



SAN PATRIGNANGO AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY, A SYSTEMS APPROACH

HOW TO ADDRESS A SOCIAL NEED THROUGH BUSINESS

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Sustainability initiatives often fall short of their desired objective. While previous discussions have cited faults within an organization and/or the process it commits to when pursuing sustainability, sometimes the problem is due to the system into which an initiative is released. While there may be a tendency to fix the system from within or do the best with what's available, it can be extremely effective (albeit extremely challenging) to create a new system altogether.

This discussion is particularly relevant to the social dimension of sustainability—a domain that is often overshadowed by the ecological discussions around sustainability. The social dimension of sustainability, however, is perhaps more important in discussions on corporate sustainability because it focuses on a social need. The history and evolution of San Patrignano demonstrates how a leader can address a social need through business—a challenge that often requires a systems approach.

Different system

In 1976, Vincenzo Muccioli had a vision for reducing the increasing population of drug addicts in Rimini, Milan, and the greater Romagna region. Born to a wealthy family in 1934, he had acquired a 200-hectare estate called San Patrignano in the hills above Rimini. The primary activities conducted in San Patrignano were agriculture, wine harvesting and animal breeding. On a trip to Rimini, Muccioli saw two things that affected him deeply: 1) local youths lying in the streets, weak with malnutrition from drug use, and 2) locals who walked past them with condescending attitudes and comments. Muccioli's reaction was that these youths were sick and needed help from a different system to the one they were in.

After starting a tradition of inviting various drug addicts to his estate in San Patrignano for Christmas, Muccioli developed a more comprehensive plan. He felt that the best way to curb drug addiction was not through state subsidies, rehabilitation centers, or even therapists. Instead, Muccioli believed that people who had addiction problems should feel as though they were a part of something larger, a family or a community, and become functioning, contributing members of it. After discussing this plan with his wife, Muccioli invited a few drug addicts to live in San Patrignano, referring to them as his *ragazzi*, or kids. However, he had three conditions: 1) they had to discontinue all drug use, 2) they were not allowed to ask for any money from the state, and 3) they had to choose from a list of approximately 30 activities in order to make San Patrignano a self-sustaining community. There were no therapists in San Patrignano, merely small support groups among the previous drug users. Traditional therapy was replaced with community building and productive activities. From producing wine and cheese to soap and detergent, Muccioli's *kids* were able to support themselves and contribute to a greater community. Those who had not completed school had the option of sharing an apartment in a larger city to pursue their education.

Evolved into a community

From eight members in 1980, San Patrignano rapidly increased over the years, reaching 600 members in 1985 and 2,000 members in 1994. What began as a small family, evolved into a community and eventually became a completely sustainable society.

Beginning in the 1980s, guests at San Patrignano went beyond producing goods and services for themselves and started producing for sale. The number of industries San Patrignano competes in is astounding, ranging from agriculture to horse racing and furniture and almost everything in between. Guests are able to suggest new work activities as well, which further contributes to the diversity of activities pursued at San Patrignano. The revenues from these activities are reinvested into the community, which has extensive living quarters, a communal dining area, sports facilities, a medical center, and other facilities in addition to the workshops, agricultural plots and equestrian areas. Members of the community can, therefore, have their full suite of needs met and participate in a variety of activities outside of their daily workload.

The efficacy of this approach has been astounding and extremely successful. It is estimated that until 1994, San Patrignano had reduced the Italian government's spending on incarceration costs by approximately \$80 million. While only a few longitudinal studies have been conducted to compare the efficacy of San Patrignano to other drug rehabilitation programs, those that have been conducted affirm the efficacy of Muccioli's approach. Consequently, a variety of programs have been conducted to rehabilitate drug users through jobs—something that drug users have a very difficult time getting. San Patrignano has, therefore, ushered in a revolutionary approach to dealing with drug addicts. Whereas the majority of treatments for drug addicts focused on incremental changes to type of stay (outpatient versus residential) and length of therapy, Muccioli transformed the landscape by constructing a new system altogether.

The case of San Patrignano teaches leaders two important lessons: 1) the social dimension of sustainability is concerned with how an organization is responding to a social need in society, and 2) social sustainability sometimes requires entirely new systems to be created.

Conclusion

Is your organization meeting a social need? And how effective is it at doing so? If your organization's social sustainability strategy is failing, try thinking outside the box. Is there a better ecosystem you can create? In many ways, transformational innovation is born through this process.

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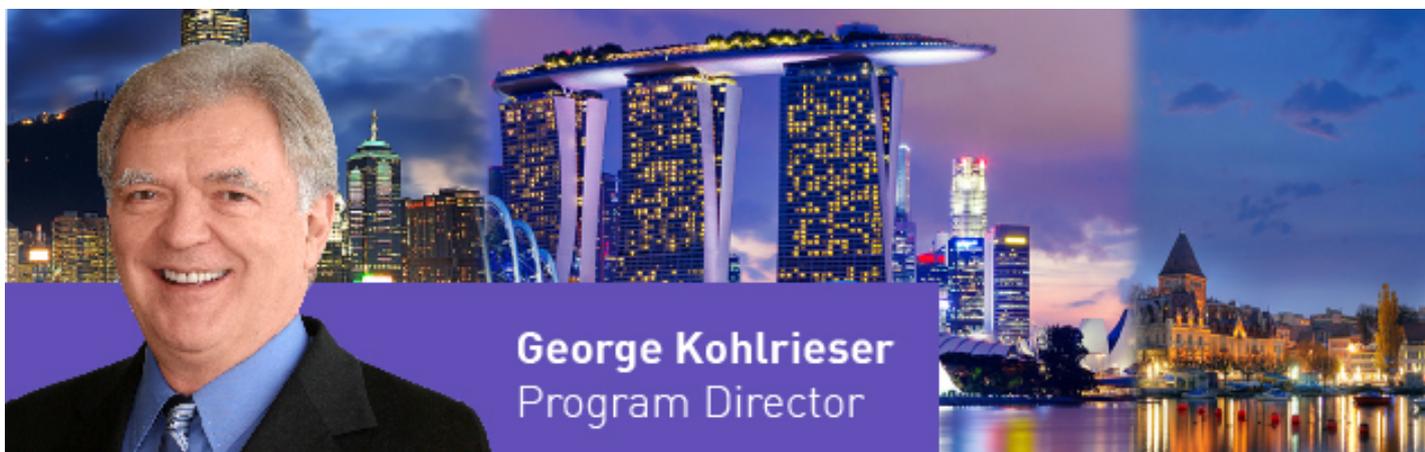


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