

***Can Business Save the Earth? Innovating Our Way to Sustainability*, by Michael Lenox and Aaron Chatterji. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018. 200 pp.**

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With the alarmist title *Can Business Save the Earth?* Michael Lenox and Aaron Chatterji want to bring attention to the daunting challenge we currently face: guaranteeing survival on Earth in the future. However, the authors initial framing —“Earth does not need saving. . . . The real question is what will life on Earth be for us if we fail to address the environmental challenges we face?” (7)—suggests that “Can Business Save Human Permanence on Earth?” could also work as a provocative title.

In recent years academic publications have been rife with discussions of the role business plays in solving societal grand challenges. Grand challenges are defined as “formulations of global problems that can be plausibly addressed through coordinated and collaborative efforts” (George et al. 2016, 1880). Lenox and Chatterji’s book may be seen as a set of recipes attempting to prescribe how business can address what many would regard as one of these societal grand challenges—sustainability. The authors focus on two main ingredients: innovation and collaboration.

The book begins with an introductory chapter that portrays business as savior. Why savior? Business is one of the world’s influential institutions, and without its involvement in addressing sustainability challenges, sustainability itself becomes mission impossible. The authors call for innovation to solve societal grand challenges and define their objective as “unlocking the innovative potential of markets and the role we all need to play, whether we run large companies, power the fountainhead of invention, finance impactful investments or simply spend our hard-earned money at the grocery store every week” (3). They describe business as a savior, not as a form of admiration but as a call for action: it is the responsibility of business, and within its interests, to work towards saving the planet. After the introductory chapter, the authors proceed to identify and examine four relevant stakeholders of the sustainability innovation puzzle: the innovator, the manager, the investor, and the customer.

Chapter 2 focuses on the innovator. Innovation is crucial for businesses to transform unsustainable practices. However, not just any type of sustainable innovation will do; needed are disruptive innovations that are complex and require joint efforts from all stakeholders. The innovative process will not happen in a vacuum; this chapter delineates examples of collaborations for successful disruptive sustainable technologies to flourish, involving suppliers, governments, universities, research labs, and even competitors. One of these collaborations is open innovation for sustainability, though I wonder if Lenox and Chatterji could have made a stronger case for real openness on sharing innovative practices to solve urgent sustainable issues rather than protecting it through green patents. Many are involved in trying to find sustainable solutions, and if the challenge is as urgent as it seems to be, sharing sustainable discoveries with everyone, including competitors, may be the wisest move.

Chapter 3 emphasizes the role of managers as heroes. As the primary stewards of business activities managers incur responsibility to act sustainably. First, there are low-hanging-fruit actions that can help companies become more environmentally and economically efficient: lean eco-efficient practices save both natural and financial resources, green companies satisfy employees who are likely more productive, and green supply-chain practices contribute to a firm's overall sustainability. Yet it is important to note here that the authors insist that managers cannot base their actions solely on low-hanging fruit. They call upon managers to trigger disruptive sustainable innovation that will change their *modus operandi* and allow them to abandon unsustainable practices. Once this is achieved, the goal becomes to grow and gain market share from unsustainable companies until these either eco-innovate as well or are displaced from the market. The authors' manager-hero analogy parallels recent works borrowing from literary criticism to claim that addressing sustainability requires helping managers develop an emotional connection with the sustainability challenge. One way to achieve this is to make them identify with heroes from epic stories who save the planet, while also ensuring that they understand its tragedies, the mystery and science fiction associated with disruptive sustainable technologies, and the folklore associated with preconceived ideas on what sustainability means (Montiel, Antolin-Lopez, and Gallo 2018).

Chapter 4 identifies the investor as visionary. Lenox and Chatterji examine the different kinds of funding sources that can push disruptive sustainable innovation. Private funding, debt financing, and public funding all play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable innovation. In addition, recent years have brought a proliferation of venture incubators, accelerators, crowdfunding, and philanthropists investing in sustainability. Investments in all these forms are crucial to accelerate disruptive innovations and, once again, collaboration among investment agencies through partnerships will facilitate the process.

In chapter 5, the authors label the customer as the king—again, an analogy with deep roots in literature. Customers, they argue, are indeed kings of the sustainability movement. Ultimately, the argument goes, it is customers who possess the power to displace unsustainable companies from the market, although doing so requires reliable and transparent information on the sustainable attributes of the goods and services we consume. This is not a trivial matter. The authors discuss mechanisms to provide such information through consistent labeling and certifications. NGOs and activists are also identified as powerful players to promote change in the consumer landscape towards sustainability.

The book concludes by claiming that a system of forces needs to operate as the catalyst for sustainability. Once again, the authors emphasize that collaboration among innovators, managers, investors, and customers, but also among public agencies, universities, activists, NGOs, foundations, the media, and individual citizens, must flourish in what they refer to as a “constellation” for sustainability.

A common transversal theme prevails in the book: collaboration, collaboration, and collaboration. The authors make this point crystal clear: we will not successfully tackle the sustainability grand challenge without cross-collaboration among all relevant stakeholders. The text is replete with ideas about open innovation, collective action,

research-and-development alliances, industrial ecology, and all sorts of partnerships: cross-sector, multi-sector, and public-private, to name a few. Although not explicitly stated, one can sense that to address sustainability, the authors would have us put aside the traditional boundaries and roles expected by the different stakeholders and explore new roles. These boundaries have already blurred through recent activity; examples include CEOs acting as activists, social movements turning into sustainable ventures, and customers acting as social media whistleblowers.

It is not until the book's conclusion that Lenox and Chatterji more explicitly communicate the urgency of the sustainability challenge when they state that we must "avoid . . . potentially devastating outcomes" (152) and prescribe business as part of the solution. I agree with the optimistic notion of moving past the idea that business is merely the crux of the problem and embracing its potential to be part of the solution. Clearly the solution depends in part on collaborative efforts from all relevant stakeholders.

This book is a must-read for scholars and practitioners not only in the fields of business ethics and sustainability, but also for wider audiences in such areas as public policy, economics, and engineering. Among the book's contributions is its translation of complex environmental jargon and scholarly constructs into ideas that readers can easily digest. One deficiency is a shortage of specific and concrete examples of systems that have already addressed sustainability challenges—cases in which relevant stakeholders (innovators, managers, investors, and customers) have successfully engaged with one another. On the whole, though, Lenox and Chatterji do a fine job integrating facts, hard evidence, and research findings, which are crucial for a sophisticated understanding of how business leaders should tackle sustainability.

REFERENCES

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