the meaning and satisfaction – the happiness – we say we crave, it seems worth having what Amital Etzioni calls a ‘moral megalogue’ – a big public dialogue about whether there is a shared idea about the purpose of life, and how we might go about defining a good one well spent (Etzioni and Carney, 1997). Thankfully, over the last decade there has been a series of books, collectively known as the ‘happiness literature’, to set the ball rolling. (e.g. Lane, 2000; Grayling, 2003; Layard, 2005; McMahon, 2006; Gilbert, 2006). This has also made it easier for me to propose that the purpose for what Adam Smith called the ‘toil and bustle’ of our economy should be happiness. Even though the idea is far from new, for ages people thought I was daft to suggest it. Now, as we are all (re)discovering, happiness is there in all religions and non-organized spiritual traditions, whether achieved after life, through meditation or in obedience to a particular God’s rules for right behaviour. It is even in the American Declaration of Independence: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident – that all men are created equal: that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’

The really big question, though, is what does the good life where happiness – or at the very least, contentment – may be found look like? Socrates said it was the ‘perfection of the soul’ and Plato, his disciple, explained that wisdom and goodness give value to wealth and success, not the reverse, and when Socrates said ‘virtue is knowledge’ he meant that once a person understands what good is, he cannot do otherwise (Grayling, 2003, p21). Thanks to new neurological research we can add some physiological evidence to philosophical and instinctive definitions of what makes us happy. The physical responses of our brain in various trials even suggest we have an innate sense of right and wrong.³ Moral judgement, long considered to be culturally relative, just might be hard-wired to the way our brains work. And it looks like we’ve evolved that way. We are happier being cooperative and honest and struggle in a world that rewards the opposite.⁴ As Robert Lane points out, the way we ‘toil and struggle’ right now is bad for personal relationships. There is a ‘kind of famine of warm interpersonal relations, of easy-to-reach neighbours, of encircling, inclusive memberships and of solidary family life’. And evidence that for people lacking this kind of social capital, ‘unemployment has more serious effects, illnesses are more deadly, disappointment with one’s children is harder to bear, bouts of depression last longer, and frustration and failed expectations of all kinds are more traumatic’ (Lane, 2000, p9). Our personal happiness and resilience in face of difficulty is heavily tied up in how successful we are in our relationships with others.

Boil down all the surveys and studies and it does seem that, most of all, people want to feel good about themselves, their relationships and the places where they live. How perverse is it that none of these are criteria for success, of an individual or an economy? Figure 0.1 is a graph from just one of the many exercises in many countries that finds happiness – or more accurately life satisfaction – does not parallel growth of *per capita* GDP, but flatlines above about \$15,000 per annum.

A sustainability critique of the research on what makes up human happiness would say that, like so much social enquiry, it is disconnected from the physical environment in which people act out their lives. Even without bringing forward evidence from poets, writers, painters and musicians of all cultures, there is plenty of evidence a healthy, attractive environment raises our spirits, and makes us happier and healthier.



Source: Layard, 2005

Figure 0.1 Happiness and GDP in the USA

When we are sick or stressed, the sight of trees and the sound of water and birds soothes us and speeds our recovery. Recently a student argued that happiness was an anthropocentric concept, but I wonder if that is true. Surely the ultimate human-centred conceit is to imagine other species to be incapable of happiness, albeit in ways that may be largely beyond our comprehension. The Greek word for happiness translates most literally as ‘flourishing’, something that I like to think applies to all living things.

For me, the joy of happiness as a goal for our lives is that, because it is *not only about feeling good but being good*, it is – or could be – the ‘big idea’ around which to build the sustainability project as a positive and engaging view of the future.

Threading concepts

There are some other concepts and shorthand expressions that crop up throughout the book and need some introduction. Some, like the ‘four habits of thought’, are developed in later chapters. The others simply require an early warning of their meaning.

Four habits of thought

In the daily bustle of deciding and doing I use the ideas of resilience, relationships, reflection and reverence as a mental checklist to keep me thinking from a sustainability perspective. Will this or that decision, policy or action increase resilience or not? Are relationships increased or improved this way? Has enough reflection taken place, and are the right people involved? Does that respect what we know (and maybe don't know) about the way the biogeochemical economy works?

Resilience

Resilience is the capacity of a system (or a person) to bounce back after shocks. The more resilient a system, the larger the disturbance it can absorb without shifting to an alternative regime. Increasing resilience is the main strategy of evolution. The strength of an ecological system (like a river valley or forest) is based on the number and density of the connections (relationships) between different components. Resilience of social and economic systems may be obtained in the same way, but only if embedded in ecological resilience.

Relationships

Good and many relationships is how resilience is achieved and sustained in any system or by any person. Increasing the number of right (i.e. sustainability-oriented) relationships between people, their institutions and processes and the environment, is what sustainability-literate leadership does.

Reflection

Extracting the learning from any experience helps avoid or further compounding past mistakes. It also raises the chance of good judgement now, however complex and uncertain the future may appear. Applying what is known to work, and being imaginative about making good practice better, is what has made evolution a success. If we learn to pause and reflect before we decide and act, we can do the same.

Reverence

Respectful awe, or reverence, for the power and beauty of the natural world, and for the intimacy of our biogeochemical relationship with it, is the default spiritual and practical position. It protects us from hubris or ideas of scientific omni-competence, and helps us proceed with confidence and caution. We are less likely to hurt what we love and revere.

All life on Earth including us (ALOE+US)

If we are to correct the error that finds us believing our human story can evolve separate from the rest of life on Earth, at the very least we can use a language that acknowledges the shared storyline. Too many environmentalists talk of the environment and neglect the people bit, just as too many social scientists, politicians, economists, financiers and so on (almost everybody else in fact!), talk only about people (and often a rather small aspect of our humanity at that), neglecting the rest of life on Earth, even though it is the inescapable home-base for everything and everybody.

To emphasize the indivisibility of everything, in parts of the text I've substituted the rather inelegant acronym ALOE+US for the words 'all life on Earth including us'.

The notions of sufficient and good enough

Many people are put off getting to grips with sustainable development because they believe it is too complicated and more the domain of specialists sporting PhDs. And it can be daunting to realize that sustainability is about everything. How on Earth can one person, or one organization, know about everything?

No one can, of course. Which is why sustainability literacy is about having *sufficient* knowledge and understanding to make a *good enough* choice or decision. By definition, we've not done sustainable development before (certainly not on the scale we have to now), so we are all learning as we go. Hence the importance of reflection as an important habit of thought. You may not get it right every time, but with a *good enough* insight into a broad enough range of old and new ideas, you should be able to work out when it is wise to ask for help, or to just go

ahead with *sufficient* confidence you've got the direction of travel more right than not. The words are used frequently throughout the book and appear in italics to remind you that *enough* is often *sufficient*.

Direct action: Deviating around the political and economic filters

Quite a lot of the writing about sustainable development is couched in terms of policy, often recommending sums of money to be spent on this or that. Like the Stern Report on *The Economics of Climate Change* (2006), in which the author thought 1 per cent of GDP per annum should be enough to decarbonize the UK economy. Within months, Sir Nicholas had to revise his estimate upwards, with any stable meaning for money subsequently lost in the economic collapse. Moreover, the mobilization of trillions of pounds to bail out banks proves that any sum can be found if the policy maker considers it important enough. Moreover again, the last decades have shown that decision makers in government and all sectors appear to be immune to pre-cooked policy prescriptions. And a final moreover, policy, like a budget, has a short shelf life.

So, as far as I have been able to restrain myself, I've steered clear of giving policy recommendations or price tags for this or that action. That is not because I don't think policy and budgets are important. They are. It is just that we are up to the eyebrows in policies, treaties and funding recommendations for sustainable development. They are not in short supply. So why add more? The crisis, as Kofi Annan has been pointing out for years, is in implementation; we know what to do, but are not doing it. Why? This is the home territory of the positive deviant. It is *your* task to work out the right thing to do where you are and deviate round or remove the policy, funding and other impediments to making it happen.

Starring positive deviants *

For the same reason, mostly I have avoided offering case studies of companies or countries. Too many examples of what is irritatingly called 'best practice' (do they really mean it cannot get any better?) have been degraded by time and transparency.

Instead, I include a number of examples of positive deviants (see the appendix) – people who, if mentioned in the text, have a * beside their name. Most are individuals, some are organizations, and each offers an inspiring example of different ways to be a positive deviant in the 21st century.