

Sustainability *and* Higher Education,

A [Hypothetical]

Love Story

By Lindsay Eva Wagner

It is quite clear that sustainability is here to stay, but in many cases we have yet to determine what it actually is. The buzz words and issues—solar panels, wind turbines, recycling, green cleaning, energy management, green buildings, green products, public transportation, and carbon neutrality to mention a few—have all been part of the initial drive to be sustainable. The big question is, can these efforts be sustained? It is time to unpack sustainability and develop a successful long-term relationship.

Creating a healthy long-term relationship requires planning and an understanding of the potential stages that the relationship will go through. The following is a hypothetical love story between higher education and sustainability. All institutions will most likely go through some version of the following stages, but only a small percent will reach the final stage.

THE HONEYMOON PERIOD

In the beginning of a long-term relationship there is a honeymoon period. During this time the love comes easily and the relationship seems effortless. Everything is new and exciting. The focus is on similarities and little attention is paid to the differences. It is often believed that this period will go on forever and there will never be disagreements about anything.

In a campus's relationship with sustainability, this period often involves adding LEED-rated buildings, tending to so-called "low-hanging fruit" of energy-efficient upgrades, and basking in the media attention that follows. All available rooftop space is blanketed with solar panels, and the tax rebates and incentives begin rolling in. Direct digital controls are added to existing heating and cooling systems, and building occupants experience a greater level of comfort.

Decisions are made fast and without long-range planning. The marketing opportunities seem endless, and students are flocking to the institution because it is considered to be one of the most sustainable in the country. We are in love with sustainability; what could possibly go wrong?

ADJUSTING TO REALITY

Something happens, maybe minor, maybe major. Whatever it is, the conflict makes it absolutely impossible to continue believing that the relationship is bulletproof. All of a sudden it becomes apparent that the partnership is not living up to our hopes and dreams. Flaws become evident. There is a desire to become close again, but fear sets in. This is the stage that the real relationship begins.

The LEED-rated buildings are requiring more maintenance than any other new buildings ever have. The replacement parts are more expensive and the repairs are much more complex. There was no additional staff added to maintain and operate these buildings. The roof over the library, where the largest solar array was placed, begins to leak and books are being damaged. Upon calling the contractor to fix the roof, you learn that their contract indicates they are not responsible for roof repair. All the panels must be removed to repair the roof and the entire burden will be the responsibility of the university.

At the same time the utility provider eliminates their incentive program so the university will no longer receive a monthly production-based incentive check. The positive media attention and increased enrollment due to sustainable practices is continuing. That makes it all worth it, right?

THE POWER STRUGGLE

Adjusting to reality becomes more and more difficult. Minor issues begin to turn into major disagreements. Doubts arise and feelings of anger begin to develop. Communication is riddled with sarcasm and hostility. For the first time since the relationship began there are frequent thoughts of leaving.

Building mechanics struggle to keep the LEED-rated buildings running and toy with the idea of bypassing what they feel are trouble spots in the system. Winter sets in and all the rooftop solar systems are covered in snow and power production is minimal. The established set points in the direct digital control system kept building occupants happy in the summer, but they are now complaining of being cold and not having the ability to adjust their thermostats. Mechanics are frustrated because they cannot change the set points without risking the loss of the guaranteed energy savings. Who is in control of this relationship?

REEVALUATION

During this stage the question of stay or go is addressed. Generally each party will turn away from one another and withdraw. If an affair is going to occur, it will occur in this stage. The use of a temporary separation period is available as a tactic to avoid divorce. This stage is a major turning point in the relationship.

As vendors come into the office unannounced, touting the latest and greatest product, general disinterest begins to transform into curiosity. Collections of brochures from other solar companies and other control companies begin to stack up. When you announce a new building project, you decide to test other products and techniques. Will the relationship make it?

ENLIGHTENMENT

If the relationship survives the reevaluation stage there will be a new spark. An interest in reconnection will develop. Having developed a greater understanding of what is reality and what is fantasy, this attempt has a much better chance of survival. Differences are brought to light and recognized leading to a stronger relationship that is based on honesty and understanding.

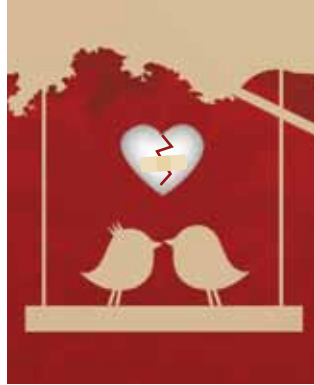
This is the stage that building mechanics realize that sustainability is staying, and it would best suit them to learn as much as possible about products and technologies so they can make informed decisions. It is where the light bulb goes on and realizations about the benefits of the relationship are made. Building mechanics begin to share their needs and desires in design meetings and design professionals begin to listen and design buildings based on total cost of ownership as opposed to LEED points. This is a glorious and productive stage. Are you ready to renew your vows?

ACCEPTANCE

This is the final stage in a committed relationship. Very few relationships ever reach this stage, which is one of complete acceptance. There is an integration of individual and relationship needs. There is a positive and supportive feeling. Conflict may still arise, but it is utilized to strengthen the relationship. There are very few surprises. The expectations are known and completely accepted. A true union is established.

Hypothetically, if this stage is reached, the campus would be

full of LEED platinum buildings that operated without a glitch, and with people who wanted to work and learn 24/7 because the buildings were making them smarter and healthier. The entire campus would be off grid and there would never be a utility outage. The building mechanics would have time to give tours and answer questions for reporters because there were never any mechanical issues. Carbon neutrality is reached and no one has to put forth anymore effort. This is the goal, right?



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COUPLES THERAPY

Because getting to the acceptance stage in the hypothetical love story is not possible for most institutions, we must take control of this relationship and create an Acceptance stage that is beneficial not only to the facilities manager, but also to the entire campus community. Facilities managers have the opportunity to shape this relationship into something monumental and truly sustainable.

Let's go back to the Honeymoon Period. During this time administration is generally supportive of the budding relationship between the campus and sustainability, which makes it an ideal opportunity for the facilities manager to jump in armed with total cost of ownership data for various products. If you can get the ideal product approved, the Honeymoon Period is going to be prolonged. This ability requires maintaining a high level of knowledge of the products that are on the market.

If your institution is anything like mine, you are most likely stretched way too thin to spend the many hours necessary to research which products will work best for the campus. Don't stress, your busy schedule provides you with the opportunity to get students involved. Often times there are engineering and construction students that need to do internships to meet their graduation requirements. Bring them on board to become your resident expert. Not only are you helping them graduate, you are allowing them to be active participants in sustainability on campus.

Even if you have done all the research and selected what you believe to be the bulletproof product, there is still going to be some adjustment to reality and ultimately a power struggle. Whenever change is introduced there is an adjustment period. You will have building users who do not understand why they can no longer crank up the temperature in their office to 90 degrees. You will have building mechanics who are hesitant and resistant to the change from pneumatics controls to digital controls.

Adjusting to reality and dealing with power struggles will be a lot less painful if a situational communication strategy is developed. There are a broad range of people on campus that all have different levels of understanding when it comes to build-


ing technologies. An individual communication strategy must be developed for the various groups across campus. People are much more likely to accept something and get on board with change if you can develop a feeling within them.

Most students, for example, do not have extra money, so quantifying energy savings into something like number of meals that could be purchased monthly hits home for them. They can feel that number. They cannot, however, feel kilowatt hours. Developing strategic messages based on your audience that make them feel something will help in the Adjustment to Reality and Power Struggles stages.

The Reevaluation period provides a great opportunity to look at other products, but it also provides an opportunity to look within. Are there problems with processes that need to be addressed? Are there training opportunities that have not been taken? Have all possible partnerships and relationships been explored across campus? Have communication methods been successful? Does the campus community know why things are changing? It is easy to blame the product, and search for a new one. The real work and the real gains will be made through self and organizational evaluation and improvement.

THE RECONCILIATION

After all internal processes and practices have been fixed it is time to reconcile. Facilities management staff can lead this effort. As they take on their daily duties the fact that they fully embrace sustainability efforts is visible. They become the face of sustainability, paving the way for full integration into the campus culture.

Acceptance occurs after a solid decision process is developed, students and staff are involved, a communication strategy is created and utilized consistently, internal processes are addressed and readdressed, and excitement is generated. Acceptance is not an endpoint, however. It is the beginning of a vibrant culture of sustainability that reaches and involves each individual that interacts with the campus. The excitement and feeling that is generated spills over in to the community and is carried with students after graduation. The culture of sustainability on one campus can change the way people live. Does your organization have this impact or do you need to consider couples therapy? 

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