

# Evolutionary Sustainability™

Reconceptualizing Sustainability of  
Organizational and Community Change

An Evolving White Paper by  
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## Background

It is time for a new way of thinking about the sustainability of organizational and community change. Discussions about sustainability need to take into account the reality that the traditional model, which focuses on chasing funds to continue programs has not been successful. We need to change our conceptualization of sustainability to an understanding of it as a way to manage transitions within an ongoing change process.

## Myths about Sustainability

**Myth 1:** New programs funded by grants can be sustained (continued) after a grant ends by getting new grants.

**Reality:** Grant funding is rarely obtained to continue activities because:

1. Grant funding is hard to get and most submitted proposals are not funded—in general only 1–5% of proposals are funded.
2. Most funders want to fund new activities and not continue existing activities.
3. Funders requirements are so different that it is rare to find a match between what has been funded and new funding.

**Myth 2:** New programs funded by grants can be sustained (continued) after the grant ends by charging a fee.

**Reality:** Grant funded programs are rarely continued after the grant ends by charging a fee because:

1. Delivering services that are funded by a grant will not easily transition to a fee for service model. If the person receiving services could afford to pay for the service or another funder existed, then a grant would not have been necessary in the first place.
2. A totally different set of proficiencies are necessary to successfully deliver services to participants who are paying for services than those who are not.  
Most organizations that have proficiencies in delivering services at no cost or below cost to participants, do not have the experience, knowledge, or skill sets necessary to successfully operate a fee for service program.
3. Operating grants does not help agencies develop the proficiencies/competencies necessary to successfully operate a fee for service program.
4. A defined need for a service does not mean that there are participants who can pay for that service.

Funders may give higher scores for sustainability sections of grant proposals which describe strategies for sustaining program after the grant ends by getting more grants or charging a fee—but in the majority of cases this does not happen.

The majority of grants are not designed to be sustainable, and the majority of new programs that are funding activities with grants are not continued. As a result, agencies are constantly starting and stopping new programs.

**Result:** Resources are wasted in starting and stopping programs, staffing is unstable and disrupted, and lessons learned from past performance can not be used in new programs because they are so different in nature.

**Assumption:** Underlying the myths that grant programs can be sustained after the grant ends is the assumption that new programs should be funding activities that will need to be continued forever.

Traditional sustainability planning involves attempts to:

- a. get more money to continue new activities that were started with grant funding or
- b. change the way things are done (i.e. system change).

System change grants often do result in permanent changes that continue after the grant. However, a very small percent of grants are system change grants. Either way, this model is based on the thinking that a set of activities needs to be continued indefinitely.

Evolutionary Sustainability™ is a model that is built upon the new science which looks at organizations and communities as living and dynamic systems which are constantly changing, and is aligned with recent findings from brain research about what works with people. This model is one in which activities are designed:

1. to put in place processes and results that continue after a grant,
2. are based upon the assumption that change is constant,
3. center around development of strengths based, functional partnerships and strategic collaborations, and
4. does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Table I: A comparison of the two models

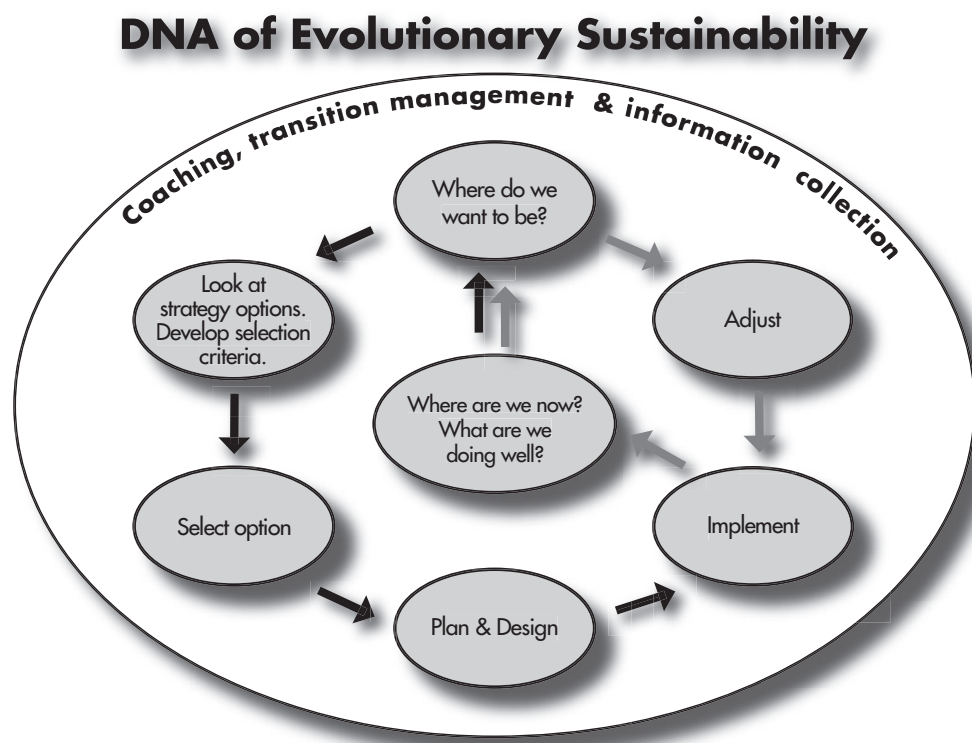
<b>Traditional Sustainability</b>	<b>Evolutionary Sustainability™</b>
Static	Dynamic
Either/Or thinking	And/Both thinking
Musical note	Seed
Partners just to partner – a list on a flyer	Functional partnerships/strategic collaboration
Money is used as incentive	Partnerships are driven by mission, money is used to support—money is not an effective incentive in the long term
Based on assumption that activity needs to be continued forever	Based on assumption that constant adjustments are necessary
Activities proposed need more money to continue after the grant or changes in existing structures need to be made to continue activities after the grant	Activities proposed create lasting impact
Duplication and re-inventing the wheel	Based on leveraging what institutions/organizations are doing already and their strengths/competencies
Based on needs – deficit model – with no relationship to assets, strengths, stability	Based on strengths, passions, and commitments of partners sharing a joint vision
Based on survival	Based on thriving
Agency as expert	Community and partners as experts
One-way communication	Two-way communication
No feedback or adjustments	Constant feedback and adjustments
Design of expensive services with no funding source for continuation	Design criteria exclude the creation of expensive activities that need additional funding to continue and instead focus on maximizing existing resources
Stuck on an escalator	Apollo 13
Individual/Organization dependent	Team/Multiple Organization dependent
No recognition or management of transitions	Management of transition
Are exclusively focused on problem solving	Are focused on maximizing strengths
The only solution is money	Constant adaptation dependent on authentic participation of community
Elements are designed to be constant	Elements are designed to evolve
Individual efficacy	Collective efficacy
Unsuccessful attempts for buy-in	Shared vision—deep resonance
Funders/Providers set the agenda	Community partners set the agenda
Based on model of dependency	Based on model of interdependence and independence



is happening inside and outside that will influence the organization. An important part of this stage is collecting information and input from all partners, clients, funders, etc. During **Retaining**, the organization decides what needs to be retained from the universe of activities that are currently taking place. There will be changes that need to take place to retain activities, particularly if a grant is supporting the activities which are by nature time limited. During **Adapting**, decisions are made about what to drop that is no longer working and what to add based on the information that was discovered during the Forecasting and Retaining stages.

An operationalization of what could happen during each of these phases is depicted in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: DNA of Evolutionary Sustainability



The starting point for an organization is an assessment of where you are now and what you are doing well. The second step is to determine where you want to be. After this, options for strategies to pursue are developed and criteria for decision making determined. Then using these criteria, strategies are selected. At this point, planning and design takes place which will include an implementation plan. When implementation occurs, there is a continuous loop of feedback to determine the impacts of the implementation, a re-assessment of how you are doing and where you want to be, and then adjustments are made.

The failure of most implementation and change efforts are well documented. One statistic that demonstrates this is the fact that between 80–90% of organizational efforts to alter the way people relate to other people fail. Another relevant statistic is that only 10% of what is learned in training is actually used on the job. These statistics reflect a failure of adaptation.

Looking at the model in Figure 2, the majority of these stages are currently left out of planning and implementation efforts and organizations swing back and forth from selecting options to implementation—often with no assessment of where they are, what are they doing well or could do well, and where they want to be. Decisions are frequently made on which strategies to pursue with no clear criteria – which contributes significantly to the high failure rate. There are several change strategies or quality improvement methods that are based on a method to reduce errors in machines. These are not effective with people, because people are not machines. What works with people are the elements that are embodied in the Appreciative Inquiry approach which is validated and supported by the new science and brain research. This research shows that what works with people is focusing on what is going well, engaging in meaningful conversations about past success, letting people come to their own answers and encouraging focus on their insights.

Critical to increasing success of organizational efforts is using approaches that are effective with people, are based on the new science and an understanding of transitions and how they impact people. There are three stages of transition as outlined by the Bridge's model. (Bridges, 2003) Transitions start with an ending, then there is a neutral zone, and finally, a new beginning. Coaching, transition management, and information collection are critical to successfully functioning in the model of Evolutionary Sustainability™ and are depicted in Figure 2 as the context.

We welcome your comments and encourage you to contact us to learn more about the specific tools and methods developed by Wholonomy Consulting, LLC to move towards Evolutionary Sustainability™ .

**Katherine Kraft, Ph.D** has over 30 years experience working with non-profits, universities, and foundations conducting service delivery research and planning programs. She has worked in dozens of communities with single agencies and large, broad based coalitions to determine the most impactful program strategies, and create the most feasible path for turning these strategies into results. Dr. Kraft uses her research skills to guide organizations and groups

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*Wholonomy Consulting, LLC Senior Partners are available for speaking, presenting, and training on Evolutionary Sustainability™.*

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