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Paul's blog: what does sustainability mean for me?

To me the issues are straightforward - two of our biggest environmental problems associated with construction are waste and carbon emissions.

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This month I want to focus on me...me, me and finally me... Well it is a selfish world, right? We don't care too much about our neighbours, other nations, let alone the planet so I want to have a bit of space for myself. Why? Well for the last few months I have been trying to simplify what sustainability, the word and / or concept, would mean for the large construction company that I work for. Why do we have to simplify things? Because with several thousand employees and thousands of suppliers the need to communicate what is wanted and who needs to do what in order to become a sustainable organisation is no mean feat.

If you start a conversation with say five different people and ask them to define what sustainability is you would probably come up with five different accounts. The difficulty is then how do you get a common approach from a diverse set of responses. Quite a challenge, don't you think?

Before I describe my approach to cracking this one, let me also bring into the equation another aspect to this, which is having a vision. A common mistake is not being able to develop a common vision that can be shared across an organisation, or across a range of stakeholders. Quite often policies are developed without that common vision so people don't buy into it as they don't see where it will end up.

What would that common vision be for the built environment in the UK? It would probably be about sustainable communities with developments that serve the current and future needs of the local people without having detrimental environmental impacts. For the company I work for our vision comes from a set of aspirations that help us define where we want to be....all our buildings we build will be zero net carbon, water and waste as a minimum, and our developments will have long-term sustainable job creation and employment opportunities, that will also provide a social infrastructure that supports and stimulates local or regional community activity. So here are three powerful aspirations that provide the sense of purpose for our work, but just what is the roadmap to get us to this long term future?

Should I be looking for business transformation to achieve these aspirations or can it be done through incremental improvements some of which may involve quite large step changes, for example in our approach to waste and carbon management? I don't think the sector is going to transform itself, but rather achieve the change through incremental change, the rate of change will be dependent on the policy setting of the government. Lets face it we have the technology and most of the know-how to deliver better buildings. The rest boils down to removing some of the cost barriers by have the correct incentives and government can help provide them.

Faced with this situation, and my assumptions - which you may or may not disagree with me over- what next? Well I am a simple soul. So to me the issues are

straightforward - two of our biggest environmental problems associated with construction are waste and carbon emissions. We need to cut both of them if we are ever going to get close to building zero carbon homes. So why do we have carbon and waste? Because of the materials that we use and the way we put them together and improved material selection and procurement together with better design could factor out a lot of our waste and carbon. Responsible materials selection could also help improve indoor air quality so we can also meet another aspiration of building healthy and safe living and workspaces.

So what does sustainability in the UK mean for me? It means reducing our direct carbon emissions, reducing our construction waste that goes to landfill, delivering a more sustainable design and a responsible materials procurement. Oh and to help with vision on social outcomes, it means helping 3,000 into employment over three years. For each of the categories above we have set targets over three years, for example a 70% waste reduction. Focusing on 5 important areas is one way of helping to answer the question what does sustainability mean to your organisation. Of course, sustainability is wider than the five I've selected, but it's a start! Without that direction we would still be having a conversation, rather than actually getting on with it and taking actions.

So forgive me the indulgence of being selfish, but my actions do extend to a few thousand people who will be the change agents required to deliver sustainability for my organisation.

Story from **NCE**:

http://www.nce.co.uk/opinion/2007/12/pauls_blog_what_does_sustainability_mean_for_me.html

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