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April 23, 2014

Abstract

With the push towards more sustainable living, hotel leaders need to consider how they can make their operations more sustainable. While the general business line of "growth at all costs" is rapidly giving way to a view that supports sustainability as good business practice; hotel leaders who seek to make their businesses, and by extension their communities, more sustainable need to use business models that support environmental, economic, and social sustainability. It is incontestable that the primary goal of commercial businesses is profit and that hotel leaders must meet goals and targets focused on improving shareholder returns. I contend, however, that strategic planning focused on sustainability may be effective in achieving profit targets in a way that effectively integrates social, economic, and environmental imperatives. This article will explore concepts from the literature on sustainable community development and sustainable hospitality as well as discuss preliminary research results from one site.

Keywords: Hospitality, Sustainable Hospitality, Business Strategies, Leadership

Beyond Towel Recycling: Sustainability as Hotel Business Strategy

Purpose of the Study

With the push towards more sustainable community development, hotel leaders need to consider how they can make their operations more sustainable. While the general business rhetoric of "growth at all costs" is rapidly giving way to a narrative that espouses sustainability as good business practice; hotel leaders who seek to make their businesses, and by extension their communities, more sustainable need to implement strategic planning models that integrate environmental, economic, and social imperatives. It is incontestable that the primary goal of commercial businesses is profit and that hotel leaders must meet goals and targets focused on improving shareholder returns. I contend, however, that strategic planning focused on sustainability may be effective in achieving profit targets in a way that integrates social, economic, and environmental imperatives.

The following article presents initial data and findings of research conducted with one participating organization. This research explores concepts from the literature on sustainable community development and sustainable hospitality to provide hotel leaders with a model with which to develop and implement sustainable business strategies.

The questions this research project seeks to answer are the following.

What is the extent to which hotel leaders integrate concepts of sustainability into their strategic planning process?

Sub questions include:

- How can a sustainable framework of scale, limits, place, and diversity contribute to our understanding of sustainability within hotel organizations?

- What are the barriers and limits experienced by hotel leaders while integrating concepts of sustainability into strategic planning processes?

- What leadership skills, characteristics, and practices do leaders draw upon when engaging in this process?

- What is the relationship between sustainable community development and building sustainable hospitality enterprises?

To answer the above, I will use a multiple case-study approach. This approach seeks to explore the details of a particular case (Flyvberg 2006), understand the dynamics within a particular setting (Hubberman and Miles 2002), uses multiple data collection methods (Yin 2009) and highlights distinctive concepts in order to arrive at a theory (Bryman 2008).

Sustainable Hospitality

In responding to increased demand for more sustainable practices, industry leaders have developed and devised various business practices that have addressed the environmental component of sustainability. Some of these industry led practices have been rolled into various green programs that have been developed for the hospitality industry, typically offering different levels of certification; for example, the Canadian Hotel Association offers the Green Key Eco-Rating Program (Green Key 2013). Melissen (2013) reports that there is an extensive body of research that links green practices to financial performance but, with a variety of programs and varying levels of certification, Melissen (2013) questions if securing a certification is a: "valid indication of the level of the type of environmental decision-making" (p.816). Further, the social component of sustainability seems largely missing from the sustainable hospitality literature, a situation Melissen (2013) blames on the reluctance of researchers to address this issue and an

indication of an industry that is challenged in incorporating social, economic, and environmental imperatives. It is clear that new business models are necessary if hoteliers are to respond to increasing demands from the business sector and customers to incorporate the social, economic, and environmental imperatives of sustainability.

In search of such a model, Hawkins and Bohdanowicz (2012) outline ten principles of responsible hospitality; (a) avoid wasteful use of resources and protect, and where possible improve, the environment; (b) prepare for the unexpected; (c) develop products that are responsible and can be operated responsibly; (d) take full account of the views of people and communities; (e) embed responsible business practices throughout the supply chain; (f) engage employees and customers in actions that support environmental, economic, and social wellbeing; (g) contribute to the development of public policy that promotes environment, social and economic well-being; (h) define responsible business values and communicate good practices; (i) build trust through transparency; and (j) take responsible business to the heart of the company.

One important area that is not considered by Hawkins and Bohdanowicz (2012) is human resources management within the hospitality organization itself. Melissen (2013) comments that: "Sustainability concerns currently only include ecological and parts of the economic elements of sustainable development" (p.817). Given that hospitality is such a labour intensive industry with working conditions that can be physically and emotionally difficult (Kusluvan, et al. 2010) it seems odd that this social aspect of sustainability has not yet been addressed in sustainability models, or models of corporate social responsibility to local community development.

Sustainable Community Development and Sustainable Hospitality

Dale and colleagues note four necessary conditions for sustainable community development: scale, limits, place, and diversity. Although this is a highly theoretical framework, I have situated it uniquely within the context of hospitality. Sustainability can be understood as an activity that: optimizes economic prosperity by respecting ecological limits (scale), provides the capacity to innovate for continued development (limits), promotes a strong identification to the physical space (place), and encourages difference as a necessary condition for resiliency (diversity) (Dale, Ling, and Newman 2008; Dale and Newman 2010; Newman and Dale 2008; Newman and Dale, 2009).

In reflecting on Hawkins and Bohdanowicz's (2012) model and juxtaposing it with the four conditions of sustainable community development: scale, limits, place, and diversity, I find that if we are to create sustainable hospitality business models we will need to integrate Dale and colleagues' key conditions. I also believe that without an understanding and integration of these conditions any sustainable hospitality business model can only provide limited success. Paying attention to scale, limits, place, and diversity is analogous to ensuring that the optimal conditions for growing a garden: air, sun, soil, and water are present and of good quality.

Research Methods

A multi method, multiple-case study approach using exemplifying cases has been selected for this research. This approach allows for the examination of key social processes, the ability to compare and contrast distinguishing characteristics, the ability to highlight distinctive concepts to arrive at a model (Bryman 2008), and that multiple cases improve theory building (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2009). The design of this research follows an embedded case study design in which researchers gather evidence from different aspects of a case (Scholz and Tietje 2002) resulting in a rich thick descriptive case study. A descriptive case study uses a reference model or theory to

direct data collection (Scholz and Tietje 2002). In this case, sustainable community development and sustainable hospitality. Specifically, the sustainable hospitality model advanced by Hawkins and Bohdanowicz (2012) and Dale and colleagues definition of sustainable community development, which emphasizes scale, limits, place, and diversity (Dale, Ling, and Newman 2008; Dale and Newman 2010; Newman and Dale 2008; Newman and Dale, 2009).

The selection of cases will follow a literal replication model. A literal replication model refers to the selection of multiple cases aimed at predicting similar results (Yin 2009). One of the selection criteria for cases includes hotel leadership teams that are interested in producing strategic plans using concepts of sustainability. Further, the hotels selected must be of an adequate size to allow for a diverse range of opinions and perspectives, and finally that there be ease of access to participants. In considering these criteria I have settled on selecting three leadership teams within hotels that have at least 150 rooms, have food and beverage and banquet facilities and are located in Western Canada. The research will be conducted during the spring and fall of 2014.

Project Design

To answer the research questions, participants from hotel leadership teams (general managers and department managers) will be asked to participate in a two-day strategic planning session created and conducted by the principal investigator. The objective of the session will be to devise strategic plans and actions based on the sustainable community development and responsible hospitality models mentioned earlier in order to meet business goals.

There are three data collection points:

- a visual explorer exercise during the two-day session that seeks to gather data on personal thoughts, concepts, and notions on sustainability,

- semi-structured interviews immediately following the strategic planning session to gather data on participants' thoughts, and

- semi-structured interviews once teams have had the opportunity to implement some of the actions developed.

In seeking to contribute to the wider conversation on sustainable tourism by providing insight into how hotel leaders understand sustainability a visual explorer exercise is planned. Visual explorer is a method in which a set of images is used to support collaborative and creative conversations (Palus and Horth 2010). Open-ended semi-structured interviews are being considered. Interviews are a way of: investigating implicit and explicit knowledge and assumptions, reconstructing subjective theories in use, and obtaining in-depth responses that contain nuance and contradictions (Flick 2009; Mack et al. 2005). Interviews will be conducted with each member of the leadership team; this can range from ten to fourteen members. It is important to note that interviews will be conducted until conceptual saturation has been reached.

Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software will be used to assist in analyzing data. The software selected is MAXQDA. It was selected because of its ability to support an interpretive style of coding better than NVivo (Saillard 2011).

Expected Outcomes

The intended outcome of the research program is to create a rich and thick description of the process followed by hotel leaders when incorporating concepts of sustainability into their strategic plans. Specifically these outcomes are: (a) an exploration of the process that hotel leaders use when incorporating concepts of sustainability into their strategic plans, (b) the discovery of the barriers and limitations in this integration, (c) the uncovering of leadership

skills, characteristics, and practices leaders use when engaging in this hotel strategic planning process, and (d) extending the sustainable hospitality literature.

Preliminary Findings

In March 2014, the research began at a hotel outside the downtown core of a large urban area located in Western Canada (Site 1). Facilities include: over 200 rooms, a fitness area, extensive meeting space, and two restaurants. The hotel is a franchise of a hotel chain that provides training in sustainability to all employees. Fifteen participants attended the off-site strategic planning meeting; fourteen attended the entire session. Twelve of the fourteen participants volunteered for the interview. Those who were not present for the entire meeting were excluded. I facilitated the strategic planning process. The findings should be interpreted as very preliminary as they are based on one site only.

Visual Explorer Exercise

Fourteen participants participated in the Visual Explorer exercise. The question posed to participants was: What does sustainability mean to you in the development of business strategies? Participants responded with comments such as: "out of the box solutions"; "challenge the status quo"; "three pillars economic, environment, cultural"; "finite resources"; "we don't use all our resources"; "engaged, focused, and effective leadership"; "cycle of business" and "adapt and grow".

In a preliminary analysis of the comments, respondents mentioned economic, environmental, and social elements of sustainability, the recognition of a finite availability of resources and using resources wisely and innovatively. Further, participants described engaged and focused leaders as necessary to enact sustainability strategies.

Interviews

The twelve interviews ranged from twenty-one to fifty-seven minutes, with a mean of forty minutes. Interviews followed a semi-structured format and were typically conducted in the participant's office. Eleven interviews were held during the three days following the strategic planning session. The last interview was held a week later via phone. An iPhone was used to record in person interviews while a software program called Tape-A-Call was used to record the over the phone interview. The interview questions included the following.

- What is your perspective on sustainability in hospitality?

- Think back to before the strategic planning session. How would you have described sustainability?

- Did the strategic planning session contribute to your understanding of sustainability? If so, how?

- How would you describe sustainability now?

- What are your opinions, views comments on sustainable hospitality?

- How would you define sustainable hospitality?

- What do you think about the business strategies that were developed?

- We talked about scale, limits, place, and diversity. What do these concepts mean to you?

Respondents highlighted various themes during the interview. It was noted that prior experience with concepts of sustainability in the work environment was an important factor in articulating how sustainability is conceived. For example, one respondent commented: "Well, I think I look at sustainability as – coming from my background – I always look at it three pieces, and they have to … if you have all three sort of pillars you can hold your business up" (Respondent #1). Another respondent when asked what sustainability meant to them answered: " To be honest it wasn't till we had our retreat that I really thought about it. So I guess to me it

would mean utilizing the resources we have and I actually don't really know to be honest"
(Respondent #2).

These two comments demonstrate the range of understanding concerning sustainable
hospitality as they emerge from within the group. Respondent #1 articulated the three
components of sustainability and strategies (e.g. taking care of people) that contributed to her
view of a sustainable business. We can also see how Respondent #1 integrated key sustainability
concepts into her personal schemas, while Respondent #2 reported not previously considering
sustainability in a hospitality context. It is useful to think about participants' perspectives on
sustainable hospitality as a continuum from a shallow to deep understanding and application of
sustainable hospitality concepts.

In the group session, participants focused on employees as an integral part of the
sustainability puzzle. During the workshop much conversation involved the unsustainability of
high levels of employee turnover. In fact, participants devised a strategy to address high
employee turnover that included actions such as: incorporating departmental incentives to
engage employees, the creation of structured succession plans, and getting to know employees
and caring for them.

Some respondents also recognized that sustainability is systemic and a business model.
Systemic in that participants recognized that sustainability effects the entire organization and a
business model in that acting sustainably is a way of doing business. Respondent #1 highlights
this when she says: " If you have all three sort of pillars you can hold your business up. And
that's been part of the environment, your sustainability, your care for the environment overall,
your care of your business – so you have to have a financial pillar, and environmental pillar –
and then I say the culture or community". This systemic view stands in contrast with the more

usual perspective of sustainability, which views the social and environmental as external to an organization as opposed to viewing sustainability from both inside and outside the organization. This perspective is intriguing because it could afford the foundation for a model that could bring sustainability to the core of hotel operations and decision-making.

During the course of the strategic planning session participants developed over-arching business strategies and arrived at three actions for each strategy. They identified the following business strategies: (a) control costs, (b) revenue growth, (c) WOW guests/guest loyalty, (d) strategic training, (e) decrease turnover, and (f) ownership/entrepreneurial. Some of the actions linked to these strategies included: decrease costs by reducing, reusing, and recycling; maximize on the ethic diversity of associates with a commission for referred business; and care about your people, get to know them as a person. Some participants linked more obvious strategies (reducing, reusing, recycling) to concepts of sustainability, while others reported they did not know if there was a link. Two respondents connected the majority of the strategies to each concept of sustainability. One person commented:

> When we talk about our strategies for guest loyalty that of course goes into my people because it's all about the people. Anything to do with our … revenue generation is a lot of my financial. And then anything to do with environmental or community service goes into my environment type thing. It's overly simple but it helps me organize my … how I work (Respondent #1).

It appears that for some participants the session provided them with a different perspective on sustainability while with others it re-enforced previous ways of thinking about sustainability.

Future Directions

While it is too early to answer the questions this project asks, these initial findings raise other interesting questions. For example, what would a sustainable hospitality framework or model look like if one explored the social and environmental components of sustainability within the hotel? How would one incentivize its implementation in all staffing levels? What if sustainability was used as a core business decision-making process? How can one increase the understanding and application of sustainable hospitality and culturally embed it within and across a hotel chain? In continuing the research it will be useful to see if the themes identified in Site 1 are also present in subsequent sites. Further, this research could provide the foundation for a sustainable hospitality framework that effectively integrates the achievement of profit with social, economic, and environmental imperatives.

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