ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

Avoiding "Chicken Little" Syndrome

How to raise environmental issues without being labeled an alarmist

At the 2008 Ceres environmental conference, Gary Hirshberg, president and CEO of Stonyfield Farm, gave a moving description of his business philosophy, which helped transform what was 25 years ago an infant company into the world's largest organic-yogurt producer, with annual sales of over $300 million.

Long before "green" became fashionable, Hirshberg recognized that for his company to be sustainable, product purity must be the uncompromised standard. He was personally troubled that "200 industrial chemicals have been found in the umbilical cord of babies" and "over the past 90 years we have been conducting a great experiment [in human health] and the early results are not too good."

A Message With Clout

Hirshberg delivered this alarming message to an audience that happened to be highly receptive. But even if he had delivered it to CEOs at a Business Roundtable meeting, his point would have had equal credibility and impact, for several reasons:

- First, his business performance record holds peer-level respect.
- Second, the message was being delivered at a "tipping point" moment, when awareness is growing among business executives about the risks of trace toxic chemicals.[1]
- Finally, it was delivered within context in an even, rational tone.

By Way of Contrast

Contrast Hirshberg's delivery with an opinion piece on "peak oil" written earlier this year by a University of Arizona professor, Guy R. McPherson, and published in the *Arizona Republic*.[2] The title alone, "End of the World as We Know It," is enough to invoke visions of Chicken Little shouting, "The sky is falling."

The piece began by stating, "Peak oil spells the end of civilization." It went on to assert that "the American Empire absolutely demands cheap oil." Here are some additional quotes from the piece:

> We passed the world oil peak in 2005, and we've been easing down the other side by acquiring oil at the point of a gun . . . .

Richard MacLean

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> Later this year, we fall off the oil-supply cliff, with global supply plummeting below 70 million barrels/day.
>
> . . . .
>
> In a decade, unemployment will be approaching 100 percent, inflation will be running at 1,000 percent and central heating will be a pipe dream.
>
> In short, this country will be well on its way to the post-industrial Stone Age.
>
> . . . .
>
> If you're alive in a decade, it will be because you've figured out how to forage locally.

Why Worry About Eco-Rants?

Many readers may be tempted to simply dismiss commentary such as McPherson's. But I find the piece instructive at many levels, so I would like to offer a few observations on it.

First, it makes it clear that authority figures are teaching students by example that a "rant" constitutes rational discourse. Today's political landscape is already shaped by party leadership uttering the most extreme vitriol. So I suppose we cannot expect much better on the environmental scene.

Energy costs will significantly escalate as oil becomes more scarce and harder to extract—a phenomenon often called "Hubbert's Peak" after M. King Hubbert, the geologist who first identified it.

Second, eco-alarmist messages may hold sway with some readers. But they are a nonstarter with any business group—and, for that matter, with most audiences.

If the objective is to influence, educate, and change the direction our society is taking, what do these diatribes accomplish? From my perspective, they can do real harm.

In many cases, individuals who have the power to positively effect change will simply be turned off by alarmism. Moreover, those who want to delay environmental initiatives or obfuscate the issues often find that disseminating outrageous quotes is an ideal technique for manufacturing doubt and undermining valid environmental concerns. They find it particularly useful if the quote comes from someone who can be linked to a prestigious institution or organization.

Third, giving prominence to "eco-harangues" invites allegations of media bias. The piece quoted here was printed above the fold, on page one in the *Viewpoints* (opinion) section. Many find it hard to believe that a less "politically correct" commentary would have received such prominence without an opposing piece to "balance" it. I should note here that, to its credit, the *Arizona Republic* did publish a string of negative reactions to the McPherson piece.

Problems With Prophecies of Doom

The irony here is that the core issue described by McPherson is absolutely correct: Energy costs will significantly escalate as oil becomes more scarce and harder to extract—a phenomenon often called "Hubbert's Peak" after M. King Hubbert, the geologist who first identified it. The result will be widespread economic disruptions. McPherson's piece contained no new revelations on this score.

Instead, from a communications standpoint, the problems with the message were threefold: First, I can find no credible information to support assertions of an imminent "fall off the oil-supply cliff." Second, the tone of the piece likely struck many readers as "over the top." Finally, there was scant mention of potential mitigating factors, such as advances in conservation or alter-

native energy, or other energy options such as oil shale, coal gasification, and tar sands.

This type of eco-alarmism has many precedents, of course. Environmental professionals often believe they must couch their warnings in extreme terms in order to get attention. For example, during the 1970s, in the wake of rapidly proliferating environmental regulations, industry professionals who were trying to gain management support for environmental programs all too often relied on the threat of "You might go to jail!" I know I did.

The initial response from management was excellent. They provided more staff resources and capital to build the required pollution control infrastructure. But few business managers ever went to jail for environmental violations. And many eventually came to view environmental professionals as eco-cops, alarmists, and unreliable business advisors. To some extent, we are still burdened by this stereotype.

Delivering the Message Effectively

To be sure, when it comes to the environment, the ultimate end points are often identifiable—and bleak. For example, physicists tell us that Earth will eventually burn up in a cataclysmic explosion. But saying it will happen next year makes no sense, unless you can back up your prediction with real-time asteroid impact data.

The challenge for those of us who work in the environmental field has always been to gather information on how ecosystems, economies, and societies react, respond, and adapt, and then communicate it in a manner that will allow decision makers to take appropriate action.

Clearly, the collective "we" have been doing a poor job of this to date. But the solution is not to impart shrill messages of doom. Instead, we need to offer vision and leadership.

So, how should you deliver the environmental message today?

Readers of this column often have jobs that require them to communicate with sophisticated corporate executives, community leaders, government officials, and politicians. Your task is urgent—and has potential immediate real-world consequences. Here is my advice.

Do Your Homework

When you make a presentation to leaders and decision makers, they might venture far afield from the specific topic at hand. They also may probe very deeply on a specific point in your presentation.

Indeed, the latter approach is a technique often used by business executives: Probe some minor or tangential point with complete thoroughness. If the presenter can "pass muster" on these details, the questioner concludes that the recommendation being discussed is probably valid (and management moves right along to the next subject).

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To withstand this type of rigorous examination, the presenter must be thoroughly informed—not just on the issue at hand, but on interrelated or peripheral issues as well.

Bring Support

Doing your homework is not the same thing as having every tiny bit of supporting information stored in your brain. No one person can understand all of the details of really complex issues. Yet driven by ego, pride, or the fear of losing face, environmental managers often continue to go it alone.

In key meetings, consider bringing technical experts to provide information that you do not have yourself. At meetings of boards of directors,

I would sometimes bring along the top technical expert in my department to respond to very specific questions, should they arise. Not only does this build goodwill within the organization, but it allows you to focus on the big issues, without worrying about the minutia.

Place Issues in Context

When communicating on environmental, health, and safety (EHS) issues, it is useful to consider context:

- How does this specific issue relate to other EHS issues? What is its relative timing and impact?
- How significant is this issue in both the near and long term relative to other organizational dynamics and business resource needs?

In the grand scheme of things, some issues really do not matter much. By contrast, other problems can literally bankrupt the organization and harm employees, the community, and the larger environment.

When presenting an environmental issue, provide a range of options for addressing it, with the strengths and weaknesses of each laid out fairly.

It is important to understand (and communicate) the relative business risks or competitive opportunities associated with particular EHS issues. Executives who are not familiar with environmental technology and regulations often have a difficult time making judgment calls on these issues. You gain a lot of credibility if you are able to differentiate among risks and place them in a broader context.

Let the Facts Allow Your Audience to Come to the Right Conclusions

People do not like to be told what to do or what to think. This is especially true of people in executive positions, who must take ultimate responsibility for organizational decisions and outcomes.

The key to persuasiveness is laying out the facts in a connect-the-dots fashion that allows conclusions to become obvious. The most successful presentation or white paper is one where, at the end, those you are trying to convince believe they have come to their own conclusions. But it is up to you to set out a clear "logic roadmap."

Establish a Learning Environment

Environmental issues can be very complicated. They typically involve regulatory, policy, ethical, technical, emotional, and competitive dimensions—to name just a few.

While you may understand this broad scope of influential factors, do not assume that management always has the required background to make informed decisions. You may need to fill in many details for them. That said, you cannot feed information with a fire hose. It needs to be delivered at the right pace and within the right setting.

Many of my clients have established "Executive Business Councils" as a means of meeting at regular intervals (often quarterly) with top leadership. This allows the environmental professionals to inform leadership about emerging issues that affect the business and avoid just focusing on past results or the "crisis du jour."

Demonstrate That You Are a Team Player Who Is Looking Out for the Organization's Interests

It is important to be seen as a neutral player and to avoid being labeled as someone pushing their own agenda. When presenting an environmental issue, provide a range of options for addressing it, with the strengths and weaknesses of each laid out fairly.

Organizations invariably have lofty value statements. The list of values does not include "wreck the environment for profit." If your organization's

values genuinely reflect their corporate statements, your leadership will pick the right choice if you have made a convincing case. If they consistently fail to do so, it may be time to change jobs.

Have Someone Else Deliver the Message When Necessary

Sometimes the message you need to get across is so challenging, radical, and urgent that you risk damaging your own reputation or standing within the company by delivering it yourself. In other cases, the content may be so technical that there is no one in the company who can provide sufficient depth of knowledge to withstand deep probing. In still other cases, the message can appear so self-serving (e.g., "we need more staff") that it would be discounted out of hand if you delivered it on your own.

This is where consultants come in: They are excellent sources for delivering displeasing messages. It is also an unfortunate fact of life that an "outside expert" generally has more credibility with management than do internal staff members.

Avoid Emotionally Charged Language

Media reports often use inflammatory language when covering environmental issues. Pollutants are never "released"; they are "spewed." But as an environmental professional, you cannot afford to use such charged terms.

Recently, I assisted an environmental director with a presentation he was making at an annual companywide meeting of business managers. The content of the presentation was excellent, but he had originally included a sprinkling of overstated language. So we eliminated the charged words before he made his presentation.

The environmental director later told me that his company CEO had come up after the presentation to congratulate him on his talk. I cannot claim that my editing led to this success. But the point is that, in critical meetings, you don't want anything to distract from your key message.

Do Not Mix Messages or Bring in Irrelevant Issues

This brings me to my final point: It is crucial to stay focused on your key issues. Avoid bringing in other subjects unless they are relevant, necessary, and clearly related to the topic at hand. Do not stray from your main message in order to make rhetorical points—especially ones that might strike your audience as controversial or unrealistic.

If your aim is to warn your audience about the dangers of "Hubbert's Peak," it diminishes your message to refer to the United States as "the American Empire," a characterization that many people find offensive and inappropriate. Many audience members who might otherwise be receptive to your arguments will likely reject the message if it is couched in terms they find off-putting or overstated.

Notes

1. For example, in July 2005, the Wall Street Journal began running a multipart front-page series on the topic, with an article entitled "Levels of Risk—Common Industrial Chemicals in Tiny Doses Raise Health Issue."

2. McPherson, G. R. (2008, April 6). End of the world as we know it. The Arizona Republic, p. V1. Available online at http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/viewpoints/articles/0406vip-mcpherson0406.html.

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