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PERSPECTIVES

Sustainability doesn’t need a seat at the table

Why executive representation alone cannot replace a culture of shared accountability.

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If I had a magic wand and could change one thing about corporate sustainability, I would disband the sustainability team. I can imagine the reaction: somewhere between shock and horror. Understandably, but I wouldn’t be finished. I would take those same people, develop their expertise further and embed them across the business. One in Finance, one in Risk, another in Procurement, Communications or IT. Certainly someone working closely with the CEO’s office. The arrangement would depend on the organisation, but the principle would remain: instead of eliminating sustainability expertise, I would eliminate the boundaries that make sustainability somebody else’s responsibility.

Which brings me to one of our profession’s favourite demands: a seat at the decision-making table. I fundamentally disagree with the assumption that this is what sustainability needs to become effective. A strong Chief Sustainability Officer can be enormously influential, but even the best CSO cannot compensate indefinitely for an executive team unwilling to recognise risks beyond its members’ own functional territories. Giving sustainability its own seat may, paradoxically, reinforce precisely the separation we are trying to overcome. The CFO owns Finance, the COO owns Operations, Procurement owns the supply chain, and the CSO? Well, Sustainability, obviously. Congratulations, we’ve created another silo.

Over the years, in our efforts to do the right thing, reduce emissions, protect habitats and conserve resources, I think we, as a profession, have sometimes shot ourselves in the foot. We’ve spent so much time convincing organisations that sustainability deserves attention that we’ve overlooked how businesses actually make decisions. They allocate resources according to needs, obligations, risks, opportunities and strategic priorities. They need to understand not only what action will cost, but what inaction might cost. Not only what benefits can be realised, but which risks can be avoided. And, critically, not only what they should do, but also what they don’t need to do. There is no one-size-fits-all

sustainability agenda, because no two businesses face precisely the same circumstances.

Consider a hypothetical business evaluating a major investment or expansion. The commercial case is compelling, but the strategy also carries environmental, regulatory or transition risks. A sustainability function arguing for a change of direction might be perceived as an obstacle. But what if the same expertise were already embedded in the investment appraisal, financial planning and risk assessment? The business might still decide to proceed exactly as intended. And why not, provided the decision is properly informed? Sustainability integration shouldn't be about securing a particular outcome. It should be about ensuring that material risks, opportunities and dependencies are understood before the decision is made. Sometimes the best sustainability advice might be to change nothing.

Giving sustainability a seat at the table doesn't automatically achieve this. Access is valuable, but it is not the same as receptiveness to challenge, let alone the integration of that challenge into everyday decisions. It may simply give the organisation one more person to disagree with. Real integration begins when Finance recognises climate exposure as financial risk, when Procurement understands environmental and social dependencies as part of supply-chain resilience, and when Operations treats resource efficiency and environmental exposure as operational considerations. Not because the CSO has persuaded everyone to support a separate sustainability agenda, but because those considerations are already part of their responsibilities, embedded in the way they assess investments, manage risks and make decisions.

This is why I find the centre-of-excellence model so compelling. A central sustainability capability retains specialist expertise, develops methodologies, provides reliable evidence and challenges assumptions, while its people and knowledge are embedded across the functions that actually control decisions. There is an important distinction here between the right to challenge and the responsibility to act. Sustainability specialists must have the independence and authority to question evidence, challenge decisions and escalate concerns, but accountability for managing the underlying risks must remain with those who control the relevant business activities. Of course, distributing expertise without clear governance, common standards and executive accountability risks replacing one problem with another. Integration must be designed, not simply declared.

Ultimately, this is as much about organisational culture as structure. A good CSO can achieve extraordinary things in an organisation willing to listen, accept challenge and recognise that expertise does not always follow reporting lines. Without that openness, even the most capable executive will struggle, regardless of where they sit. Perhaps we have spent too long trying to increase the influence of sustainability professionals when we should have been increasing the sustainability competence of business decision-makers. After all, sustainability does not need to own every sustainability-related decision. It needs to ensure those decisions are properly owned.

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