

# Hidden in plain sight: the easiest leverage for change

**Isabel Rimanoczy** discusses the 'Sustainability Mindset' and the path to an accelerated mindset transformation





**A** number of years ago, as I became increasingly aware of the numerous environmental and social challenges looming on the horizon, I felt deeply troubled by the lack of consciousness in the media, in government departments, in educational institutions, in businesses and in the general public. It was comforting though, to encounter some exceptions, and I wondered if the exceptional pioneers held the key for the transformation we needed. Why were they acting in a 'business as unusual' way, redesigning their products and manufacturing processes to achieve a more positive footprint on the planet? Did they perhaps have some knowledge or capabilities that we could intentionally develop for a generation of responsible citizens?

After years of research and interviews with business leaders, I was finally able to identify a number of aspects they indeed had in common, and which seemingly had played a major role in their launching a novel way of running their enterprises. These characteristics met an important criterion: they were not innate and we could develop them. They related not to the knowledge, but to the thinking (how they processed information), and to the being (how they showed up in their attitude to the world). This particular way of thinking and being was the lens through which they looked at our environmental realities. It formed the invisible underpinning of their actions. I have called it the 'Sustainability Mindset'

This was back in 2010. Fast forward to 2021. A quick scan of the news and social media makes it clear that public consciousness has risen, due to the number of fires and floods around the world, the rise in global temperature, the CO2 in the atmosphere and the political struggles to meet the 2030 agenda. Educational institutions, responding to the demands of a new generation, have multiplied their sustainability courses, programmes and certificates. The media, worldwide, is providing increased coverage of climate-related events that are impacting populations and organisations in all countries. Led by young entrepreneurs, businesses are combatting the challenges by adopting innovative approaches, among them the creation of a new business model – making profit through development of products and services that actually solve our real needs, as the list posted on AIM2Flourish shows.

Still, the changes are not happening at the speed we need. Some initiatives are hastily assembled efforts that result in mere ‘greenwashing’ and we have seen an abundance of technical short-term solutions which portend unwanted future impacts.

A few years ago, Pope Francis saw this coming: *“If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realise that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature.”* (Laudato Si’ #215).

Mindset ... this intangible construct has been appearing in other places. The seriousness of our environmental problems demands fundamental attitudinal change. Superficial stances will not suffice; we need a deeper mental approach. Nobel Peace Prize winner Prof. Muhammad Yunus addressed the 2019 Social Business Forum with these words: *“Unless we change our mind we cannot change the world.”* That same year, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J Mohammed called for a *“new paradigm shift to replace the*





*traditional sustainable development approach to realise the 2030 Agenda". More recently, we heard from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres: "We cannot solve our biggest problems if we do not come together. It is not only about institutions or processes. It is in the first instance about our mindset." And HH The Dalai Lama put it simply: "If we want to have a better and happier future, now is the time to examine the mindset of our present generation."*

### **How do we examine, replace, change a mindset?**

Here is the good news. It is easier than we think.

Since 2014, a network of academics has been gathering and exchanging research, thoughts and practices to address the 'unsustainable' mindset – and develop a mindset of sustainability. These academics are mostly outliers in their institutions, experimenting with new holistic ways to facilitate learning about generating sustainability, and doing it by focusing on the thinking and the being. The diversity of their contexts (55 different countries, 190 institutions) is a colourful tapestry of experiences and approaches. Their stories of students' paradigm transformation nurture each other's work and, by showing what is possible, inspire other colleagues.

Some use art, literature, service learning or reflective essays. Others use nature, dialogues, questions and interviews. In many cases, they report how easy it is to prompt this profound transformational shift: "it is as if the students are ready for this conversation", "they just need the language".

While the Sustainability Mindset is intangible, like a worldview or a paradigm, it is expressed in actions. Think of this student attending the MA Hospitality and Tourism course at Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey, who decided to create a professional oath for her school. Her rationale was clear: she experienced a powerful mindshift that transformed how she saw herself, her profession and her possibilities to make a difference in the world. What better leverage than to create a professional oath, as a vision of how new graduates entering the industry could see their contribution? Of course, many aspects of a Sustainability Mindset pervaded the text of the oath: thinking of long-term impacts, considering diversity and inclusion, the priceless value of an ecosystem, our carbon footprint, tourism as a way to educate and to support local farmers and business, etc.

The path to an accelerated transformation is readily available. Complementing the technological advances and broader understanding of the urgency, we now have ways to tap into the lever that can bring this change: educators can help by exploring the mindset that brought us here, and by developing a sustainability one.

Change from the inside out. Elementary, my dear Watson.



#### **About the Author**

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