

The Development of Managerial Competencies: A Collaborative Inquiry into the Practice of Sustainability

Marcos Bidart Carneiro de Novaes, Janette Brunstein

This is a work about human and social management of organisations. It is a work focused on managers' reality, in which the interests of various stakeholders are taken into account, and not merely those of shareholders. The work reflects on organisational-level questions and possibilities for sustainability. The general objective was to investigate, using a co-operative methodology, the competency development of managers, by introducing the sustainability discussion in this organisation's environment. Paradoxes and ambiguities appeared to be significant for the development of competencies. These aspects, ignored in uncritical business programmes, were fundamental in broadening the vision of the managers involved.

Key words: sustainability, sustainable development, competencies, hospitality, co-operative inquiry

1. Introduction

Humanity is currently living in a time of existential concern over large-scale risks provoked by human action, which could affect everyone on the planet (Beck, 2007). Society fears floods, catastrophes linked to extreme temperature increase or decrease, great famines, social disturbances and mass migrations, with risks linked to global warming and climate change. Society is also

discussing the risks inherent to the accumulation of waste on land, in the sea, and even in the atmosphere.

There has been a resurgence of the dialectical contradiction between the dominant paradigm of neoliberal capitalist expansionism and its antithesis, the eco-socialist paradigm (Santos, 2007). The first worldview has undergone commercial and industrial revolutions and now finds itself in what can be described as a 'financial revolution'. Its antithesis is unfolding into radical environmental, conservationist, preservationist and political ecology currents, and is now manifesting itself in the form of the 'new social movements'. According to Beck (2007, p. 3) a paradigm shift is taking place and "It is becoming apparent that the sovereignty of the market represents a fatal threat given the danger of catastrophic climate change."

Sustainable development, eco-development or sustainability are terms that have been conceived of differently since the initial impulse given by the 1972 Stockholm Conference and the 1987 Brundtland Report. These terms arose in the scope of the discussion about climate change and as proposals to solve these problems. Veiga (2010, p. 51) warns about the fact that renouncing the idea of development and using only the term sustainability can be "[...] an ideological trap invented to perpetuate asymmetric relationships between dominant minorities and dominated majorities, within countries and between countries." To some critical authors, the term sustainable development is also impregnated with neoliberal economic notions (Banerjee, 2003). As with the term 'development', 'sustainable development' (SD) means practices, policies and meanings that resulted in damage for most of the world's population, especially the rural populations of the developing world. Terms like sustainability and SD are still being constructed in the scope of colonialist and exploitative thought.

This definition difficulty is inserted in the profound questions of paradigmatic shocks, originating from the dialectical contradictions exposed in the opening paragraphs. It is a theme that covers diverse aspects and social, environmental, cultural, technological and economic interests which often remain obscure, impenetrable and unspoken. Even so, in this work we chose to use the term 'sustainability', due to its recurrence in academic studies about business and in the organisational environment itself.

As a result, society requires organisations and their managers to position themselves in relation to sustainability. Managers, as individual actors and/or collectively with their teams, are the ones who, on the one hand, suffer the structural influence of the systems in which they are inserted and, on the other hand, reflect on these influences and propose modification. At times, managers decide which technologies to favor and whether or not to use renewable energy sources.

This is a work about people who are being pressured to make increasingly fast decisions, taking into account increasingly complex interests. It is particularly an investigation of the reality of managers, who are being called to participate in a broad mentality shift. Many stakeholders place hopes on these managers, and/or pressure them to perform a structural transformation of beliefs and values as a condition for our society's perennial existence. This process is related to competency development, as the changes and transformations which occur in society are translated into organisational plans and strategies.

Competencies relate to action, to what people do in the workplace, hence the importance of studying sustainability from the viewpoint of human agency. But this agency depends on the construction of a sustainable mentality, which sometimes implies breaking with ways of thinking and with cultural roots in the organisation. A change of this order, in mentality and in action, towards social and environmental awareness and maturity, requires investigative processes of an interventionist order, such as the collaborative investigation proposed here. This is because the development of competencies of this nature, to be significant, must occur both on the level of technical abilities and on the level of values.

Thus, the general objective of this work is to investigate, in a co-operative manner, the competency development of managers at an organisation by introducing the sustainability discussion in this organisation's environment. The specific objectives are: (i) to analyse how the question of sustainability is understood and signified by corporate actors; (ii) in what way the sustainability discussion, interlinked with practice, alters these meanings and leads to competent actions; (iii) to understand and problematise if and when aspects

linked to sustainability and its relationship with human action, in this specific study field, surface.

The knowledge gap that must be filled is the understanding of how managers of a hospitality organisation develop new competencies as the sustainability notion is held up for discussion and translated into actions, including the competency of the manager's political participation as a social agent regarding sustainability. The path that must be followed is participatory and dialogic, a social construction that will be developed locally, and with the involvement and commitment of the managers who are cooperatively involved in the research. Competency development requires these participatory and dialogic aspects (Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 2006), which are fundamental in order to set in motion competent actions for the common construction of meanings for the work itself, for sustainability, and for the competencies needed to implement it.

Rationalist, behavioural and functionalist competency approaches spring only from companies' wishes for the behavior of their employees. They ignore the contexts and meanings attributed to work by the worker and other fundamental aspects, such as interactions with social reality, which are the base for construction of meanings and definitions (McKenna, 1999).

However, contradicting those mainstream views about competencies, interpretivist and phenomenological studies are beginning to arise, such as those by Sandberg (2000), Sandberg and Dall'Alba (2006) and Sandberg and Tagarma (2007). These studies suggest that the interpretations workers give to their work experiences are fundamental for the formation and development of work quality and competent action. These interpretations, and their changes over time, are seen as the significant elements for effective professional accomplishments. Based on the way organisational actors see their work and give it meaning, they can bring to the organisational agenda subjects such as ethics, morality, sustainability, high level relationships between people and so forth.

Decision-making and individual action originate from ideas and meanings about the situation in question; about the ideas of other people involved in the situation; about the evaluation of other people's reactions to the situation, or the actions of each person and their own ideas. This rich context of interac-

tions, allied to internalisation about what is right or wrong, and what is appropriate or compulsory, is what sets each person's actions in motion. Thus, says Sandberg (2000), the ways of conceiving and experiencing work are more important than its observable attributes. That is, attributes are in service of conception; they are activated by subjects and materialised in action guided by the meaning attributed to work.

When we consider competency development as something circular, reflective and dialectical, we see two main forms in which the understanding of work changes. There can be ways of maintaining or reinforcing the current way of acting and understanding or, "[...] when the purpose is to renew competencies, activities should be designed to 'break' the current circularity of our understanding of work and redirect them towards an alternative circularity of understanding" (Sandberg & Targama, 2007, p. 86). In this second sense, tensions and ambiguities resulting from different experiences can be beneficial and "[...] fertile soil for development" (ibid, p. 41).

It is based on this presupposition that this study proposes a collaborative investigation to analyse the change processes of meanings at work, with a view to sustainability purposes. The following investigation is situated in the time and space in which it occurred and its main stages are presented.

2. Situating the research in space and time

The work was developed by researchers in partnership with 20 managers, in eight hotels of a Brazilian hotel chain, with headquarters in the city of São Paulo and about a decade old. All the hotels are located in the region known as greater São Paulo, composed of the city of São Paulo and other neighbouring municipalities. The research began in May 2010 and ended in December 2011.

Three factors determined this choice. Firstly, there were the enormous pressures on the environment and social questions exerted by the 19 million inhabitants of greater São Paulo. Secondly, there was the absence, up to that point, of a sustainability project within the hotel chain in which the study took place. Thirdly, there was the interest observed among the managers

themselves for a joint construction of a sustainability project which had the support of the organisation's board.

The research was performed by two academic researchers, a man and a woman. The managers acted as co-researchers, diagnosing practices deemed unsustainable, visiting suppliers and co-operatives, researching solutions for their areas and implementing them in their hotels. This group's role was therefore more practical, while the researchers who authored this work were responsible for facilitating meetings, provoking reflection and theorising.

The research unfolded in three main stages. In practice, these stages are not as clearly delimited, but here they are shown that way for didactic reasons, to systematise the investigation for readers.

Table 1: Research stages

Stage	Characterization	Duration
1. Diagnosis and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meetings with the board of the hotel group to obtain authorizations for the research - Meeting with a pilot group of eight managers to define availability and expectations for performing the work - Meetings between the two researchers to define research protocols 	2 months (2010, May-June)
2. Action and reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three meetings between the whole group of managers - Individual and continuous visits by the researcher to the hotels - Interviews with the managers individually - Practical actions by the managers in the field 	14 months (2010 - 2011, July - August)
3. Theorisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consolidation of the field findings and managers' practical actions - Another reflective meeting held with the whole group - Theorisation on behalf of the researchers 	4 months (2011, September – December)

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2011) projects that in 2030 the number of travellers (leisure and business) in the world could reach 1.8 billion people. There are estimates which consider tourism and hospitality to be responsible for 5% of the world's CO₂ emissions. The two industries often use non-renewable energy and water sources and produce high volumes of solid and liquid waste. Since 1991 there have been calls for responsible tourism based, among other aspects, on respect for the environment. Tourism

thus practiced should satisfy the economic needs of establishment owners, as well as the needs of the surrounding populations and nature.

The tourism industry has been under pressure since the 1960s to develop a 'greener' posture towards its surroundings (Knowles et al., 1999). Although it is increasingly common to seek consumer awareness, adequate waste treatment and employee training, a series of problems linked to more sustainable hospitality have also emerged since then.

There is clarity about conservationist postures when we study hotels that depend on nature and local culture for their economic survival. In big cities, this scenario becomes more complex, because it is more difficult to reveal the problems and needs behind a sustainable attitude. Global themes such as reduction of energy and water consumption, correct waste disposal and atmospheric pollution are interwoven with regional questions that are just as complex, if not more.

In order to obtain more clarity about managers' daily lives, and to empower them as research co-creators, we decided to use the co-operative investigation methodology.

3. Methodology

Co-operative inquiry is based on the works of Heron (1970, 1996), Reason (1994, 2003) and Heron and Reason (2006). The four forms of knowledge that emerge from the field when we work with co-operative inquiry can be briefly described as: (1) experiential knowledge, which is involved in being present, face to face, in the meeting with another person, place, or thing, the immediate perception and empathy of the relationships we participate in; (2) presentational knowledge, or the intuitive, imaginary or creative forms that present themselves, such as drawing, collages, paintings, sculptures, poems, songs, stories, drama, movement, dance, etc. The findings presented in the following session originate from meetings, creative dynamics, discussion groups and reflexive dialogues (Sandberg & Dal'Alba, 2006), emails exchanged between group members, and blogs and websites constructed jointly by the participants. The main source of records is the researcher's field notebook, along with photographs and recordings; (3) propositional knowl-

edge, in the form of theories and ideas about the theme studied, an informative spoken or written product, as presented in the fifth section of this work; (4) practical knowledge, which is 'knowing how to do something', or new manual or technical abilities, interpersonal competencies and policies and knowledge developed by the individual, group and community (Heron, 1996).

The co-operative method of investigation aimed to allow managers to reflect on their conceptions of sustainability and launch competent actions in this field. The intention was to intervene in reflection and action cycles that could boost the emergence of new meanings and, consequently, new management conduct.

4. Presentation of findings

As shown in Table 1, in May 2010 an initial diagnosis began of the hotel managers' understandings and an exploration of their interests, along with the opening of a communicative space. As Sandberg and Dall'Alba explain (2006), every desired change in subjects' understanding must be based on a pre-understanding of the way these individuals think. Knowing the structure and logic of their thinking allows researchers to act with more assertiveness, and to boost more significant changes.

From the very first meeting, the concept of sustainability, and the desire to influence themes related to it, were approached as very concrete rather than abstract things, linked to what can be done now to benefit future generations. Some managers showed an understanding that, due to their age, from 32 to 40, the future in terms of sustainability is relevant to them. Talking about the theme is not an ethereal practice, but is linked to their retirement, their plans for the near future and their enjoyment of old age.

After obtaining the required authorisations and confirming with a pilot group of managers that they were interested in participating in the research, the second stage, action and reflection, was initiated. The group was asked at the first meeting of this new research stage to reflect creatively and express their views about sustainability. With no initial theoretical stimulation, two

possibilities for the future arose. The groups gave the following names to their visions of the future:

Green Building Vision: Market trend. Water re-use, natural lighting, energy saving. Economic axis: a project has to be economically sustainable. Social and environmental axis: people interact with a view to maintaining the ecosystem. Information speed: internet, see what others understand and are doing for sustainability.

Mad Max Vision: View of the future that arose 30 years ago. The planet is totally used up. We run the risk of fighting for survival and for resources. More natural disasters linked to global warming are occurring and will occur.

(taken from the field notebook)

These visions match the technocentric and ecocentric positions described by Gladwin, Kennedy and Krause (1995). There are advocates of a technocentric current or paradigm for sustainability. Solutions for environmental problems arise from scientific progress, when seen from this perspective. In complete opposition, there are the advocates of an ecocentric paradigm, which proposes the immediate suspension of economic growth as the solution for long-term environmental and social problems. As a result of the dispute above, therefore, a third viewpoint emerges. This new, sustainocentric, viewpoint aims to help overcome these apparently irreconcilable views, which are trapped in mutual negation and open confrontation mechanisms. There are signs that a green technocentrism is moving closer to an ecocentrism that accepts certain types of development. Non-radical ecocentrism even accepts ecodevelopment, with certain practices that can be considered traditional organizational ones, like green building and production.

These two visions also mirror the dual visions that Sachs (2000) calls cornucopian or catastrophist. When they were invited to translate these visions into ideas that could be applied in the organisation, the group quickly and practically moved on to 'what can be done'. They then focused on the technological or economic-environmental concerns that are most widespread in the media and most easily associated with sustainability. The group quickly lost sight of a vision which included the planet and took a reductionist direc-

tion, talking about what could be operationalised. This logic had the end result of ‘technifying’ the discussion about sustainability.

One phrase that was used by one of the managers at the first meeting of this second stage of research mirrored the conflict between rich and poor, this time charged with prejudice: “We need to spread the idea to the general population, to the masses that create the most waste.” The group was thus once again mentioning the belief that the ‘poor’ are the most responsible for pollution. As the research developed, it became clear that this group had no institutionalised voice to represent them. That is, they can be pointed to as the cause of the problem, but nobody is listening to their understanding of the theme and their opinions on it.

The managers also expressed a constant concern with the operational and with time pressures. When the group noticed their own impatience and the fact that the team thinks in an excessively operational way, in terms of practical knowledge generation, it was a breakthrough for the researchers and the group itself. This seemed to be a characteristic of the way middle managers at this organisation act; the medium and long terms seem not to have a place on the agenda.

At a second meeting the group was invited, through the use of creative and expressive methods, to make other associations in relation to sustainability. Ideas linked to nature and physical-biological surroundings came up, but there were also ideas about culture, technologies, social routines and the influence of family ties. This expression gave the researchers elements created by the group itself to deepen the sustainability dialogue. The researchers were thus able to show, for example, that just as environmental aspects frequently appeared in definitions, expressed as ‘care with nature’, there were also manifestations of aspects of ‘man’s interaction with nature’, such as vegetable patches, farms and gardens. When the group was later asked about how to bring these expressions to their daily life, creative ideas arose, such as vegetable patches on the hotel roofs, or gardens tended by the managers themselves or by employees rather than outsourced firms.

The group was at that point already presenting the deep contradiction that emerged, between sustainability in the broader sense, and the real individual and collective possibilities of acting, giving rise to the expansive develop-

ment pointed out by Engeström (2001). This author writes about an expansive development for individuals and collectives based on these contradictions and conflicts, reflected in changes in rules and structures, according to the following steps: (1) as the contradictions emerge, the communities question existing practices; (2) an analysis of the situation leads to an understanding that the primary contradiction cannot be resolved with the existing knowledge; (3) the activity needs to be redefined following a questioning of basic assumptions and understandings about the work; (4) new activity models are implemented, causing new contradictions, depending on how deep the questions formerly asked went; (5) changes in individual habits and work practices can no longer be seen as a singular action by an individual or group. These steps do not necessarily follow each other, and recurrence and reflexivity may occur at any moment. Emerging organisational practices may succumb to previously existing power relationships within the organisation, as well as to resistance from people or groups.

During this moment of reflection, contradictions and conflict, the group returned to what seemed to be their comfort zone, the immediate applicability and concrete definition of projects and actions. When it came to rapid operationalisation, the group gained energy and everyone was mobilised, in a vivacious discussion with clear methods. When the proposal was reflection, the movement lost energy and motivation for dialogue.

At the third meeting in this second stage of research, the possibilities for each hotel's initial action were analysed. This meeting was marked by the first political reflections, about whether authorisation needed to be obtained from the company's corporate area for certain actions. For the first time in the discussions with the managers, the importance of connecting with the board, defining responsibilities within the group, mobilising people and creating networks emerged. The researchers saw a preference for projects with actions that can be considered as intended to 'change others'. These included training employees and other ways of raising the awareness of subordinates. Other actions targeted creation of norms, such as generating letters of intention in relation to the environment or sustainability in the broader sense. This proposal reveals the fact that the managers are up to date about what is being done in the corporate world and with socio-

environmental reports. Even though this element remained an intention until the end of the investigation, it must be considered relevant.

A great speed of practical knowledge generation was always observed, since the first meeting. The managers gave clear priority to environmental, technological and economic solutions in the ‘technocentric’ sense, without entering into detailed explanations or deepening the discussions. They shared practices and concrete actions, because what was implemented at one hotel was quickly copied at others.

Three great topics had emerged until this moment in the research, out of the interviews and informal conversations held with the managers. Firstly, the ambiguous relationship with shareholders and the difficulties of negotiating subjects with them that did not present obvious financial gain. Secondly, there was the discussion about whether clients did in fact desire a sustainable hotel, or whether they saw it as a value. Thirdly, the question of solid waste emerged, the most paradoxical and broad theme for hospitality ventures within big cities.

Regarding the first theme, the managers pointed out problems in making shareholders see the possibility of indirect gains via ‘green marketing’ for attracting clients. They also did not seem prepared to prove to shareholders that there were possibilities for reducing costs in the medium and long terms. Regarding the shareholder question, one of the managers stated during an interview:

Look, in the moments when we are in contact with them, which are rare, like, if we stop to think, in a year we have, at the most, four moments when we are in contact with them. Whether it’s in person, face to face, or on the phone. They never said anything about: “Oh, how are you disposing of your waste? What actions are you...” They never brought up the sustainability subject. The investor is still very – and I believe this is general – he’s very tied up with the financial return of the business. They want more, more, all the time. We have quite an ethical and consistent investor here, but even so he’s a very demanding guy. Actually, we have 23 investors here, and only two of these 23 participate, they are council members. One of them owns gas stations, he has six gas stations here. So, like, he’s a very consistent guy, he’s very ethical, but he never asked us either what measures we have adopted in relation to the subject.

(Transcript of interview with Hotel 3 manager)

As for the second theme, the posture of guests, there seemed to be scepticism about their behaviour. The managers understand that there are consumers nowadays who are more aware, but when it comes to low cost hotels such as the ones in the chain, the impression is that clients' habits are not at all sustainable. In fact, the managers talked about clients who had left the air conditioning on all day in their room, so that it would be cool or warm when they came in. Even at the hotels which have the system of using room keys to activate and turn off electricity, some clients used business cards, expired credit cards or other objects to keep the air conditioning on all day. There are also many reports of water consumption abuse:

So, for the guy who comes here, the end client, who is the guy at the end, there is an option which really influences the question of pollutants caused by washing clothes, he could easily hang up his towel again. And, for this action, there's a sign in the bathroom, where it says, if he hangs up his towel it's because he's going to reuse his towel, it won't be changed. If he leaves the towel on the floor, then there's a change. Even with this action, we never heard anyone say: "Oh, it's really cool that you're doing this, that's great. Look, I hung up my towel, I contributed."

(Transcript of interview with Hotel 1 manager)

The solid waste theme generated great interest among the managers from the beginning. This subject was easily identified as a practical action area, with interrelated impacts on the economy, the community and the environment. Adequate waste disposal was seen as beneficial for the environment and a potential source of financial revenue for socially-needy groups, whether waste pickers and their co-operatives or hotel employees. Besides, this set of actions would not require immediate investments from the hotels.

Another manager's speech clarifies the choices available to these professionals over the course of the process. Apart from difficulties with shareholders and clients, with their subordinates they opt for the actions which are easiest to perform, that is, those of a technological nature, which do not depend on awareness, talks, persuasion and training in order to be generated and maintained.

Our employees come from quite a humble part of the population. So, people don't understand. "Oh, but what's the point of that? Why shouldn't I

pour fat down the drain and put it into a PET bottle instead, take it somewhere? That's a lot of work, I live far away, it's a dirt road, it's a hard trip for me every day." So, these actions that we had in place, for raising the team's awareness, for using resources, for example, turning the light off, closing the tap tightly, etc. These actions were kind of hard to implement. The most practical actions, which depended on us, let's say, where you go and change a light bulb, where you go and put a flow regulator in the shower, where you call a company and a guy comes to collect your oil, these actions went ahead and are less difficult, I think, because you go, do it and it's done. You don't need maintenance work, let's say, where you have to go over and over the same thing. And I think sustainability work with the population is like that, you have to keep reminding people...

(Transcript of interview with Hotel 4 manager)

A visit to one of the biggest solid waste collection and recycling co-operatives in São Paulo was organised by the managers themselves. When they left, the managers were unanimous about the impression the 'trash pickers' (Pinheiro, 2012) work had made on them. The managers recognised that the pickers knew more about environmental laws than they did, and had strength of purpose, assertiveness, personal and business dignity and business organisation like many profit-based companies. Here, in this article, this group of workers is called "recyclable-material pickers", according to the terminology used by the group itself.

There is specific city legislation in São Paulo which sets a maximum limit for hotel waste removal. Anything above this limit requires hiring specialised companies or recycling co-operatives. Research conducted by the managers themselves in other São Paulo hotels has shown four forms of dealing with solid waste: (1) full adaptation to the legal framework and hiring of specialised companies for waste collection; (2) informal waste recycling and sale of recyclable material to recyclable material pickers for a minimal price: the revenue will go towards parties and collective shopping for the children of the hotel cleaning staff; (3) irregular removal of additional waste by public services, with bribes paid to state employees at the waste-collecting system. The hotels that act in this way are aware of the existing risks and also that this system is unsustainable and could even be doubly expensive; and (4)

inertia, that is, some establishments did nothing during the time the research was unfolding, waiting for greater legal clarity or the presence of inspection.

The last meeting took place in September 2011 (meeting of the third research stage as in Table 1). Its goal was to evaluate the group's and the researcher's actions and reflections about how the managers had developed as professionals, individually and as a team, both in meanings and actions. A small initial impulse was enough for the group to begin giving examples of better energy and water-resource use. They spoke about replacing bulbs, about water-consumption regulators installed in the showers, and about new technologies used for gas consumption.

One of the managers stated that these aspects had been the easiest, because they depended on decisions from the managers themselves and a certain ability to 'camouflage' actions within budgets. They said that if certain technological innovations were presented to shareholders initially as costs, they would be vetoed. But if they had the courage to divide the costs into installments that fit the budget and implement the changes, most of the time they could demonstrate the success they had achieved in terms of economy and cost reduction. When, however, greater investment was needed for these technological innovations, they became difficult or impossible. It must be noted that the managers referred to this ability to make the proposals 'fit' the budgets, but not to the competence to negotiate them openly, clearly showing an attitude of avoiding confrontation with shareholders.

There was no open talk of the relationship with nature itself, protection of vegetation or the chain of production considered as a whole and its implications for the environment. The managers stated that when economic-financial gain was not clear, it was difficult to adopt sustainable postures when negotiating with high management. This is because, they said, talking beyond financial aspects takes up time in the day, and time is perhaps the most valuable resource. They said that going beyond financial gain cannot be expressed in obvious and numerical language, but means discussing new beliefs and trying to modify values. That is, they show they understand that sustainable decisions and actions require new value hierarchies and that the time invested in these actions reflects to what extent the sustainable strategy is present in the company's life.

One of the managers brought up the case of a recent flood in one of the hotels, caused by a nearby river, and the impact it had had on business. This made the other managers recall instances of glass broken by storms, tiles destroyed by hail, etc. The managers confirmed that they were taking more adaptive measures all the time, changing floors, buying equipment that is more easily removed in the case of floods and taking out new insurance coverage. These examples clearly made the other managers think. They pointed out that these environmental matters were being added to daily problems, demanding new learning and postures in face of the climate crisis.

The managers spoke openly about how they had become aware, over the course of the investigation, that in the beginning they had insisted on ‘educating’ the cleaning ladies because they had some power over them. But when it came to clients and investors, the power relations were of another kind, forcing them to deal with more complex negotiations. “We can train the cleaning lady, but we can’t train the investor,” was the phrase used. This posture demands other abilities than those of a manager with merely hierarchical power; the ‘meaning management’ competencies proposed by Sandberg and Tagarma (2007) and the political competencies pointed out by Brunstein and Boulos (2011) are necessary here.

Regarding the daily urgencies that make it necessary to act quickly and focus on the short term, the managers began to understand from experience that, in a way, it is their own mentality and understanding of their professional role that leads them to seek these urgencies instead of reaching for medium and long term gains.

As a last reflection, the managers stated that the sustainability theme seemed even more complex to them now. They no longer saw the matter as something that could be resolved operationally, but rather as a challenge that would require time and energy. In a deeply heartfelt statement, one of the managers stated that the sustainability work had, on the one hand, brought them closer together but, on the other hand, left him personally with a ‘feeling of abandonment and loneliness’. This is because he didn’t see a partnership coming from shareholders, clients and most collaborators. The group’s silence and the respectful glances and gestures of agreement towards this

manager showed that the feeling was not an isolated one, but belonged to the group.

5. Analysis and discussion of results

All the themes raised during the research were marked by contradictions and conflicts, paradoxes and ambiguities. The greatest contradiction perhaps lay in understanding the role of shareholders. These had at first been understood as a protective element to which respect is owed, because they provide the investment that makes the venture possible. The investors, however, began to be seen also as an obstacle to more significant actions in sustainability terms, as they prioritised financial return. These internal and external debates provoked the expansive development of the managers' awareness in the sense proposed by Engeström (2001) and a dialogic, reflexive and elliptical development as proposed by Sandberg (2007).

It must be stressed that this understanding of the contradictions did not yield radical changes, ruptures with the status quo, but it led to adaptations. An example, as mentioned above, is the development of abilities when presenting budgets for sustainable actions. This presentation began to be made in such a way that the financial aspects of actions, with payment in installments, could be better accepted by the shareholders. These small changes reveal an understanding of the problem at the same time that they show an inability to break with structures in a more forceful way.

Tensions and contradictions led the managers to reflect critically and go deeper into some themes. They expansively developed new meanings for their sustainability work, which brought the need for new competencies, especially the competency of integrating aspects that are sometimes contradictory, such as those presented below.

All the actions mentioned below were effectively implemented by the managers. As the purpose of the work was to provoke and observe changes in meanings and the resulting competent actions, the tables below serve to summarise the results.

The tables present some of the contradictions, and the development of meanings and competencies, as well as the actions undertaken by the managers over the course of the research.

Table 2: Vision of the future

Theme	Contradictory visions	
Vision of the future	<i>Mad Max</i> Total lack of resources	<i>Green Building</i> Technologies that save
Development	From an initial polarity between immobility and exaggerated optimism, the group moved to a pragmatic vision, focusing on small actions that caused rapid gains.	
Actions	Based on the criticalness and complexity concepts, the action focused on the less difficult aspects which were nonetheless considered important.	

The meanings and actions relating to the ‘future’ did not advance sufficiently to break a pragmatic, short-term action, as the sustainability paradigm demands. We can therefore consider that the comprehension of the scenario in which managers decide how to develop competencies (Sandberg, 2000) did not change, so they would not learn new attitudes. Those meanings and actions reinforced, however, the existence of the different sustainability paradigms pointed out by Gladwin et al. (1997).

This is an important aspect to consider, because, as competency development studies show, different meanings attributed to a specific theme will guide different forms of learning and provoke different short and medium-term actions.

Table 3: Understanding of shareholders’ role

Theme	Contradictory visions	
Shareholders	Facilitators Seen as partners in projects	Creators of obstacles Seen as adversaries in projects
Development	From a perception of shareholders as hierarchical, unquestionable leaders to a posture of negotiation and budgeting ability. The perception of the need to present and explain change proposals clearly was developed.	
Actions	Negotiations with investors to implement sustainable actions with ever-increasing focus on expected returns and actions that do not result in immediate costs, but in payment by installments that can be assimilated by investors.	

Managers began to put sustainable actions on the agenda for negotiating with shareholders, but this competency was restricted to enforcing initiatives that did not require additional costs. The managers revealed their competence in their ability to review budgets and even find a way around them to ensure that sustainable actions were underway. They did not, however, develop their persuasiveness to the point of convincing shareholders to invest significantly in sustainable technologies.

Table 4: Understanding of clients' role

Theme	Contradictory visions	
Clients	Service provision focus Revenue generator	Awareness focus Generator of environmental problems
Development	Had been seen as the only focus of service provision, and began to be seen as a group to be transformed in partnership in waste-reduction projects.	
Actions	Greater observation of client behaviour. Search for more efficient communication with clients about sustainability.	

The managers were able to identify the problems generated by client behaviour and sought to develop more competent mechanisms for communicating sustainability.

Table 5: Understanding of employees' role

Theme	Contradictory visions	
Employees	Laymen Group to be educated	Holders of knowledge Group that can contribute
Development	Began to be seen as a group that holds fundamental knowledge for sustainable actions, as well as the target group for these actions.	
Actions	Increase of autonomy for decisions about what to do with solid waste.	

Employee behavior also drew attention from the managers, who began to encourage sustainable actions and hold them responsible for the use and disposal of solid waste.

Table 6: Understanding of trash-picker co-operatives' role

Theme	Contradictory visions	
Recyclable waste -picker co-operatives	Source of problems Generates costs and health problems	Source of solutions Generates revenue and knowledge
Development	Waste that had been seen as a source of dirt and problems became an opportunity to generate revenue for social movements or employees. Picker cooperatives, which had been considered underprivileged parties, began to be seen as organised, dignified and important.	
Actions	Holding meetings with collector co-operatives and learning from these. Engaging in dialogue with hotel employees for a more democratic decision-making process. New partnerships were established with co-operatives and with individual pickers.	

The reflexive nature of the research allowed the group to suspend the battle between 'rich' and 'poor' within the organisation and with the external environment. When the work began, they talked about their subordinates on a lower hierarchical level as being responsible for the greater part of the 'dirt' in society and about co-operatives as needy people. Gradually the managers' consumption, as well as that of the hotel itself, started to be seen as the problem to be tackled. In this process, both the employees and the solid waste pickers began to be viewed not as part of the problem but as part of the solution.

Nothing is completely clear in the researched environment, confirming the vast field of non-knowing Beck pointed out (2007). The state is sometimes a friend, sometimes an enemy, as are the clients and the employees themselves. All parties seem to talk about sustainability and climate concerns, but they fight to maximise their financial interests. This lack of clarity between what is spoken and what is done results more in hall conversation and suspicions about how to act than in organised actions with other companies, state bodies, individual and corporate clients and non-governmental organisations. Independently of these more obscure questions, something became clear; the importance of an idealised sustainability, put into practice with the participation of all interested parties, from proposal creation to execution.

All of the above reflections about partnerships, negotiations with interested parties and co-operation with social movements lead to some final considerations about the development of the political competencies mentioned in the theoretical references. The great domination and coercion force that the managers found difficult to face was the mentality directed at short-term financial results or at maintaining property as it is.

6. Final considerations

When confronted with tensions, paradoxes and ambiguities, it is significant to act and intervene for the development of competencies, in the scope of the sustainability discussion. These aspects, ignored in uncritical business programmes, were fundamental in broadening the vision of the managers involved. Thus, the importance of working with competencies from a critical interpretivist optic is reinforced, as is the relevance of constructing professional development, in opposition to a functionalist logic with the primordial role of managing this development.

The consented opening of the organisation's black box made it possible to see the tension permeating the individual and the organisation. We saw the exhaustion caused by the contradiction between: unbridled consumption, boundless financial ambition and a narrow operational focus to meet these requirements on the one hand; and on the other hand, the notion that daily decisions are exactly what can destroy the possibilities for harmony in a sustainable future. Based on new understandings, the managers set new actions in motion, such as seeking alliances with recyclable waste pickers and other more democratic ways of living with their employees, and they began to yearn to influence strategic decisions about sustainability.

The managers recognised that more meetings and more time to reflect on the theme would lead to even deeper meanings and actions. This would be a way of 'decelerating' the daily process where action is focused on the short term. More time for the climate change theme and more focus on the future allowed reflections on sustainable 'being', and not only on 'doing' or 'having' sustainable machines and processes.

Some points stood out as implications for future research, especially participatory and co-operative research of the same nature as this one, but covering main executives, shareholders and shareholder councils. Its purpose would be to analyse and discuss whether these groups are acting for the development of competencies in the sustainability field, or if they are limited to discursive practices. Secondly, research with leaders committed to sustainability projects, to investigate if different worldviews lead to different actions, and which actions are more technological or social, or if financial results are being considered first. Based on research of this nature, corporate development or education actions for sustainability could be proposed, anchored in the worldview of organisational managers and leaders.

We are all involved in this great experiment with an unknown end, where individual and group actions represent a fundamental role. Will we depend on 'sustainable leaders' organised in traditional hierarchical forms? Or will the necessary changes come from the network of 'organisational activists'? Or yet, from a stronger presence of the state, which legislates and penalises to ensure the preservation of vegetation and forests, people and cultures and the dream of a fairer society? Or will all these parties be able to form new pressure groups, acting outside traditional politics and with new power games, to construct innovative social relations?

Nowadays, organisation management lies more in the struggles between conceptions, such as values, beliefs, mission and vision, than in the fight for physical bodies, as in the times of hard labour or even in the early industrial period. Now we are fighting for the world of ideas, for prevailing in the minds of people and putting different beliefs into practice. In the heat of these struggles, the idea of sustainable management, emerging from the collective consciousness of the business world, is still being forged. We hope for an ever-diminishing space for business actions that are not anchored in a social project that includes justice, balance and respect for individual and collective needs.

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About the authors

Marcos Bidart Carneiro de Novaes, PhD in Business Administration, Mackenzie Presbyterian University.

Janette Brunstein, PhD in Education, Professor and Researcher at the Programa de Pós-Graduação, Mackenzie Presbyterian University.

Authors' addresses

Marcos Bidart Carneiro de Novaes

Rua da Consolação, 930 - 01302-907 - São Paulo - SP - Brazil

BRASIL

Email: bidart@uol.com.br.

Janette Brunstein

Rua da Consolação, 930 - 01302-907 - São Paulo - SP - Brazil

BRASIL

Email: janette@mackenzie.br.

Corresponding author

Marcos Bidart Carneiro de Novaes

Rua Haddock Lobo, 867 ap. 235 - 01414-001 - São Paulo - SP - Brazil

BRASIL

Email: bidart@uol.com.br.