

Unit 4.1 Next Steps: How do leaders catalyze progress in the pursuit of sustainability?

Humans are capable of great change. In the course of our history “we, the peoples”^{*} of the earth have moved, unevenly but persistently, towards a world with increased wellbeing for more and more of its inhabitants. We have eradicated diseases, abolished slavery as a legal institution, lengthened lifespans, and codified rights to protect poor and marginalized groups. Taking this progress for granted, however, or expecting it to simply continue, will almost certainly doom us. Moving collectively towards a better world for all takes hard work.

Sustainability is a critical way of looking at the world not just as it is, but as it could be if we do that work. The frameworks, concepts, and theories surrounding sustainability we have introduced in this course are meant to help you contribute to the work at hand: to think through the challenges of sustainable development, to design actions that could help address them, and to build the capacities needed for implementing such actions. But implementation doesn’t just happen. It also requires leadership. We therefore turn in this last Unit of the course to the question “How do leaders catalyze progress in the pursuit of sustainability?”

Our answer to this final question, as might be predictable given what has come before in the course, is “it depends on context.” Leading a community effort to better insulate low-income housing obviously requires different skills than leading an international effort to reduce plastic pollution. And the in-depth case studies we have used throughout the course illustrate the wide range of leadership approaches that have gained some success in the pursuit of sustainability at different places and times around the world. That said, some generalizations have begun to emerge. Matson et al., in the reading assigned for this Unit, draw on a wide range of experience to outline what they see to be mindsets shared by most successful sustainability leaders:

- They are empathetic problem-framers, focusing attention on the well-being of people not only in the here and now but also in distant places and future generations;
- They are systems thinkers, embracing the complexity of nature-society interactions and the need for mobilizing multi-disciplinary teams for understanding them;
- They are adaptive strategists, acknowledging the limits of our understanding and the consequent need to embrace surprise and failure;
- They are passionate but patient change-makers, recognizing the need for immediate but persistent advocacy to bring about transformational change at scale.

In the “Study Questions” for this Unit, we invite you to consider the applicability of these generalizations to a range of specific situations, and to reflect on other opportunities for leadership in the pursuit of sustainability.

Preparation for class: To prepare for this Unit, please:

- a) **Read:** Matson, P., Clark, W. C., & Andersson, K. (2016). *Pursuing Sustainability: A Guide to the Science and Practice*. Princeton University Press. “Next Steps: Contributing to a Sustainability Transition,” Ch. 6, pp.129-142.

Study Questions to help you get the most out of the readings:

- I. **Generalizations vs. context-dependence:** The readings for this Unit sketch 2 very different instances of leaders taking sustainability-related ideas into practice: Maria Foronda as an environmental activist in Peru and Ray Anderson as a CEO of a global textile manufacturer. What

^{*} This is the phrase that opens the Charter to the United Nations

were the common features of their individual leadership strategies? How and why did their approaches differ? To what extent do the generalizations regarding the “mindsets of sustainability leaders” that are summarized in this note and discussed in the readings help to make sense of the specific cases of Foronda and Anderson?

- II. **Leadership at home:** Imagine that you have been asked to lead an effort to radically reduce carbon emissions in some specific context where you live or work (e.g. a place where you have lived, a school you have attended, an organization where you have worked, etc.). Outline the initial approach you would take to bring relevant actors together in defining shared goals, identifying and evaluating possible interventions, building the capacity for implementation, mobilizing action and securing long term commitments to sustain it over the long run. Which of the generalizations about effective leadership for sustainability discussed in the readings were helpful in designing your approach? Why? What key elements of your approach derive from the particular context of the effort you have been asked to lead? What aspects of your leadership approach would you feel comfortable recommending to someone facing a similar challenge? Why?
- III. **Your case:** For the case study of sustainable development that you chose to pursue throughout this course, consider the same questions outlined in (II) above, i.e. How would you lead—or advise existing leaders—in efforts to advance pursuit of sustainability there? Why?

Digging deeper (optional materials for further exploring frontiers in the pursuit of sustainability):

- b) **Read:** Johnson, A. E., & Wilkinson, K. K. (Eds.). (2020). *All we can save: Truth, courage, and solutions for the climate crisis*. One World.
This anthology showcases diverse forms of sustainability leadership through essays, poetry, and art by women leaders across multiple fields—from regenerative agriculture to climate finance to community organizing.
- c) **Read:** Solnit, R. (2025). *No straight road takes you there: Essays for uneven terrain*. Haymarket Books.
Solnit examines how transformative change toward sustainability actually happens—often indirectly, unpredictably, and through accumulated efforts whose impacts only become visible later. Her insights about persistence through apparent failure apply directly to the long-term work of sustainability leadership.