

# Don't spoil the concept of sustainability

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14 years ago, I was working on a project where I would like to evaluate the attitude to sustainable production at B&O. I investigated the attitude in different departments and some of the external interested parties. The whole project was cancelled when the CEO heard about the project. I was told that B&O was not interested in that kind of "Hippie work". Many things have changed over the last 14 years no modern manager will longer ignore the important of sustainability.

But what is sustainability? I remember that one of the persons at B&O thought that sustainability does only deal with economy. Today most people know that sustainability is much more. Sustainable development as we know it today is first defined in the report "Our Common Future" from 1987 by the Brundtland Commission.

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The main problem with the definition is that we do not know the future generation needs. In principle we two generic strategies: a) a strategy where we leave all resource unused to future generation that means in principle we do only use renewable resources - in principle the strategy we know from the hunter-gatherers societies where a population live in an area for a shorter period, leave the area when resources are spent and come back several years later when the ecosystem has rebuild itself, b) a strategy where we develop new technologies, materials etc. that will make it possible future generation to meet their needs. The idea of "cradle to cradle" could be a part of this strategy. It is important to behave in a way so the soil, water and air is not poisoned but I think the main focus should be on developing new technologies for clean renewable energy production. If we have unlimited clean renewable energy we can solve more or less all problems: we can travel as much as we like, we can heat our houses as much as we like, we can manufacture all kind of products, we can recycle all kind of products. But of cause, it can be a problem to generate so much clean energy, so we do also have to be much more efficient in the way we use our energy and other resources.

Many attempts have been done to qualify the environmental sustainability of a product: like recycle contents, ecological and food miles. The problem with many methods is that they only focus on one phase in the products lifecycle. Many surprising evaluations has been done where our immediate opinion has been provoked ex. growing tomatoes the whole year in the cold and dark Denmark pollute more CO<sub>2</sub> than growing the tomatoes in Spain and transport them to Denmark.

But of cause why should we eat tomatoes during the winter in Denmark. Another interesting example is that driving a small car from downtown Copenhagen to a local ecological lamb farmer pollutes more CO<sub>2</sub> than the pollution from sailing the frozen lamb from New Zealand to

Copenhagen. It is difficult to be an environmentally friendly consumer.

The collaboration partners from B&O thought sustainability did only have to do with economy. Today many people think sustainability do only have to do with the environment. But sustainability deals with both: environmental, economic and social/ethical sustainability also called the triple bottom line. A problem with the triple bottom line is that all 3 sustainabilities are counted in different ways. It is possible to quantify the environmental and economical sustainability. That means we can put on numbers for how environmental and economical sustainable we are. We can say we are ex. 70% environmentally

sustainable and the product can be sold on the market to right price. The social sustainability is different; it requires that all people can have safe, equal and fair life. As a human it is not possible to accept that a not 100% safe, equal and fair live. Looking at the triple bottom line it very often happens that a product is sustainable in one dimension but not in another dimension. There is a tendency from companies to focusing on only one of the dimensions. Some companies are focusing on the environment and other are focusing on social responsibility often called Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Today many companies announce that their products are sustainable. But when is a product sustainable? Sustainable is now a very hype marketing word as many other words have been before. What very often happens is that the public find out that concept is more or less a lie, and they lose interest in the concept. After 14 years without much attention, I think the concept of sustainability is too important to lose.