

How tomorrow's sustainability leaders can benefit from past successes and pitfalls

August 18 2020



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Sustainability science focuses on ways to meet the needs of the present without jeopardizing the future. It's a deep and complex area of research that encompasses many systems, from the environment to economics,

and draws on the strengths of a spectrum of disciplines that meet at the intersection of nature and culture.

"There's no way that any single field could ever hope to tackle or have the necessary knowledge to understand those systems," says Christopher Boone, Dean of Arizona State University's School of Sustainability.

In the journal *Sustainability Science*, Boone and other leaders of sustainability organizations—including academic institutions and international nonprofits—report on valuable lessons they've distilled from their own experiences about successful leadership.

The work describes pathways to success for tomorrow's organizations and highlights five areas that can contribute to success, including intellectual resources, institutional policies, financial security, a physical space, and governing boards. Together, the authors propose, these resources can form a foundation for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary researchers to identify solutions to complex problems. The new work also includes guidance on forming partnerships in leadership roles; the importance of shared culture; and communicating with audiences of varied backgrounds.

It is the latest product of an international collaboration that began a few years ago at SESYNC, the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center, where Jennifer Dunne, SFI's Vice President for Science, is on the External Advisory Board. After that initial meeting, Dunne invited some of the participants to SFI to dive deeper into their experiences leading diverse organizations.

SFI isn't a sustainability organization per se, Dunne says, but it hosts many researchers—including her—whose interests overlap with issues of sustainability. "SFI is the perfect place to hold such a focused meeting and flesh out ideas," she says.

That meeting led to this paper and another one, published last year, and was part of a broader effort to engender new international partnerships among organizations that continue to meet and find solutions to the emerging challenges of sustainability. Iain Gordon at Australian National University says that by sharing both triumphs and pitfalls, the collective was able to identify hallmarks of success.

Fostering [open communication](#) and maintaining a cultural climate open to new ideas and solutions, the researchers report, can give rise to creative solutions. And organizations that focus on [sustainability](#) need leaders who can not only bring together researchers from disparate disciplines but also cultivate a culture of open-mindedness and flexibility, the authors note.

Gordon says he hopes tomorrow's leaders can benefit from the group's insights as they work toward a more sustainable future.

"We want to build capacity among young and aspiring leaders to ensure they have the skills and capabilities to lead organizations like the ones we've led," he says, "and lead them better than we have."

More information: Christopher G. Boone et al. Preparing interdisciplinary leadership for a sustainable future, *Sustainability Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s11625-020-00823-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00823-9)

Provided by Santa Fe Institute

Citation: How tomorrow's sustainability leaders can benefit from past successes and pitfalls (2020, August 18) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-08-tomorrow-sustainability-leaders-benefit-successes.html>

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