

Sustainable Management Practices in the Voluntary Sector

Sharon Torstonson

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Recently COSS Christchurch was invited to speak at the national LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems) conference. This invitation came because we had just decided to join Canterbury Community Dollars as part of our commitment to sustainable management practices.

The COSS commitment has developed slowly, as part of our focus on how to best work towards our vision of social justice, equity and wellbeing. In recent years there has been an increasing awareness of the impact of our own management policies and practices on social wellbeing in Christchurch. We have become more aware that it's not enough just to work for changes elsewhere in our community and society. We also had to look at our own behaviour.

This increasing awareness has led us to a number of new or changed policies and practices, some more challenging than others and all requiring new ways of thinking and behaviours. At first the changes were made as 'one-offs', but we have now adopted an overarching policy which commits us to a journey towards sustainability. We may never reach our destination, but each step along the way is valuable.

This has required quite a shift in thinking for several reasons. There is a strong theme in the social services sector of working with people to help them improve their wellbeing through individual change. There is also a strong movement for social justice through challenging the structures that contribute to social injustice. But often we in the sector haven't made the connection between those structures and our own management practices that support them.

In this rather slow and sometimes painful journey, we've looked around for examples, guidance and ideas from other groups and organisations. But it appears that few other organisations are any further along the road than us, and many have not yet made the connection between their own internal practices and policies, and the wider social environment that impacts on their clients or members.

In preparing the conference address I took an informal survey of takata whenua, community and voluntary sector groups and organisations. Emails were sent to 97 groups, asking them:

Has your Board, Trust or Committee ever considered the issue of sustainable management practices? If so, what was the outcome?

Does your organisation have any formal policy relating to sustainable management practices? If so, what are they?

If not, do you have any informal procedures that are consistently practiced? If so, what are they?

I also gave them some examples of sustainable practices (which is a strict no-no in 'proper' research, as it can lead respondents to give particular responses).

In the two days I gave them to reply, I received 17 responses. Not exactly strong enough methods or data to allow me to draw out any definitive results, but nothing that I read in the responses caused me to change my perception of where the sector is at.

In my view most management practices in the voluntary social sector appear to be based on budgetary rather than ethical or sustainability considerations.

Respondents made comments like:

"Purchasing decisions are based on price, service and ongoing support."

"We have looked more at minimising spending and maximising interest earned and addressed the issues of morality very seldom."

Even those with a personal commitment to sustainability hadn't thought to apply it to workplace:

"Till I read the question I never even considered that we as an organisation could look at sustainable management practices. I sit here with a blush because it is so obvious and I didn't think of it – while I do in my private life".

The replies did indicate an increasing interest in the issue of sustainable management practices, and a few had made decisions around other practices such as ethical funding sources and buying locally. The blushing manager said she would have the issue on the next Board agenda. Others said things like:

"The organisation is on the 'sustainability journey' and always keen to learn more."

"We are a member of the Sustainable Business Network, where we get information and ideas."

"My personal philosophies carry over into work with regards to recycling etc, so now you've got me thinking. If we haven't got it as a formal policy, I'm going to make it one!"

So what are some barriers that voluntary / community sector groups face and ways to support the journey to sustainability?

Firstly we need to find ways for groups to make the connection between sustainable practices and social wellbeing. How do sustainable management practices contribute to a group's vision and mission?

Traditional western (although not takata whenua) thinking has seen social issues as separate from environmental ones. However there is now a large body of research showing how environmental issues impact disproportionately on the disadvantaged in our communities, and this is the one area where most groups have what might be described as sustainable practices. Virtually all the responses to our survey mentioned recycling and various actions that minimise power usage.

But I'm not sure that the widespread adoption of more sound environmental practices by social sector groups is in response to their missions and visions. I would say that there has been a huge change right through society, where recycling and power conservation have become standard behaviour. We do it as a matter of course, because we recognise how vitally important it is for the whole of our community, our country and our planet - and of course we do it to save money.

Let's not overlook that latter motivation. Our sector is notoriously under-funded. People in the sector are experts at making a little go an awfully long way, and have been doing so for a long time. So it's kind of nice to be able to be virtuous about behaviour that in the past, before recycling and power conservation became normalised, may have been described in slightly unflattering terms – "penny-pinching", "miserly", or "scrimping".

Other sustainable or ethical management practices present more of a challenge to widespread adoption. As well as making the connection between sustainability and social or community wellbeing for groups, we also need to address the barriers and reasons to not choose the more ethical or sustainable action. I'll use examples from COSS's practices and policies to illustrate what some of the barriers might be.

One of the earlier decisions we made was to use some of our funds to support local economic development. Like many community groups, we get most of our income in a few lump sums from grants, and in our case these grants all arrive within a few months. The money that will be needed later in the year gets invested on a term deposit. We agreed to put some of that with Just Dollars, which is a non-profit organisation that lends to people setting up their own business that the banks are not

interested in. But there was concern around the Board table that we should not do this, because we would receive less interest than from a bank. In the view of some Board members we had an obligation to our funders to make that money go as far as we could and reduce our need for further grants.

We also decided to move to Kiwibank in order to bank with a company that was New Zealand owned and would be less likely to be investing in companies with unethical practices. One of the respondents to my survey said they had also considered that, but "Plans to move to Kiwibank were held off as many teething problems were experienced by other organisations." I can second that – it is not easy to operate a multi-signatory account with Kiwibank. Our problems have been many and continue, and I'm no longer sure whether it continues to be principle or whether it's now sheer obstinacy that keeps us with them. There are discussions in the sector at present about the possibility of setting up a bank specifically for the sector, and I keenly await developments.

We also chose not to apply to gaming machine trusts and this too was not unanimously supported around the Board table. This issue has quite a high profile at present in the sector, with the argument for taking pokie funding being that the money is raised from the community, so why not use it to do good for the community. There is also that strong economic imperative, with the chronic shortage of funding and struggle to survive that many groups are constantly dealing with.

I suspect that other Boards would find that facing similar decisions is equally challenging; but as more takata whenua, community and voluntary sector organisations are making the connection between social and community wellbeing and their own management practices, there will be more opportunities to learn from and support each other. By connecting with each other we can work together on these challenges and hopefully come up with solutions that will benefit us all.