

# Corporate Environmental Strategy

## International Journal of Corporate Sustainability

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# Book Review

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## **Ants, Galileo & Gandhi: Designing the Future of Business Through Nature, Genius and Compassion**

**Edited by Sissel Waage**

**Publisher: Greenleaf Publishing,  
<http://www.greenleaf-publishing.com/>;  
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Despite the fact that some companies have begun the exploration of sustainability, many that have are struggling to find their way. On the other hand, companies that have not are seeking business reasons to begin the journey. Meanwhile, the chorus of voices promoting and, in some cases, aggressively campaigning for sustainability is clearly becoming stronger and more widespread. And yet all too often the discussions of sustainability bog down somewhere between the intricacies of its definition and how to successfully implement it. What in large measure has been lacking has been a coherent and thoughtful, but insightful and vision-inspired description of the enormous opportunities related to sustainability in a business context.

In *Ants, Galileo & Gandhi: Designing the Future of Business Through Nature, Genius and Compassion*, editor Sissel Waage, director of research at The Natural Step's U.S. office, and her pre-

eminent group of contributors,<sup>1</sup> have carefully and persuasively found a balance capturing the essence of sustainability while at the same time identifying and assessing important lessons to be learned from their experience.

Perhaps one of the most refreshing aspects of the book is Ms. Waage's acknowledgement in the Preface<sup>2</sup> that sustainability is a work in progress. "The story of our future lies ahead and is only now beginning to be written. The cases in this book show glimmers of the changes to come," Ms. Waage writes. This passage sets the tone for what is to come: thoughtful essays and case studies providing a penetrating look at sustainability rather than flowery descriptions lacking substance, a criticism that can be leveled at many books covering this topic.

Before taking a closer look at the book, however, it is worth considering the book's rather unique title. In effect, the grouping of ants, Galileo, and Gandhi represents a metaphor for exploring the dynamics of modern businesses. Ants signify nature's lessons and the dependence of individuals on broader, complex systems. The spirit of Galileo, in turn, embodies the ability to understand and establish that the current business paradigm is imperfect. Finally, the essence of Gandhi calls forth the need for determination and compas-

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<sup>1</sup> The book is an outgrowth from The Natural Step's 2002 conference on sustainability. Many, although not all, of the contributors spoke at the conference. The contributors are: Ray Anderson; Hilary Bradbury; Gretchen C. Daily; Cecilia Danks; Katherine Ellison; Alois Flatz; Martin Goebel; Thilo Goodall; David Hudson; Matt Klein; Colin le Duc; Frank Marquardt; George McKinley; Lynelle Preston; Karl-Henrik Robèrt; Derek Smith; Jennifer L. Sokolove; Karen Steer; Juli Torok; Erica Tucker-Bassin; Sissel Waage; and Allen L. White.

<sup>2</sup> The preface is available online at: <http://www.greenleaf-publishing.com/pdfs/antspref.pdf>.

sion as new business models are established. Taken together, each element plays a key role in considering the story of sustainability.

The book begins with a provocative introduction<sup>3</sup> in which Ray Anderson, founder of carpet-maker Interface Inc., asserts, “Doing well by doing good is a new and better way to bigger profits and to greater, more genuine, stakeholder value. In the most difficult economic conditions of our corporate existence over these past few years, the model has proven not only its viability but also its superiority.”

Following the introduction, the book is organized in five parts:

- The transition to sustainability-oriented enterprises;
- Case studies of evolving business initiatives;
- Case studies from the financial sector;
- Reporting and accountability; and
- Pathways forward to organizational and societal changes.

While all 14 chapters are worthy of attention in their own right, only one, “Improving sustainability disclosure: The Global Reporting Initiative Guidelines” by Allen L. White, will be considered more closely in this review. Mr. White begins with the observation that accountability, in all its different forms, is “one of the defining imperatives of the modern global economy.” He goes on to write, “Corporations now constitute half of the world’s largest economies...Yet, with this steady increase in economic might, there has been no corresponding rise in generally accepted accountability mechanisms.” The

Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines<sup>4</sup> are the leading new reporting scheme, designed to complement already existing financial reporting Mr. White says.

After introducing the GRI guidelines, Mr. White considers the trends that are driving increased sustainability. Among the key trends are: expanding globalization; reform of corporate governance; increasing visibility of and expectations for organizations; growing governmental and financial market interest in sustainability reporting; and emergence of “next-generation accounting.” Next, Mr. White sets forth the benefits of reporting including: enhancing stakeholder engagement; reducing share-price volatility caused by untimely or unexpected disclosures; setting the stage for increased external partnerships; and sharpening the organization’s ability to assess its contribution to natural, human, and social capital. Notwithstanding the benefits that may inure to a company, he points out that a key challenge in the years ahead involves disseminating the guidelines to a wider audience—for instance, expanded outreach in developing countries is a major challenge.

Mr. White concludes that while financial reporting has been in practice for 75 years, sustainability reporting is in its “infancy. The long-term objective of developing a ‘generally accepted sustainability accounting principles’ requires both a concrete product incorporating the best thinking and a stable process through which continuous learning can occur.”

It is also bears mentioning that the book considers sustainability in the context of various sizes of businesses. A large business, Hewlett Packard, is examined in one chapter while a medium-sized business, Norm Thompson, is the focus of another chapter. Small and start-up businesses also receive attention.

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<sup>3</sup> The introduction is available online at: <http://www.greenleaf-publishing.com/pdfs/antintro.pdf>.

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<sup>4</sup> An interview with Ernst Ligteringen, chief executive of the Global Reporting Initiative, can be found at Vol. 10, Issue 5 *CES Journal* beginning at page 3-1.

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Notwithstanding the important contribution the book makes to sustainability in a business context, there is one topic that might have received more attention—governmental initiatives that are beginning to play a role in the policy-making discussion (e.g., support for sustainable development is found in the European Community Treaty<sup>5</sup>). While it is true that some businesses are willing to begin the journey to sustainability without regulatory intervention, many others simply will not take the first step without governmental prodding. This is of particular importance to companies in North America that trade inside the European Union (EU). While the U.S. federal government has paid scant attention to sustainable development, that doesn't mean that the Europeans feel the same way. Despite the EU's rather uneven implementation of sustainable, it is beginning to take place in the EU and this could herald a veritable sea change for companies selling goods and services in the EU.

Finally, several closing comments. First, the book includes an excellent bibliography and further reading section, both of which list several hundred key articles, books, and reports. Second, there is a well-organized and thorough index—all too often by the time a book editor or writer finishes the manuscript, little attention is paid to the index. Thankfully, this is not the case with this book. Third, the book is easy-to-read and digest.

Anyone or any business seeking to begin, refine, or implement their sustainability-related business practices should have this book in their library. The only hope is that the editor and contributors will continue to update their thoughts, with perhaps a follow-up book in several years time.

**Don C. Smith**

Editor in Chief

*CES Journal*

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<sup>5</sup> European Community Treaty Art. 2.

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# Corporate Environmental Strategy:

## International Journal of Corporate Sustainability

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Businesses are facing increasing attention and higher societal expectations relative to their “sustainability performance” from an entire host of stakeholders including regulators, policy-makers, investors, and non-governmental organizations to name but a few. *CES Journal* provides an important and lasting resource for those seeking to travel this often uncharted territory, all undertaken in the context of making your professional efforts more effective. Implementing one idea that you learn from the journal could more than pay for the cost of a subscription—a good ROI! Get *CES Journal* working for you today. Subscription pricing, sample content, and ordering information are available on the journal web site: [www.corporate-env-strategy.com](http://www.corporate-env-strategy.com)

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