



Aalto University
School of Science

How to develop human sustainability in organizations?

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Outline of the talk

- Human sustainability: Definitions
 - What does human sustainability mean?
- Human sustainability 1:
Engagement and human sustainability.
- Human sustainability 2:
Human sustainability in the comfort and discomfort zones of work

Human Sustainability: Definitions



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Human sustainability?

- **Sustainable work organizations:** Achieving business goals with attention to and responsibility for social and natural resources.

- **Also human resources matter!**

Given the profound effects of organizations and work arrangements on the psychological and physical well-being of the people who work in them and the growing interest in sustainability, it is interesting that the human dimension of sustainability remains largely in the background.

(Pfeffer, 2010: 40)

THE FOUR PILLARS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Diagram illustrating the four pillars of sustainability, arranged in a 2x2 grid. Each pillar is represented by a colored circle with a thin border and a drop shadow. The top-left circle is green and labeled 'ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES'. The top-right circle is blue and labeled 'SOCIAL RESOURCES'. The bottom-left circle is yellow and labeled 'ECONOMIC RESOURCES'. The bottom-right circle is red and labeled 'HUMAN RESOURCES'. A thick orange horizontal bar is located at the bottom of the slide, above the footer.

ECOLOGICAL
RESOURCES

SOCIAL
RESOURCES

ECONOMIC
RESOURCES

HUMAN
RESOURCES

Human sustainability: Work as a regenerative process

- Development and regeneration of personal and professional resources at work
(Docherty et al., 2002; Kira et al., 2010):
 - *Enhanced capability for psychological and social functioning* (Keyes, 2008).
 - Opposite - Consuming work:
 - Stress.
 - Burnout.
 - Learned helplessness.
 - *Decreased capability for psychological and social functioning.*
-



Human resources affected by work

- **Cognitive resources:** Workplace learning
- **Emotional resources:** Vitality and energy
- **Psychological resources:**
Positive identity, positive view of the world
- **Social resources:** Social skills
- **Physical resources:** Health

Human sustainability 1: Engagement and human sustainability



Personal engagement at work (Kahn, 1990)

- Two alternative approaches to work: People may
 - **engage** in their work (be psychologically, physically present at work; invest themselves in work) or
 - **disengage** and simply carry out what is required of them.
- Engagement is vital for human sustainability (Kahn, 2012)
 - Emotional resources: Channeling one's energy in work
 - Cognitive resources: Learning at work
 - **Thriving at work** (Spreitzer et al., 2005)!

When do people engage in work? (Kahn, 1990)

- Is work meaningful to me?
 - Is work psychologically safe for me?
 - Do I have resource available to engage?
- Promoting human sustainability means promoting the sense of meaningfulness, safety, and resources availability at work!

Meaningfulness

→ When is work meaningful?



Meaningfulness and sustainability (Martin, 2000)

- Work is **intrinsically meaningful** when it aligns with one's interests, competence and abilities, values – with one's work identity!
 - Intrinsically meaningful work promotes psychological health and well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and boosts performance (Pink, 2011).
- Work is **socially meaningful** when one can meet customers and see how one's work impacts on their lives in a positive manner.
 - Energy, better performance, competence development, appreciation of self (Grant, 2007).
- Work is **socially meaningful** when it is valued in the society and carried out in an organization that is valued.
 - Positive sense of self → Well-being, energy!

**Psychological safety →
What do my colleagues and managers
think of me? Do I dare to engage?**



Psychological safety and human sustainability

- Psychological safety = There will be no negative consequences for my self-image, status, or career if I get engaged with my work.
- Psychological safety is vital for workplace learning (Edmondson, 1999) → Vital for human sustainability!
- What are work relationships characterized by safety like?
 - *Trust* = To accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Rousseau et al., 1998).
 - *Resilient* = To allow for trying and failing, and dealing with both positive and negative emotions (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).
- Mutual acceptance – I am accepted and appreciated, even if I mess up.



**Availability of resources →
Can I apply and develop those competences
I see in myself?**



Learning in the workplace (Kira, 2010; Kira & Korpelainen, 2012)

Routine generating learning

- Participation in work activities within 'the zone of proximal development'.
- Gradual learning...

Regenerative learning

- Possibility to meet different people, perspectives, tasks, and competence: Having the opportunity to broaden one's understanding of work processes.
 - Transformative learning!
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Human sustainability 2: Human sustainability in the comfort and discomfort zones of work



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Proposition 1: Human sustainability requires comfort zones where there is...

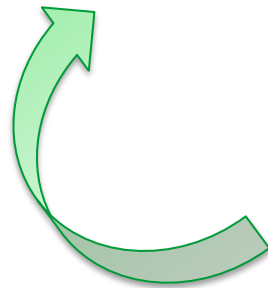
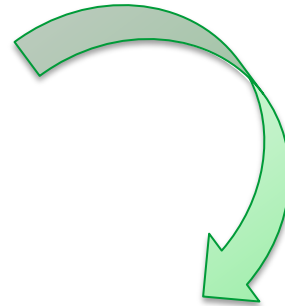
- An alignment between **who I am (work identity)** and **my work** is vital for the experience of
 - meaningfulness (is work personally meaningful),
 - psychological safety (am I appreciated as I am), and
 - having resources available (do I have an opportunity to use my resources).
- Work identity = An on-going story we tell ourselves of who we are at work.

Proposition 2: Human sustainability requires struggling through discomfort zones

- Discomfort zone:
 - Facing something new.
 - Not having control.
 - Having to question who I am as an employee and how I see my work.
 - Work misaligning with present work identity!
- Discomfort zones give a possibility for profound learning about self and about work.
 - Also discomfort zones promote human sustainability!

Work design for human sustainability

- Designing comfort zones to work:
 - Aligning work identities and work.
 - From work design to *work crafting* (Wrezesniewski & Dutton, 2001)
- Designing discomfort zones to work and supporting employees as they go through transformative learning:
 - Providing reasons why it is good to be in the discomfort zone.
 - Helping employees create resources (e.g., competence) to deal with the discomfort zone.
 - Helping employees to see how they are developing.



Conclusion

- Human sustainability = Development of personal and professional resources at work.
- When work is experienced meaningful and safe, and employees assess they have resources to deal with challenges
→ Development of human resources!
- Employees experience work to be meaningful and safe, and they assess they have resources available to deal with it, when work is in alignment with work identities.
- Also 'working in the discomfort zone' is important for development and human sustainability!

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