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Using the Management Constellation as tool for Corporate Sustainability

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Abstract

In the recent years many companies have set sustainability goals and strategies in the recent years. To translate them into practice, the companies may face difficulties. These difficulties can be internally like organisation, culture, processes, management styles etc. and externally like customers, suppliers, authorities and other stakeholders. In many cases difficulties occur as complex and intransparent situations. They can concern factual problems or relational problems.

The innovative systemic method of Management Constellation can help to solve or to clarify such diffuse and complex problems, in particular problems regarding relationships and so-called "soft factors". The procedure is the following: a person with a problem ("client") clarifies his situation in an interview with a facilitator. They define a problem system and its elements. As elements persons are chosen. They get placed by the client in a room. By doing this the client visualises his inner picture of the situation. He makes his implicit "tacit" knowledge explicit. But it is more than a picture: the persons which have roles as system elements talk, interact, feel and change places in a process. Options, solutions, decisions can be simulated in a lively manner. This process is guided by a trained facilitator and leads to conclusion or even solution picture. In the end the client steps into this pictures and can reverse the explicit solution into implicit knowledge.

How this innovative organisational tool - which does not need any paper, yet people - can be used as a tool for the management of Corporate Sustainability/ Corporate Social Responsibility will be introduced in the presentation and the conference paper. Results from one of the latest research subjects of the Institute for Ecology and the Environment at University of St.Gallen in Switzerland are presented. In this project, a company that translates a sustainability strategy into action was accompanied for one year. Seven constellations were carried out, documented and evaluated in a case study. The conclusion is to add the method as a valuable tool in the toolbox of Corporate Sustainability Management, because it integrates a bundle of problem solving methods into a unique new way of clarifying, simulating and solving sustainability issues.

1 Introduction

In the recent years many corporations have set visions, goals and strategies in order to achieve corporate sustainability. Following this first step of corporate sustainability they communicate their plans to the public, in particular to the interested stakeholders. Consequent step is to translate these visions and **strategies into practice**. A step where many companies do have difficulties, because writing brochures and delivering lip services is easier than the clumsy reality of changing the business as usual. Hence the problem in corporate life is the realisation of sustainable development (e.g. Linne & Schwarz 2003; Leitschuh-Fecht & Steger 2003; Steger 1997, Birke & Schwarz 1997).

How to solve this realisation problem? This question is the main focus of the latest research of the Institute for Economy and the Environment (IWÖ-HSG) at the University of St. Gallen. There have been projects on the evaluation of Environmental Management Systems (Dyllick & Hamschmidt 2000), on the implementation of the management tool Sustainability Balanced Scorecard (Schaltegger & Dyllick 2002), on the resources and hurdles which are set by Corporate Culture (Bieker 2005) and now on the strategy realisation supported by the tool of Management Constellation. Thus it is a mix of looking at the “hard” facts and the “soft” facts of the realisation problem.

This paper reports about the findings of the latest project researching the implementation of Corporate Sustainability (Gminder 2005). It has theoretical findings through literature analysis and empirical findings through analysis using the systemic method of **Management Constellation**. The approach is qualitative applied management research. Together with corporate partners problems of reality are analysed and solution paths are developed. In this project the author carried out Management Constellations in a partner company of the textile industry [Remei AG], documented, analysed and evaluated them.

The results show that the Management Constellation **provides sufficient potential** to help to overcome the above-mentioned problems. In particular the “soft” problems related to human interaction, business relations and organisational as well as cultural fit. It is a tool that has been developed to analyse complex relational problems and develop and simulate solutions for the future. Hence it provides a methodology to bridge the gap between the strategic and operative levels of companies, in particular the non-technical management and business relations parts.

Objective and outline of the paper is to specify the strategies and areas of implementation of Corporate Sustainability found in the literature, to explain the Management Constellation, to show an example of applying it in order to solve a problem in the partner company. In the end a conclusion is drawn on the usefulness of the tool for putting Corporate Sustainability into practice.

2 Implementing Corporate Sustainability – Results from theoretical research

After having decided to follow the approach of Sustainable Development and having set policies, visions and missions for Corporate Sustainability, companies should set up sustainability strategies. Research in various sectors (building, food, chemical, IT, freight traffic, mechanical engineering) concerning the competitive aspects of environmental management, carried out at the IWOe-HSG over the past decade, revealed an empirical body of evidence which can be clustered in to five different types of competitive strategies implying different causal relationships in the competitive field (Dyllick 2003, Gminder et al. 2002, pp. 108-112, Dyllick et al. 1997, pp. 76-176, Forest Reinhardt proposes similar strategy types, cf. Reinhardt 2000):

- (1) Strategy "safe" - Reducing and managing risks.
- (2) Strategy "credible" - Enhancing and fostering credibility and reputation.
- (3) Strategy "efficient" - Enhancing productivity and efficiency.
- (4) Strategy "innovative" - Differentiating in the market.
- (5) Strategy "transformative" - Developing markets and society.

Strategy Implementation focusses regarding the **level of action** on company sites organisation (for levels of action cf. Dyllick 2004). „Organization is the key. One of the major obstacles to implementing strategies that break radically new ground is often the absence of an organizational capacity to make them stick.” (Crosbie & Knight 1995: 256). In addition the implementation can also take place on the level of product chains, the product functions and even the needs.

In order to translate these Sustainability Strategies into action four **areas of implementation** can be identified through literature research. They show where strategies should be realised within a company. These are the areas of the formal and informal organisational structures, organisational processes and systems, corporate culture and the style of leadership and management. Within these areas four **modes of implementation** can be identified. They show how to realise Sustainability Strategies. These are the modes of organisational learning and development, organisational change, micro politics and the management of symbolic systems (cf. Gminder 2005: 105-121), Starik 2002, Meffert & Kirchgeorg 1998: 395-438 bzw. Epstein 1996: 26f.).

The implementation process has **constraints** which should also be considered. Constraints are the complexity and long-term-focus of sustainability and its perception whether it is fitting to financial efficiency or not. The purpose of the company, its history and its reasons for setting Sustainability Strategies have enormous impact. Are the strategies set because of normative ethical reasons? Are they set for gaining competitive advantage or because of legal political reasons? Other may to consider are the situational context of the company, the organisational level where it is implemented and the question, whether the strategy is implemented explicitly or not.

Through literature research there can be also identified **success factors** for the implementation. Successful implementation integrates social and environmental objectives and measures in the traditional management and lines of business. It constructs sustainability as an objective which is useful für the company and its vision. In addition social rules in the company system have to be considered, in particular rules of self organisation and professionalism. And the systemic limits of steering a social process have to be respected. In a conclusion most of the factor are similar to traditional change processes and therefore need specific change management. The following figure shows an overview of the clusters of strategy implementation within a company:

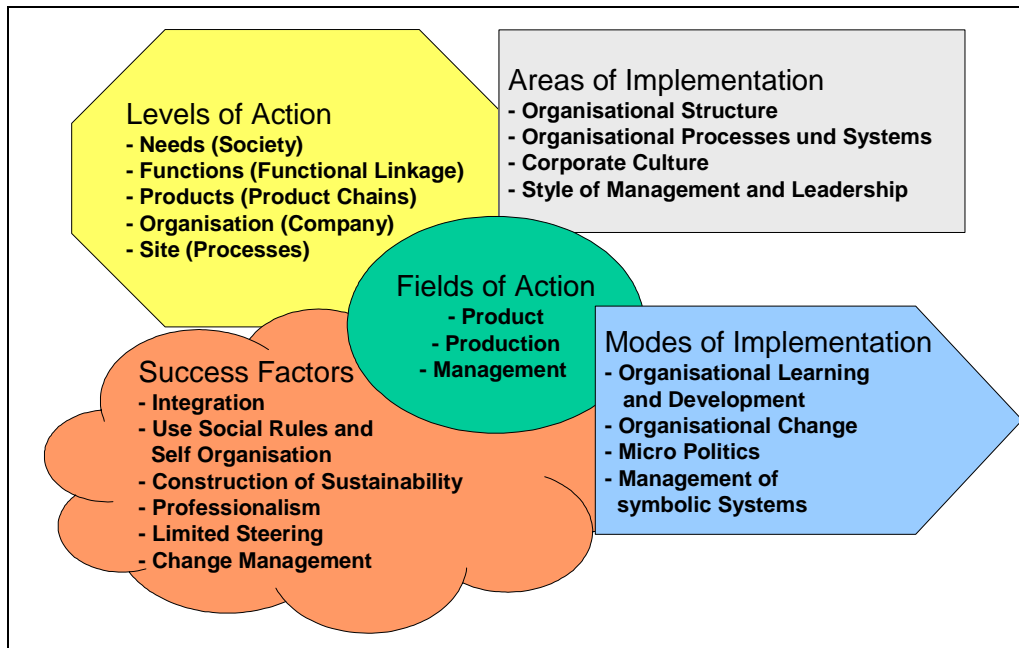


Figure 1: Clusters of strategy implementation within a company

The partner company (Remei AG, Switzerland) for the case studies of the above mentioned research project has chosen the strategy “innovative” (IV). Implementation areas and modes were not determined beforehand. Looking back all of them were touched. Remei is a company trading with cotton and textiles. In 1991 it started to create a project for growing organic cotton in India. The organic part of their traded cotton increased continually over the past decade. In 2003 the 50:50 balance between organic and non-organic cotton was reached. The management decided to put all further investments in organic cotton (“star”) and handle the non-organic one as “cash cow” for the next years. The strategic goal is to have a reasonable 5% p.a. growth of organic cotton and develop to the leading organic cotton company of the world. The Management Constellation was used for accompanying the strategic implementation process of translating this Corporate Sustainability Strategy into action.

3 The Management Constellation – Tool for Research and Implementation Support

The Management Constellation (cf. Weber 2000, Horn & Brick 2001, Sparrer & Varga von Kibéd 2000, Sparrer 2002, Ruppert 2003, Rosselet 2003, Wade 2004) is a method or an instrument to analyse concerns and to generate impulses to solve or handle these concerns.

Concerns can relate to general issues like solving problems or conflicts, like supporting decisions or achieving an objective, like simulating future scenarios. Or they can relate to specific questions and subjects of a firm, a business unit or a department. The issue or subject is stated by a person or a group and is also related to him, her or them. The method needs to be facilitated by a trained expert. In addition enough space and a group of 5-10 people are required for application.

The following **procedure** is carried out when applying the Management Constellation. It starts with a solution focussed interview of the person who wants to arrange a concern. The facilitator interviews this “concern owner” and collects the necessary information of the status quo. The concern is written down in a sentence on a flip chart which expresses the objective for the constellation. In consultation with the concern owner the facilitator

proposes the persons, groups, subjects and objects relevant for the concern. The people of the group are assigned to these roles, they get “representatives” e.g. for the Colleague A, the boss C, the subject “Environment” or the object “Management System”.

In the next step the concern owner arranges the representatives¹ in the room according to his/ her inner picture of the situation. The representatives have 1-2 minutes to perceive their personal impression at the position they have been placed and to observe the relations to the others representatives. They should also check whether they would like to change their position. The facilitator interviews the representatives, the process owner watches the whole procedure from the outside (“It is so great to watch the system in which you are in for 24h a day from the outside,” was once a comment of a concern owner). Now the so-called “**As-is-picture**” is complete.

In the next step, the so-called “process work”, the As-is-picture gets transformed into a “solution” or “**Conclusion Picture**”. The transformation is mainly done by testing and changing positions of the representatives, sometimes also dialogues between particular representatives are necessary to work on relationships. Having progressed to an appropriate conclusion, the concern owner steps into the picture and replaces his or her representative. She/he can assimilate and memorise the idea of a possible solution for the concern.

The Management Constellation is finished by a **debriefing**, where the representatives can add comments from their role perspective. Intended purpose of the debriefing is to interpret the events of the constellation and to extract results. Sometimes the conclusion picture itself is so rich that further discussion is not necessary. Yet most of the times many phenomena have occurred, so that a longer discussion and transformation of the area, sensual and relational scenes into language is important.

Concerns, as-is and Conclusion-Pictures refer to an **organisational system**. Such a system can be a project, a team or a company, as well as the purchasing or the sales market, the political or the societal system. It depends on the concern. Therefore the Management Constellation is a systemic method which shows more the interactions and effects between the members and elements of a system, rather than the action and performance of a single person or element.

The concern is arranged by **one person**. It is her or his view and construction of the situation, her or his personal mental projection of the concern. That fits to personal issues. If the concern is shared in a team, a department or a company, attention has to be paid to the personal impression. Optional the As-is-picture can be discussed and determined beforehand by a group.

The Management Constellation can serve **several purposes** of the management. It can be used as analytic and creative tool for the Strategic and the Change Management. It can be used for Micro political Analysis as well as for the Organisational or Human Resource Development, for the work on the changing corporate culture and last, but not least, the various issues of Sustainability Management, i.e. the management of stakeholder relations and the commitment of employees.

The scientific epistemology of the Management Constellation bases on three notions of social sciences: the Constructivism (cf. Watzlawick 2002, Jensen 1999, Kieser 2001, Hejl & Stahl 2000, Dachler & Hosking 1995), the Phenomenology (cf. Waldenfels 1992, (Gergen 1991, Bühl 2002) and the General System Theory (cf. Müller 1996, Willke 1991), in particular System-oriented Management (cf. Ulrich 2001, Rüegg-Stürm 2002, Gomez & Probst 1999, Malik 2000 or Schwaninger & Hechenblaickner 2002) and the Systemic

¹ If there is no sufficient number of persons, pieces of paper or other place holders can substitute them.

Psychotherapy (cf. Schweitzer et al. 1992, von Schlippe & Schweitzer 2003, Simon 1993, Ludewig 1997, Reiter & Ahlers 1991).

How the sometimes impressive **impact** of the Management Constellation arises is not yet fully and clearly researched. Main items seem to be the work with visualisation, the strongly solution-focussed approach and the addressing of relational and emotional questions and dependences. One helpful concept of explaining might be the “Emotional Intelligence” notion of Goleman 1997. The power of the right part of our brain is used in constellations in opposite to most of the “rational” management tools which address the left part of our brain by calculating, discussing, analysing, writing etc. The author of the paper recommends participating once in a Management Constellation, at least as representative. Some consultants and trainers offer open seminars at the weekend. This experience has more power of explanation than many pages of description.

4 Implementing Sustainability Strategies - Results of the Case Study Research

In the research the Management Constellation (MC) is applied to concerns arising during the implementation of Corporate Sustainability in the partner company. In seven in-depth single case studies the execution of constellations are described, analysed and four conclusions are drawn for more generic results regarding the method and regarding the content, the implementation of Sustainability Strategies (cf. Gminder 2005: 214-234).

[1] In all constellations, **successful business and work relationships** are highly relevant for a successful implementation of Sustainability Strategies. Sustainability changes business relationships within the company and relationships with external business partners in 7 dimensions:

1. Corporate Sustainability increases content, volume and complexity to be dealt with in the business relationships. Social and environmental get added to the existing economic ones (e.g. more items to be negotiated). MCs help to clarify and understand complex contexts and situations.
2. Corporate Sustainability leads to process requirements towards the suppliers. At the moment a company defines product requirements for the products its suppliers manufacture. To set process standards (like fair trade or organic rules) is not common in the supply chain and requires more transparency and effort from suppliers. One case showed this: a part of the organic farmers brought out synthetic fertiliser and violated the organic farming rules. A Management Constellation helped the company to cope with this difficult situation.
3. Corporate Sustainability requires more transparency in the relationships. Another player enters the supply chain: organic and social certifiers are checking the suppliers in charge of their customers. There are two effects: One is the control - the supplier is no black box anymore. The other is more relationship complexity due one or several new players. MCs can help to handle these new relationships.
4. Because of this transparency Corporate Sustainability leads to more openness when issues occur. This is necessary in order to keep credibility with the end consumer. Corporate Sustainability is a product quality of trust. The consumer can not check it directly at the product. He needs to trust and request evidence from the producer. MC can support when solving issues of credibility by simulating communication processes and their impact.
5. Sustainable Products require coordination and good relationships along the whole supply chain. A company is not able anymore to solve sustainable issues on its

own. It is restricted to its production sites. With the support of MC supply wide actions and measures can be developed and simulated immediately.

6. Through the broader and more complex requirements, the likeability of mistakes and misunderstanding is higher, too. These can weaken the relationships how one case study with supplier problems showed. MCs help to gain insights in such processes and develop new attitudes for fruitful relationships.

[2] Five out of seven case studies confirmed the trend that after long years of focussing the environmental dimension, **social sustainability** stands in the foreground. In opposite to the environment which can be optimised more scientifically and technically, the social dimension needs more effort in relationships, in „soft“ areas like culture, teamwork and management. Management Constellation can help to solve „soft“ issues which can not be optimised technically through new production lines, processes or machines.

[3] In times of globalisation and shifting of production, the **cooperation with developing countries** (in the case studies: India) plays a more and more important role. All three dimensions are touched by this fact. The economic one of efficiency when producing clean and fair in developing countries. Foundations can play a major role for bridging the gap at the moment. The social and environmental one when adapting our values and ideas about social wellbeing, welfare and “good” environment in these countries. Many times other ideas need to be respected and accepted. The case studies show that Management Constellations train intercultural understanding and communication.

[4] A professional and **better marketing and market strategies** are required for selling sustainable products. Two case studies show this. In particular the experiences of the 1990es made clear that such products neither sell better nor sell more expensive. Their additional environmental and social benefits need to be communicated positively and depending on the product proactively or even very subtle. E.g. in the textile business „bio“ or „environmentally friendly“ is more constraint than resource. Due to bad experiences of the early “Bio”-Clothing, the consumer has deeply stored the image of being expensive, bad quality, non fashionable colours and design (cf. Schneidewind 2003). Using MCs , market strategies and communication for sustainable products can be formed and tested regarding the reactions of the customer. MCs support a clear and attractive marketing of these products.

The results of the empirical case study research confirm the fact, that the implementation of Sustainability Strategies needs to take place in the areas of Management, Processes, Systems, Structures within the company, but as well as in the supply chain of the internationally oriented global production. MCs can be used for solving or clarifying strategic questions of implementing and adapting Sustainability Strategies. They can be used for operating issues as well, occurring during implementation or everyday work. Thus the Management Constellation can serve as a **tool for the strategic and the operating Management of Corporate Sustainability**.

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