

Handling Objections:

A Professional's Guide to Overcoming Objections to Sustainability Adoption and Implementation

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Executive Summary

This discussion paper summarizes the ideas shared at a Toronto Sustainability Speaker Series workshop event facilitated by author and sustainability expert Bob Willard on February 16, 2012.

To assist sustainability professionals in addressing and overcoming any objections they encounter, both general and specific strategies are presented. This paper outlines not only how to 'win over' objectors, but also how to effectively present and implement sustainability initiatives through an understanding of the psychological mindsets and principles of organizational change.

Content for this discussion paper was gathered through insights shared by:

- Bob Willard
- TSSS online community through the [TSSS LinkedIn group](#)
- Group participant brainstorming at the workshop
- Webcast participants including those from North America, London, Brazil, and others.

Introduction

“We can’t afford it right now.”
“We don’t see a business case.”
“It’s not one of our current strategic objectives.”
“There aren’t the resources to devote to such initiatives.”

How many sustainability professionals have faced objections like these when trying to put forward the business case for sustainability?

One hundred and twenty sustainability champions gathered at the offices of Bennett Jones LLP in Toronto, Ontario, on February 16, 2012, to participate in an *Objection Handling Workshop for Sustainability Professionals*.

Selling Sustainability

Selling sustainability is similar to any sales effort – you have to understand the principles of Sales 101 and what motivates your target consumer. In handling objections and resistance, we must both understand our target’s personal worldview and validate their target’s concerns and feelings.

A defined approach, according to Bob Willard, is to consider the Three F Framework: “I understand how you **feel**. Others have **felt** that way before. What we have **found** is that...” This is a great framework, but it can only succeed if the conclusion of that third sentence is formed with an understanding of the worldview that shapes the information processing and decision making of the person you hope to sway.

Classifying Objections

At the TSSS workshop, participants discussed over 30 objections. Despite the large number of objections discussed, they can all still be classified into only four categories. (In *The Next Sustainability Wave* (2005), Bob Willard organizes 26 likely objections and suggested responses into these same four categories).

Other priorities:

Objectors indicate that they are too busy, that the sustainability initiatives are not aligned with the organization's strategic objectives, that the initiatives are too difficult to implement, that there is no pressure from either leadership and/or customers/clients to make these changes, that they've already heard too much about this type of thing, that they don't want to risk their own reputation on unproven ideas, or that ultimately, they'd rather just stick with business as usual.

Fear of backlash:

Objectors indicate concern that they may face a personal backlash as colleagues see them to be trying to self-promote, or push unpopular ideas. There can also be concern about backlash against the corporation if it is accused of green washing, or if new sustainability initiatives are contrasted with past acts or behaviors (i.e., skeletons in the corporate closet), or that new initiatives are seen as an admission of current or past poor practices, or that adopting such initiatives could lead to a competitive disadvantage.

Weak business case:

Objectors believe that the organization is doing enough already and asking 'what's in it for me?' They may see benefits that are too long term in nature and don't feel the payback criteria justify the action. They may also be predisposed to reject the business case since accepting it can be seen as admitting to the insult that they have missed out on an opportunity until this point.

Mindset:

Objectors have a mindset that predisposes them to reject sustainability arguments. They may simply not believe that there is an environmental imperative, or they may believe sustainability champions are simply anti-capitalistic. They can state that if such initiatives were of value, they would have learned more about them in MBA studies, or that government would take more responsibility for addressing them (For more insights on the importance of understanding the objector's mindset, see Appendix A: *Understanding Worldviews*).

Top Tips for Handling Objections to Sustainability

The following tips are useful for handling a wide variety of objections. While not all suggestions will be applicable for all objections and/or all objectors, an understanding of organizational culture and the personal and professional worldviews of the objector will help define your best approach.

1. **Clarify the “it”:** What are they *really* objecting to?
2. **Trail close:** “If we can agree on this, can we proceed?”
3. **Identify what they *do* care about:** Show how your suggestion can help with *their* priorities/goals/current business imperatives. Answer for them the “What’s in it for me?” question. Use questions such as, “What is your business?”, “What pressures do you face?”, “What is hindering your success?”
4. **Watch your language:** Use *their* terminology. Avoid using terms (e.g. sustainability) that may lead to a negative response or confusion without clear definitions.
5. **Be proactive and pick your spots:** Carefully select the timing/location of your discussions.
6. **Play the risk card:** Identify the risks/costs of *not* doing anything.
7. **Build on the base:** Relate to the organization’s basic culture, beliefs, values and mission.
8. **Keep their defense mechanisms down:** *Do not* make them feel guilty.
9. **Be gracious and educate softly:** Acknowledge the objection’s merit and use the Three F Framework.
10. **Inform:** Educate “softly”, without causing anyone to lose face.
11. **Speak to both the professional and the private person.**
12. **Start small:** Suggest beginning with no-threat initiatives like benchmarking and safe pilot projects.
13. **Protect your business credibility:** reassure them *repeatedly* that your intent is to help the company do better, not to threaten or harm it in any way.
14. **Tell stories.**
15. **Ask for advice:** Let them guide you to what would best address their objection.
16. **Ask, don’t tell:** “How’s it going?”, “Would you like to try ...?”, “Would you be open to trying something different?” rather than “What you should do is...”
17. **Do your homework:** Anticipate objections and have ideas for responses prepared in advance but be careful not to be scripted.

Top 10 Objections (and Strategies to Handle Them)

While ten specific objections received the most attention, several others provoked interesting discussions, including the ‘conspiracy theory’ objection, suggesting that sustainability advocates are conspiring to create economic opportunities for themselves with lucrative payouts for environmental scientists and ‘green’ experts (e.g., *“Is Al Gore Getting Rich off of the Green Movement”*, NYTimes blog, 2009).

The following ‘Top 10 Objections’ can act as obstacles to sustainability initiatives in business environments. Workshop participants brainstormed in small groups to develop strategies that could be used to overcome them.

1. “It is not one of our current strategic objectives.”

- Emphasize how sustainability initiatives can be used to help achieve other strategic objectives and make their job *easier*.
- Help them discover how sustainability concepts are already embedded in their business practices.
- Ask what their priorities are and then *show* how sustainability initiatives will make it easier for them to achieve their own defined priorities.
- Find ways to help them discover their own ideas for using sustainability to achieve their objectives. Show how one of their current strategic objectives can be achieved through sustainability.
- Explain what is meant by ‘sustainability’ which can be an off-putting, poorly understood word for many with a traditional business background.
- Clarify how sustainability is linked to identifying risks (these could include competitive forces) and opportunities (these could include building the brand). Have you considered the risks of *not* doing this? Have you assessed the strategic value? If your competitors are doing this, or about to do this, then ‘standing still’ is not an option.
- Explore the ‘inverse’ of their concern – how the environment is impacting their business, rather than how their business is impacting the environment.

2. “The benefits are too intangible.”

- Discover what success ‘looks like’ to them and develop a sustainability strategy that will lead them towards their vision of success.
- Let them explain to you what kind of ‘tangible’ results would appeal to them.
- Help them define metrics and collect data that will allow them to see benefits from defined benchmarks.
- Ask them questions to identify if there are ‘intangibles’ that they already consider in their business operations (e.g., competitive edge, reputational risks).
- Develop a plan with them that includes a stepwise progression of benefits, beginning with concrete tangible results from low hanging fruit and has a strategy to realize greater intangible results in the longer term, once they are able to see the merits of sustainability initiatives.

3. “Return on Investment is too low for our stakeholders.”

- Ask questions to identify any factors that may have been omitted in original ROI assessment such as: reduced employee turnover costs, increased employee engagement/productivity/innovation, reduced material costs, decreased waste handling costs, reduced energy costs, support for strategic objectives, increased revenue through customer acquisition/retention, branding, and softer intangible benefits that can ultimately yield significant ROI, e.g., image, reputation, social capital.
- Ask for example(s) of project(s) that have not met ROI expectations and offer to evaluate them to identify ways they could be more sustainable and achieve better ROI.
- Offer to help them establish baseline measurements to accurately assess where they are and where they're going or could be going.
- Emphasize advantages of longer term vision and thinking.
- Be careful of the egos of leaders, don't make them feel they've missed something but rather that this is a new opportunity
- Explore future opportunities/risks that could affect financial bottom line (e.g., carbon credits, pending legislation, maintenance/operating costs): Have you considered the risks of not doing this?
- Include all affected groups/stakeholders in the discussion – Human Resources, Risk Management Team, Suppliers, C-Suite.
- Identify opportunities for low cost pilot project(s) to illustrate ROI potential.

4. “We see a lack of political will/leadership, so why should we care?”

- Promote discussion about whether a lack of political will is truly their major barrier/objection.
- Discuss the nature of politics as being in a constant state of change, so that absence of political will today is not a guarantee of lack of will tomorrow.
- Use examples of significant changes in our cultural and economic landscape that have been led by corporations and communities rather than government.
- Ask questions about whether they perceive political will as an agent of change at any level and whether one level may affect another.
- Ask questions about whether the lack of political will might leave a vacuum that creates an opening for corporate leadership, brand image enhancement (local, national and even international).
- Suggest the possibility that government is not the place to look for leadership; corporate domain is the source of innovation.

5. “We see no hard financial justification to do more than we are already doing.”

- Clarify concern, “What hard financial justification do you need to consider moving forward with this?”
- Align sustainability goals with other strategic objectives.
- Be inquisitive. Ask questions to identify financial benefits they have already identified and deemed to be not significant enough.
- Identify benefits for stakeholders beyond the simple financial case.
- Discuss ‘soft’ financial benefits – e.g., image, reputation, social capital.
- Learn about what they define as ‘hard’ financials.

6. “We’re too busy; there’s just no time.”

- Ask questions to discover things that they are already doing, and can build upon, in terms of sustainability.
- Learn about their Key Performance Indicators (KPI) so that you can help identify how sustainability will contribute to them.
- Discuss how sustainability can be about doing things differently rather than creating new work and that it can actually lead to time savings. Share success stories with quantifiable results.
- Work with all relevant divisions within the corporation to align corporate strategies so there are maximum results for effort of input.
- Focus on identifying short term payback opportunities that will help win them over without a big time commitment.

7. “We can’t afford it right now.”

- Ask about what they can afford.
- Help them to see the risks of not doing anything.
- Suggest that with the potential risks of not doing anything now is a good time for investment.
- Identify short-term ROI initiatives ('low hanging fruit') for quick payback.
- While using the "Three F Framework," of Feel, Felt, Found, emphasize that we have found there is always cost savings and good ROI with sustainability initiatives. For example, electricity rates will continue to increase so how can you not afford to reduce energy usage?

8. “We don’t know how or where to start.”

- Focus on the Three F Framework, acknowledging feelings that can include being overwhelmed and uncertain.
- Inquire about their business and priorities to find ways to connect sustainability with other priorities.
- Identify a specific area to create a focused plan of attack.
- Use case studies, stories and examples to illustrate ideas and processes.
- Identify short-term ROI initiatives ('low hanging fruit') for quick payback.

9. “It’s not going to make a difference to the world.”

- Ask questions to learn about what activities of their organization they perceive to impact upon the world, both positively and negatively.
- Learn about what their main objections really are – is this their primary concern with a sustainability initiative?
- Present the business case for sustainability that can be proven independent of any ecological imperative – reduced costs, increased innovation.
- Develop an understanding of their priorities/goals/current business imperatives. Answer for them the “What’s in it for me?” question independent of the “What difference does it make to the world?” question.

10. “Our customers don’t care.”

- Don’t focus on sustainability; focus instead on identifying customer needs and concerns, encouraging dialogue – What drives the customer relationship? What do you know about your customers? What do your customers care about?
- Assess the validity of the statement that customers don’t care – is it simply an assumption that may or may not be true? Do customers actually not care? Or do customers care but this hasn’t been communicated to business?
- If customers do care but business doesn’t realize this, then work needs to be done on helping/encouraging business to communicate with and understand customers.
- Even if customers don’t care, or don’t know what they want, they can be enticed to care through innovation and education – this approach, where business is leading steps ahead of customers, can both retain existing customers and also secure new customers.
- Offer ideas to link what customers do care about (e.g., quality) with sustainability ideas (e.g., longer life span product).
- Be cautious not to ‘educate on the fly’ – find ways to softly and discreetly share ideas with them about their relationship with their customers. Ask don’t tell. “Would you like to try...and see how it works?”
- Emphasize your wish to add value to their company, not bring harm.
- Present examples of organizations that have achieved success by seizing on chance for ‘first-mover’ advantage.
- Identify opportunities for low cost pilot project(s) to illustrate customer response to initiative(s).
- Discuss other factors that drive business decisions other than customers – e.g., market factors, regulations, supply chain.

Summary

This Discussion Paper summarizes the ideas shared at the TSSS Objection Handling Workshop for Sustainability Professionals. We encourage readers to continue to come together both in person and online to share challenges, successes and best practices of moving sustainability forward in an organization.

It is this “idea sharing” that allows champions to grow their energy and enthusiasm as they prepare to take on ***and win over*** objectors and cynics.

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APPENDIX A: Understanding Worldviews

In trying to sell a product or an idea, we must recognize that our target is composed first and foremost of human beings, representing varied worldviews. These views influence how people perceive both others and themselves, as well as how they receive, process and decide to act upon information. If the sales pitch doesn't appeal to the individual's worldview, then the sales pitch will fail. While people are all individuals, our worldviews tend to align into identifiable categories.

The Myths That Have Made Us

Betty Sue Flowers, co-author of *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (Doubleday, 2004), explains that we must understand "the myths that have made us." She outlines four myths: Hero, Religious, Democratic/Scientific and Economic. These myths form the worldviews of not only individuals but society in general. She suggests that, "Every corporation is embedded in a story." We have the power to tell a better story about ourselves and our corporations.

Present society is firmly planted in the Economic Myth whose core ideal is growth. It has been suggested that we must aspire to a new myth, an Ecological Myth, focused on the health of the whole interconnected system, including the economic, rather than focusing on simple growth. This myth tells a story in which the global financial system is embedded in ecological terms; **the health of a company is defined by its long-term growth rather than by short-term gains.**

How People See the World

In trying to sell the idea of sustainability to an individual, one must understand his/her worldview. A person whose worldview is framed by the Hero myth, for example, will respond best to communication through the form of stories, while a person with an Economic worldview will be most receptive to communication in the form of numbers and images. A person with a Religious worldview will have behavior motivated by the concept of Obedience to norms, rules and regulations, while the behavior of a person with a Democratic/Scientific worldview is more motivated by an appeal to logic and reason.

Selling Sustainability through Worldview Thinking

[John Marshall Roberts](#), author of *Igniting Inspiration* (2010), is an expert in strategic communications and organizational psychology. He suggests that there are eight fundamental 'ways of thinking.' While most people's thinking will fall predominantly into one of these categories, on any given day, an individual may experience any number of these thinking systems depending on situational factors.

Here's how he categorizes these ways of thinking:

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Autistic Thinking | 5. Individualistic Thinking |
| 2. Tribal/Magical Thinking | 6. Humanistic Thinking |
| 3. Heroic Thinking | 7. Systemic Thinking |
| 4. Absolutistic Thinking | 8. Holistic Thinking |

According to Roberts, the dominant thinking patterns and value systems in North America today are the Absolutistic, Individualistic, Humanistic and Systemic. Therefore, sustainability advocates must find ways to craft their messages so that they inspire the thinkers among those groups by being seen as authentic and relevant.

For example, the Absolutistic Thinker finds meaning by denying impulses and upholding moral laws and has a value system based upon discipline, authority and purpose. The Individualistic Thinker works to achieve success by strategically accomplishing desired outcomes and has a value system based upon accomplishment, power and profit. The Humanistic Thinker, however, wishes to find happiness by relating deeply to other humans and values equality, honesty and relatedness. And the Systemic Thinker sees the world as being torn asunder and wishes to work to restore vitality and balance with respect for values of integrity, competence and sustainability.

Clearly, a sustainability champion who approaches an Individualistic Thinker and a Humanistic Thinker with the exact same sales pitch will be unlikely to sway both people.

Understanding the myths and worldviews that shape an individual's thinking patterns and value systems is vital in presenting ideas to that individual and in overcoming any objections that person may present. It is only with such an understanding that sustainability champions can successfully move forward in responding to those objections with the Three F Framework: "I understand how you **feel**. Others have **felt** that way before. What we have **found** is that..."

APPENDIX B: Organizational Change

Even with an understanding of sales and worldviews, a sustainability pitch will fail if you are not selling the idea to the right person within the organization. All groups, including profit-driven businesses, governments and nonprofit organizations, have a culture that permeates their beliefs and activities.

When trying to effect culture change, the sustainability champion must be aware that many people's influence on decision making extends far beyond their assigned job roles and responsibilities, and has much to do with their social roles and power to influence others within the organization.

The Amoeba of Culture Change

Alan AtKisson's, author of *The ISIS Agreement: How Sustainability Can Improve Organizational Performance and Transform the World* (Earthscan, 2008), describes the "Amoeba of Culture Change," wherein the organization is seen as a living organism, influenced by all of its components. Culture change and innovation are achieved when there is buy-in from all of the participants, influencers and decision makers, thereby allowing the 'organism' to evolve and change. To effectively influence organizational development, you must understand the different roles within an organization:

- **Innovators:** 'discoverers' but need help to move from discovery to reality
- **Change agents:** sustainability champions
- **Transformers:** gatekeepers, influencers, middle managers
- **Mainstreamers:** 'normal' people, need aligned incentives
- **Spiritual recluses:** driven by morals, ethics, beliefs
- **Controllers:** senior executives
- **Curmudgeons:** jaded, pessimists – may be failed change agents
- **Laggards:** prefer status quo, resist as long as possible
- **Reactionaries:** actively protect vested interests
- **Iconoclasts:** vocal critics of status quo, may attack reactionaries

These categories represent multiple challenges for a sustainability champion: Objections raised by the Iconoclasts will be quite different from those presented by the Reactionaries. And, clearly, an understanding of sales and worldviews comes into play here, as an approach that will win over the Change Agents is unlikely to be the winning approach when appealing to the Curmudgeons or Laggards.

Vital Components of Organizational Change

Once you understand the roles, motivations and mindsets of the people within an organization, the next step is to understand the vital components of any organizational change initiative. [Kevin Brady](#), of Five Winds Strategic Consulting and PE International, summarizes the framework presented by George Manning

and Kent Curtis (*The Art of Leadership*, 2002), as an understanding that successful organizational change requires the following fundamental components:

- Vision
- Skills
- Incentives
- Resources
- Action Plan

For example, without Vision, there will be confusion. Without Skills, there will be anxiety. Without Incentives, the change will be much too gradual to gain momentum. Without Resources, there will be frustration. And without an Action Plan, there will be only false starts. Without any of these five fundamental components, the initiative will stall.

About Toronto Sustainability Speaker Series

[Toronto Sustainability Speaker Series \(TSSS\)](#) is widely recognized as Canada's premiere forum for dialogue and problem solving among sustainability professionals.

Each year over 1000 sustainability change agents attend TSSS events to exchange ideas, to network and to be inspired by leading companies that have integrated sustainability into their business practices.

TSSS is known for its interactive discussion format where people come together as allies and partners to share ideas and learn from each other. Events are broadcast live via free webcast and have an active Twitter Chat.

Also, through our website at www.EcoOpportunity.net, sustainability champions share articles and cutting edge knowledge with the TSSS community.

[Click here](#) to join the Toronto Sustainability Speaker Series (TSSS) email list to receive information about upcoming events and links to documents like this Discussion Paper.

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