Stepping Into Environmental Activism

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Ones and Dilchert (2012) are on target with their view that psychological science can be effective in getting some good things done to prevent or limit the damage that humans do to the environment. I would like to extend their argument beyond environmental sustainability in the workplace to efforts to bring about green practices in communities.

The authors' arguments are sound, but they do not take into account that powerful, large, and well-funded business and political interests will present formidable and discouraging obstacles. For example, an effort to eliminate plastic shopping bags from a community is likely to bring out lobbyists and lawyers from the chemical and plastics industries. An effort to stop the clearcutting of trees from a California valley, ostensibly to reduce fire hazards, may bring out real estate developers and paper and pulp industry interests—as well as private citizens who overlook the probability that the removal of the trees will result in significant flooding, considerable wildlife damage and significant mini-climate change. All of the opponents to good green intentions will have their own strong opinions and are probably better organized than a green team.

Although it may be tempting, and even consoling, for the advocates of a green initiative to assume that their position makes total sense and that the reasoning underlying an environmentally nasty position is flawed, it is wise to ignore these assumptions. In fact, the proponents of a current condition or situation will almost certainly have a carefully crafted, well-reasoned, and apparently logical position statement ready to defend against all attacks. Often, however, some good analytical thinking by green advocates will often reveal a fundamental assumption that is flawed. Identifying a flawed fundamental assumption will give a huge boost to the credibility of the position that you will develop.

This leads to another step that is critical. The facts underlying and energizing a green initiative must be carefully collected, verified, and organized. The entire strategy and tactical plan must be based on these facts. When all the known relevant facts have been searched out and identified, then a psychologist can turn to psychological science for some help in structuring a plan to put the initiative into play.

For example, at the outset of an initiative to ban plastic shopping bags from a community, I searched out research that identified the most effective ways to order the key points in an opinion change effort. Other studies compared the effectiveness of completing an argument for a listener versus providing information that lets the listener arrive at the same conclusion. The comparative credibility of an ''overheard'' communication versus direct one-to-one communication was reviewed. The nature of a ''source effect'' (who said it) was discussed. All of this was cobbled together to build a position statement persuasive enough to influence opinion and attitudes. I also separated the beliefs from the attitudes that people (i.e., various people in the community, merchants, and elected officials) had about the use of plastic shopping bags—because messages were crafted differently at different times during

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the process, depending on whether the focus was an attitude or belief.

Based on the social psychology experiments demonstrating how the assimilation-contrast effect works (Bless & Schwarz, 2010), I adapted the findings in a proposal to ban plastic bags to put language into a position statement that made certain aspects of the two opinions (pro-ban and anti-ban) appear to be closer than they really were and other language that made the anti-ban position appear even further away from a reasonable perspective than it actually was. No facts were changed and nothing was said that could not be verified and supported by facts. It was the contrasted perspectives that enabled a credible argument.

Shortly after I (together with a friend who has marketing expertise) collected and organized all the available relevant facts to support the idea of a ban on plastic bags, it was clear to me that my friend and I were outsiders to the political process that would be necessary to result in a ban. Therefore, a few ''friendly'' elected representatives were asked to meet with us for the purpose of gaining their support. The meeting was a good one and the work of moving the idea through the political process was turned over to the elected officials. They verified the facts given to them and were very effective in bringing the idea through necessary committees and approvals. Without their considerable help in adding credibility and pressure, the initiative would have likely withered. Still, the arguments presented to this group to get their approval were crafted on the basis of several psychological studies and theories (Festinger, 1962; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953).

At the town hall hearing where a vote among elected representatives would determine the fate of the proposed ordinance to ban the plastic shopping bags from use, we focused on two sources of social pressure: supporting emails from key private citizens and high school students. The high school students were previously approached to ascertain their interest in the proposed ordinance. They were eager to help. As a result, their conversations with their parents helped with community support (which cannot be counted on because it is normally lethargic on matters like this) and they were asked to show up at the town hall when the vote was taken. Despite the initial resistance of elected town officials, almost none of them could vote against a ban because the town hall auditorium was packed with private citizens and dozens of high school students who wanted the ordinance to pass. The historic ordinance passed with a huge majority vote. Central to every communication about this initiative were the theory and research findings that people are more eager to avoid loss than to make a gain (Kahneman, 2011). This is a powerful psychological concept and should be integrated into every green initiative.

The focal article authors suggested some methods, apparently as strategies. Good strategy is necessary, but the identification of specific tactics to overcome resistance to change and bring in more powerful allies with public support and pressure is far more important. Perhaps the first critical tactic is to identify and bring in the ''right'' kind of political support. This will include consumer groups, private citizens (high school kids are great), elected politicians, and appointed officials. Without the direct involvement of individuals who will be affected by the green initiative, the initiators will be regarded as outsiders or fringe players.

The use of methods like goal setting and performance measurement, which are central to what organizational psychologists do, is definitely not enough of a ''methods arsenal.'' Industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists need to go out of their discipline and pull methods and ideas from other disciplines, including social psychology, personality theory, and political psychology. There are methodological windfalls that can be applied. For example, in a project that was aimed at preventing the ill-advised removal of trees on steep hillsides because of the fear of forest fire, the psychological focus was on explaining to a community

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that the proverbial cure was worse than the disease. Specifically, the probability of an uncontrolled fire was extremely low, but the removal of the trees was sought by a few highly vocal people who did not take into account the highly probable subsequent effects of wide-scale logging in their area. The highly probable effects on the community would have been flooding, dangerous erosion, potential landslides, loss of habitat for countless animals and birds, higher winds, increased heavy fog, mini-climate change, an ugly landscape filled with stumps and a big drop in real estate values for hundreds of homeowners. Heavy downside, not much upside.

With a solid rationale behind an effort to save the trees, a very small number of people in the community drew up a petition, got a lot of signers, and delivered it to an elected town official. One of these people was a well-known actor and he was urged to use his contacts to bring in more social pressure. Other kinds of social pressure were brought to bear on key elected officials and on the company that planned to do the logging. In all communications to the community and officials, the argument backing the green initiative was crafted in the same way as described above. Most of the logging was halted.

Finally, it is critical to get the underlying rationale and strategy, the psychological science, and the support and tactics right the first time. If an attempt is beaten back, it will discourage supporters and it will be much harder on another try. Psychologists who want to be active in green initiatives would benefit tremendously from first exploring how psychological warfare works and understanding the social psychology findings on resistance to change, propaganda, and public opinion. Especially helpful is Daniel Kahneman's research that shows that people are generally more interested in avoiding loss than making a gain. ''Green'' psychology requires methods that are not tentative and that are sound and strong enough to push through the resistance that will surely present. Both the psychological science and the energy behind the initiative need muscle for it to be successful.

Environmental advocacy by psychologists can be very powerful. Most psychologists are accustomed to following or applying methodologies, but doing this when somebody is trying very hard to stop the process is not easy. The application of good psychological processes can make a big difference with green initiatives if the psychologists are patient, thorough, and very determined.

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