

Levers

Experiences from the field-trip to Bensonwood Homes and insights from the book by Auden Schendler, *Getting Green Done*, may each inform future conversations with Cabot Creamery as we discuss its solid waste sustainability standards and plans. While each source contributes several unique perspectives on approaches to achieving more sustainable business practices, the two sources reinforce some common ideas as well. A common adage suggests that what someone (or perhaps some organization) does when no one is looking tells you more about their character than what he or she (or it) does when someone *is* looking. This may be true, but if the goal is to help to make the largest change possible, then it seems important to gain an understanding of where to focus both internal resources as well as outside attention, and to make a big fuss as you do it.

At various points in Schendler's narrative describing his time at the Aspen Skiing Company (ASC), he discusses the need for businesses to "find their biggest lever" – the part of their businesses that could best be used to make change toward global sustainability (2009, p. 88). In the case of his company, which operates resort hotels and ski slopes in Colorado, the biggest lever turns out *not* to be its reduction of actual energy or water use at its ski resorts, but rather its contact with influential people and organizations. While ASC can and does implement ongoing sustainability projects, Schendler came to realize that it is the example they provide and their message about sustainability, with a particular focus on reducing energy use and increasing efficiency, that could make the biggest impact. After all, ASC caters to people of considerable means, and directed appropriately, such means are an important aspect of promoting large scale change.

Tedd and Hans at Bensonwood have located several areas of opportunity to improve the sustainability of their business, such as transportation, systems efficiency, product design and organizational structure. I didn't get the impression they are focused on a *single biggest lever*, but rather balancing priorities among several key areas in order to promote a multi-faceted sustainability profile for the company. The *Net-Zero* (house design and implementation) program is an exciting asset for them, and could become a huge lever if it caught on, but I didn't get the sense that promoting it was a greater priority for them than anything else they are doing. If this is actually the case, then I think they could be missing an opportunity to develop an important sustainability lever.

Using Schendler's *lever* concept to look at Cabot makes the creamery operation look almost like a distraction. With thousands of acres of land under production and over a thousand owners of the business spread out across New England, Cabot may have the ability to influence widespread farm practices in the region as well as sustainability around land use. It seems likely to me that Cabot's farmer-owners represent Cabot's largest lever, not the creamery or its products, important they may be. Additionally, the reach and potential impact of the Cabot brand and their products could certainly be viewed as their biggest medium for influencing popular understanding of sustainability issues. Indeed, this is not lost on Cabot's leadership and marketing folks, as I think Jed mentioned. As my group talks with Cabot about waste and ways of deciding what standard of waste stream sustainability to try to use, it will be challenging, and maybe impossible to incorporate much of the farmer-owner lever into the process. But this leads to another point.

Schendler contends that organizations must broadcast their efforts, successes and failures with regard to sustainability. In so doing, everyone who is interested can learn from others about the right ways and the wrong ways to approach sustainability. He believes that more open discourse on real sustainability work will raise the overall level of quality of the results, and that will be good for everyone including businesses who engage in that conversation. A second result of a company making its sustainability position public is that it makes companies publically accountable for making good on their claims. The public trust and positive brand image gained from “walking the talk” can make a significant contribution to a company’s financial bottom line... which is a good thing, because the returns on sustainability investments do not always come in the short term.

If Schendler’s notion about broadcasting one’s message is correct, Jed and Cabot should start sharing Cabot’s sustainability story in a more public way. The solid waste sustainability work will one day become part of an overall marketing message and identity for Cabot. And while it is understandable that Jed doesn’t want to share that message before he feels they are ready, waiting until then may mean missed opportunities for engaging its public stakeholders and developing supportive partnerships, not to mention its own organizational learning.

Neither Bensonwood, nor Cabot, nor any of the companies in Schendler’s portfolio have perfectly implemented their sustainability efforts. But I think it’s clear that Tedd, Hans and Schendler all identified their organizations, whether consciously or not, as *learning* organizations. That is, at an organizational level there is awareness that learning occurs and there are processes in place to not only incorporate individual learning into the organizational culture, but to choose the learning of the organization and to modify the way in which that learning takes

place (Argyris, 1993). *Learning organizations* would seem to have a large advantage over others in adapting to external change, as well as finding new ways to create value, both of which will be critical in becoming significantly more sustainable. It is not yet clear to me whether or not Cabot – a constellation of independent farm-businesses – is such an organization. In any case, it seems likely that the strength of Cabot’s sustainability profile, supported in part by its solid waste disposal plan, will depend on an organization-wide (cooperative-wide) ability to try new things, adapt quickly to changes, and to be accountable to its public stakeholders by helping every farmer-owner to walk the Cabot talk.

Argyris, C. (1993). *Knowledge for action : a guide to overcoming barriers to organizational change* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schendler, A. (2009). *Getting green done : hard truths from the front lines of the sustainability revolution* (1st ed.). New York: PublicAffairs.