

## SYLLABUS

### ***Model Course Syllabus for Collegiate Instructors:*** SUSTAINABILITY FOR BUSINESS/ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

Based upon

*The Sustainability Handbook—*

*The Complete Management Guide to Achieving  
Social, Economic, and Environmental Responsibility*

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**Note to Instructors:** This model syllabus is intended to offer ideas on how a course based on *The Sustainability*

*Handbook* might be organized and taught. In some cases, films, guest speakers, and other class content are offered as alternatives to the traditional class discussion. Ultimately, you must modify this syllabus to suit your own needs for your class in light of what you think is an appropriate workload for students, the aspects of the subject you want to emphasize, and the content of your overall curriculum.

Please notify the *Handbook* author at [WRB@WBlackburnConsulting.com](mailto:WRB@WBlackburnConsulting.com) if you have suggested changes to the syllabus or other versions you develop.

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

Sustainability, an increasingly popular topic in business circles, is about values-based management of an organization framed around respect for people and other living things, and the wise use and management of economic and environmental resources. The class on *Sustainability for Business/Organizational Success* uses the content of *The Sustainability Handbook*, supplemented by guest presentations, films, student papers, team projects, and class discussions to provide the student with a deep understanding of that concept and its components of social, economic, and environmental responsibility. It offers insights about proven strategies, tools and techniques that individuals can use to infuse sustainability into business organizations of all types and sizes in ways that contribute to the organization's success. This learning should prepare the student to design, explain, promote, and implement a strategy for bringing a sustainability culture into any company. Bear in mind, there are chapters of the book on how to approach sustainability in NGOs, governmental bodies, and universities, respectively, but these chapters are not included as part of this syllabus. The focus here is on business organizations. Of course, any or all of those chapters may be wrapped into the syllabus for special projects or in other ways if the course objectives suggest it.

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## 1. **Methods of Instruction**

The course on *Sustainability for Business/Organizational Success* uses a wide range of teaching techniques, including the following:

### a. **Reading**

The reading assignments for the course are intended to maximize the learning from the course, and include the following:

#### (1) *The Sustainability Handbook*

Reading assignments will cover text from the Handbook.

#### (2) Sustainability reports

Recent sustainability performance reports written by companies and other organizations will be a source of other learning. Some assignments will require the student to select a report of interest and use it as the basis of a paper, presentation, or project. A database of reports is available from the Global Reporting Initiative (<http://database.globalreporting.org/>).

#### (3) Business publications

Students are encouraged to stay up to date with the issues of sustainability in current events by regularly reading major news and business publications, such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Fortune*, *Economist*, *Forbes*, and/or *Business Week*—either online or in hard copy. This can provide good ideas for course papers and projects of current interest, while raising awareness about how pervasive sustainability issues are in business and society in general. This may also help prepare students in the event the instructor leads off a class with a brief discussion of a sustainability-related article recently published in the news—a practice which is highly encouraged.

#### (4) Case studies

Case studies may be used to engage the student in considering real-world issues and dilemmas concerning sustainability and business.

### b. **Films**

Films may be introduced in particular classes to provide a fresh way of exploring particular sustainability topics. If students become aware of other films that may be appropriate for class consideration, they should bring this to the attention of the instructor. Some may be located through the PBS film or Ted Talks websites or by simply Googling the topic and word “film.” A list of short films on various sustainability topics has been provided by Harvard University at <https://green.harvard.edu/tools-resources/how/sustainability-talks-brown-bag-lunches>.

c. **Papers**

Each student will be expected to write three papers of 3-5 type-written pages, plus any charts and graphs, which directly address the issue identified for the paper in this syllabus. The papers will be due the beginning of the class when they will be discussed. No late submittals will be accepted.

d. **Guest lectures**

To inject different perspectives into the course, guest lecturers may be invited to present their programs and views on certain sustainability matters as indicated in this syllabus. These views should be thought-provoking, although they may or may not be in harmony with those of the instructor and many students. Students are encouraged to raise respectful but challenging questions to these guests to deepen the class's understanding of the topic and perspective.

e. **Student team paper, presentation, and briefing**

The final class will involve a project to be provided by teams of students, with the number of members per team dependent upon class size and allotted time. Each team will assume it is a staff of consultants that have been asked to assess the sustainability approach of a given publicly traded client company (or university or city), to compare it with two comparable organizations, and to tell management what actions it should take and why. The output of this exercise will be: (1) a group-designed PowerPoint presentation of 10-15 slides reporting the findings and recommendations to the organization's executive committee, and explaining why these recommendations should be followed; (2) a paper of 5-10 pages drafted individually by each student that further explains the findings, recommendations and supporting reasons; and (3) a live 10 minute "meeting with management" by each student team before the class during which the team will brief top management (played by the instructor and the rest of the class) on the key findings and recommendations. You are to assume this briefing is a preliminary one given a few days before your full presentation to the executive committee to provide a heads-up to top management and opportunity for feedback to the team before the critical presentation. You will not be required to present the PowerPoint slides in class, but merely submit them with your paper. Each team should select its client (a publicly traded company) and the two competitors and communicate that to the instructor by lesson 6. The instructor will notify the team if their selected client has already been chosen by another team and that a new client must therefore be picked. Sustainability information on the client and competitors can be gleaned from sustainability reports (see above); web documents (including critical reports by some NGOs); news and business publications; and company officials, among other sources.

f. **Group discussions**

A major part of the learning will occur through group discussion of thought-provoking questions raised by the instructor, guest lecturers, and other students. Each student is expected to contribute to that dialogue.

g. **Facility visit (optional)**

If possible, one class will be held at a nearby company where representatives there can discuss their approach to sustainability and field questions from the class.

## 2. Expectations of Students

Students are expected to do the reading in advance of each class, as required, to participate in class discussion, and to deliver papers and projects on time as assigned. Work submitted under a student's name must be their own. Citations to other publications should be made if there is any suggestion that the idea or text was pulled from another source, and quotation marks should be used where text is substantially that of others. Remember: Sustainability is also about individual integrity and accountability, and any action that is inconsistent with that will, at the very least, be interpreted as a failure by the student to grasp the lessons of this course.

## 3. Grading of Performance

Grading weights will be as follows:

Class participation, contribution to team, and peer evaluation  
(based in large part on student survey at end of course):35%

Individual papers (3 x 10%): 30%%

Team PowerPoint (10%) and briefing (5%); and individual  
supporting paper (20%):35%

## 4. Course Structure and Themes

### Section I. Introduction to Sustainability

#### **Class 1 (*insert date*): The Sustainability Concept**

a. Reading assignment: *The Sustainability Handbook*, Introduction and Executive Summary and Chapters 1 and 2, pp. xix-xxiv, 1-12, 15-25

b. *Group discussion issues:*

(1) Before you joined the class, what impressions did you have about the meaning of sustainability, sustainable development, corporate citizenship, and corporate social responsibility? What are the pros and cons of a company using each of these terms in internal and external communications?

(2) *Possible small group discussion with report back to entire class:*

(a) What expectations do you have of a company that claims to be sustainable or socially responsible? What values do you expect it to be upholding and living?

(b) What provisions of the model sustainability policy presented in Figure 2.2 of the *Handbook* might companies find most difficult to accept? Why? What specific things might a company do to meet each provision?

**Class 2 (insert date): Sustainability Trends—Part A**

- c. *Reading assignment:* *The Sustainability Handbook*, Appendix 1, sections 1.0-1.26, pp. 489-576
- d. *Optional Films:* Excerpts from *Strange Days on Planet Earth*, available from <http://www.pbs.org/strangedays/> ; or Al Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, available at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6322922/>; or *The Age of Aids*, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/>.
- e. *Paper no. 1:* What kind of business opportunities and threats might the issues covered in Sustainable Development Goals 1-16 (see *Handbook* Figure A1.0.2) pose to one of the following types of multinational businesses: (i) healthcare company, (ii) steel company, (iii) raw plastics supplier, or (iv) furniture company? (Student selects the company type.)
- f. *Group discussion issues:* What are the sustainability trends (1.0-1.26) of greatest impact to various other types of companies? What business opportunities and threats may they pose? How might such trends affect these companies' products, services and operations?

**Class 3 (insert date): Sustainability Trends—Part B**

- g. *Reading assignment:* *The Sustainability Handbook*, Appendix 1, sections 1.27-1.33, pp. 576-608
- h. *Group discussion issues:*

(1) What are the sustainability trends (1.27-1.33) of greatest impact to each of the following: (i) chain grocery store, (ii) large farm produce supplier, (iii) consumer-products company, and (iv) financial investment company? What business opportunities and threats may these trends pose? How might such trends affect the companies' products, services and operations?

(2) Why don't governments and business spend more time addressing these critical trends? What are the obstacles to doing this?

**Class 4 (insert date): The Value of Sustainability—Part A (Products, etc.)**

- i. *Reading assignment:* *The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 3, pp. 27–61.
- j. *Optional film:* Excerpts from *design/e<sup>2</sup>*, available at <http://www.pbs.org/e2/shop.html>.
- k. *Group discussion issue:* Each student brings to class some product from the grocery or hardware store and discusses briefly how it might be improved from a sustainability perspective.

## **Class 5 (insert date): The Value of Sustainability—Part B (Supply Chain, etc.)**

l. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 3, pp. 62-95.

m. *Optional guest lectures:*

(1) Company environmental leader discusses their eco-efficiency initiatives, challenges in pursuing them, and benefits of such programs; or

(2) Socially responsible investment advisor discusses latest trends in that area and techniques for, and challenges of, assessing the sustainability of companies.

n. *Group discussion issues (alternatives):*

(1) What are the most attractive arguments to business concerning the value of a sustainability initiative? Why?

What are the weakest? Why? Why don't more companies understand and act to gain this value?

(2) If you were a socially responsible investment advisor, what kinds of information would you examine to determine if the target company was sustainable enough to justify recommending its stock?

## **Section II. The Organizational Elements for Managing Sustainability Effectively**

### **Class 6 (insert date): The Sustainability Operating System; the Key Elements and Basic Structure**

o. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 4, pp. 105-135

p. *Paper no. 2:* Wal-Mart has decided it should adopt some appropriate external sustainability codes of the types described in Appendix 1. What types of codes should they consider and why? Within each type recommended, what particular code might be the best fit for them?

q. *Group discussion issues:*

(1) Why are the following organizational structures important for a successful sustainability initiative within a large company, and what may happen if they are absent: (i) leader, (ii) sponsor, (iii) core team, (iv) deployment team? What alternative structures might also achieve the same aims?

(2) What should the role be for the CEO in an SOS? What approach(es) should be taken by the sustainability champion or leader if the CEO is reluctant to show visible support for the organization's sustainability initiative?

### **Class 7 (insert date): Sustainability Operating System Standards**

- r. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 5, pp. 137-159; briefly skim Appendix 3, pp. 663-677 to generally understand its content
- s. *Optional guest lecturer:* Quality, environmental, or compliance officer from a company department responsible for implementing and overseeing a formal management system of the type discussed in Appendix 3, discusses their system, its strengths and weaknesses, and the successes and improvement opportunities in using the system to drive performance.
- t. *Group discussion issues:* What could be done to convert the management system presented by the guest lecturer to an SOS, and what obstacles must be overcome to do so?

### **Class 8 (insert date): Planning for Sustainability Improvement**

- u. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 6, pp. 161-193, and Appendices 4, pp. 679-684, and 6, pp. 689-700.
- v. *Group discussion issue:* Either the whole class or student breakout groups will complete forms C, B and/or A, as time permits, for a large multinational chemical company or shoe manufacturer, or a local bakery. The results will then be discussed with the class. (*Note to instructor:* Alternatively, this may also be framed as a student paper or an out-of-class group project.)

### **Class 9 (insert date): Selecting Goals and Indicators**

- w. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 7, pp. 195-223; briefly skim Appendix 7, pp. 701-738, to generally understand the content
- x. *Paper no.3:* Select one of the following industries then go to the GRI database of sustainability reports and review four sustainability reports of companies in that industry: (i) pharmaceuticals, (ii) paper and wood products, (iii) power generation, (iv) garment-making, (v) petroleum production or (vi) banking. Show in a comparative table the key indicators and goals each has used to measure its sustainability performance. Suggest other indicators that companies in that industry should consider, and explain why these indicators might be warranted.
- y. *Group discussion issues:* Under what circumstances would a company most benefit from using each of the eight common arrangements of complementary goals and indicators discussed in Chapter 7, pp. 215-220? Why don't more organizations use such complementary measures? What disadvantages may there be in using them?

### **Class 10 (insert date): Bringing Sustainability to the Front Line: Deployment, Integration, and Alignment**

- z. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 8, pp. 225-255

aa. *Possible guest lecture:*

(1) A company CEO, discusses the challenges, approaches and keys to success to “execution” of strategic and tactical (operating) plans, especially on a global basis; or,

(2) Company green procurements executive discusses how they manage social and environmental risks posed by their suppliers.

bb. *Group discussion issues (alternatives):*

(1) What special challenges may come in trying to deploy environmental or social initiatives within (i) China, (ii) Mexico, (iii) Saudi Arabia, and (iv) Botswana? What approaches might be used to maximize the chances of success?

(2) What steps would you follow to set up a program to detect and manage critical social and environmental risks among the supply chain of a small manufacturing business?

**Class 11 (*insert date*): Data Systems, Auditing and Other Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms**

cc. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook, Chapter 9, pp. 257-280*

dd. *Possible guest lectures:*

(1) Information Technology expert in environmental systems, discussing approach to identifying IT needs for sustainability programs; or

(2) Audit manager or consultant, familiar with social and/or environmental auditing, discussing auditing tools and techniques, especially methods for determining ultimate root cause of nonconformities

ee. *Group discussion issues:*

(1) What are the most important functions an IT system might handle for a sustainability program at a paint, shipping or home-appliance company? Why?

(2) What kind(s) of audits should be considered for such companies to help drive sustainability within their organizations? What types of activities, operations or functions should these audits cover?

**Class 12 (*insert date*): Transparent Sustainability Reporting—Part A**

ff. *Reading assignment:*

(1) *The Sustainability Handbook, Chapter 10, pp. 283-306*



(2) Magazine, newspaper or web articles of the student's choosing showing an example of how "light brings heat brings change", i.e., where the glare of publicity has caused a company or other organization to institute socially or environmentally appropriate corrective action

gg. *Group discussion issues*

(1) Discuss the expression "light brings heat brings change" and review some examples from media stories and elsewhere of how, why and where that has occurred. Ask students to bring in such articles to class and be prepared to discuss them.

**Class 13 (insert date): Transparent Sustainability Reporting—Part B**

hh. *Reading assignment:*

(1) *The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 10, pp. 306-337

(2) Sustainability reports: One or more recent sustainability reports (from the GRI sustainability report database) or website write-ups (from the company's website) from one or more well-known companies selected by the instructor. The instructor may assign different reports to different small groups within the class.

ii. *Group discussion issues:* Class breaks into small discussion groups to evaluate what they like and dislike about a particular sustainability report, then report back to the class their findings. Class can then discuss what makes a good sustainability report—and a bad one.

**Class 14 (insert date): Stakeholder Engagement**

jj. *Reading assignment:*

(1) *The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 11, pp. 341-380

(2) Case studies:

(A) Erik Simanis and Stuart Hart, *The Monsanto Company: Quest for Sustainability -Teaching Note, and Parts A and B*, (World Resources Institute, Washington, DC, 2000) and

(B) Information on the approach and results of DuPont's engagement with EDF on a nanotechnology risk assessment and management framework (see <http://business.edf.org/projects/featured/past-projects/dupont-safer-nanotech/>).

kk. *Possible guest lecture:* Company or NGO representative that was involved in a high profile stakeholder engagement process, discussing what went well, what not so well, and the lessons learned from the experience.

II. *Group discussion issues:*

(1) What do the case studies and/or guest lecture, and other recent examples in the news, suggest about the importance of stakeholder engagement and the proper way to conduct it? What are the dangers to be avoided?

(2) When should you try to convince company management that they should share decision-making power with a particular stakeholder or stakeholder group on a certain issue? How do you convince them?

**III. Putting All the Pieces Together—for the Long Term**

**Class 15 (*insert date*): Approach to Sustainability for Small and Struggling Companies**

(*Note to instructor:* If the facility visit is dropped, Class 15 can be combined with 16.)

mm. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 12, pp. 383-391

nn. *Facility visit:* Visit a small to medium size company that has been progressive on sustainability issues, and review with various company officials the strategies, approaches and challenges of the company's various social and environmental initiatives

oo. *Group discussion issues:* What sustainability-related initiatives does this company do well, and what additional steps might it consider for furthering the cause of sustainability and its own business prospects, given its size and resources?

**Class 16 (*insert date*): Keeping the Initiative Alive: Making the SOS Sustainable**

pp. *Reading assignment: The Sustainability Handbook*, Chapter 16, pp. 483-488

qq. *Student team presentation:* "Meetings with management" to present recommendations (See description of team project, above.)

rr. *Student papers:*

(1) Team PowerPoint of recommendations and

(2) Individual supporting paper explaining recommendations (See description of team project, above.)

ss. *Group discussion issues:* Class and instructor will play the part of "management" to pose questions to student teams presenting recommendations