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*Managing for Results Asks the Small Questions Managing for Sustainability Asks the Big Questions**

Results matter. They're necessary. But they're not sufficient.

Results matter because it is essential to show that a given investment was worth it. Investors want to know the bottom line. Did their dollars produce value? Were the time and resources well spent?

A poverty reduction initiative, for example, must show that it has helped reduce the number of households living on low income – or at least moved substantial numbers of households along the pathway out of poverty. Investment in green technologies must be able to demonstrate that they protect the environment – and are indeed better than the technologies currently in place. Support for community economic development must prove that it has been able to restore the local economic base or revitalize the social well-being of the community.

But problems clearly can arise when it is only results that matter. Limiting an assessment to what can be measured leaves out most vital issues. The near-obsession with outcomes often overlooks crucial questions that need to be asked about the broader impact of any given initiative. What other changes resulted from the investment? Were there unintended consequences? Did the results make someone or someplace worse off?

The relatively narrow notion of success embedded in current management and evaluation processes cannot really claim to contribute to well-being. These processes focus simply upon getting the narrow or 'small' answers.

But the route to well-being is charted by asking the 'big' questions. It is only by posing challenging questions – and at the right time – that the actual impact of any investment can be determined.

** The authors currently are developing a framework for incorporating sustainability indicators in investment decisions.*

Managing for sustainability should be understood as both journey and destination. The path taken to arrive at the destination is as important as the end point itself.

The major impact of any investment effectively derives from its process – the dimension typically overlooked in the all-consuming search for good outcomes. It is the journey en route to the destination that adds the sustainable development component, by inquiring explicitly about the potential environmental, economic and social effects of the investment.

It is possible, for example, that an apparently environmentally friendly technology actually may have an overall negative environmental impact. A bio-based fuel assessed only at its point of use may produce very low greenhouse gas emissions (a good result). But a simple emissions count tells only part of the story. It's what we don't count that really counts.

The creation of the bio-based fuel may require substantial acres of biomass, such as corn. Because the production of large quantities of corn is highly energy-intensive, the growing and harvesting of sufficient corn for the new fuel may generate more greenhouse gas emissions than the fossil fuels it is trying to replace – when the total process is considered. The net effect, from an environmental perspective, would be a minus on the scorecard.

It is clear that a sole focus on emissions can result in omissions. Inquiring only about the end game without asking about how it was played misses the larger picture and, in many cases, the real story.

In another example, it is possible that results which are counted as 'good outcomes' may have a negative economic impact. An investment in a big box store in a small town, for example, may be deemed positive if assessed only through an economic lens.

But in asking about the larger impact from a sustainability perspective, it is possible that the big box store displaced many small retailers along with associated jobs. On balance, the town may be no better off. The narrow assessment based only on levels of investment would have given an apparently happy ending to what in reality may be a very sad story.

Third, results that appear at first glance to be positive may have a negative social impact. Many communities throughout the country, for instance, are helping low-income households accumulate assets. The building of assets has been found to help break the cycle of poverty by providing a foundation for education or employment, for choice and for hope. Assets comprise a steppingstone to resilience.

Yet while the results of an asset-building project may look good, it inadvertently may create harsh consequences. Many households, for example, might lose access to social assistance because their enhanced level of assets now exceeds the allowable limits of provincial welfare systems.

Leaving welfare is a desirable goal – but only if the exit is planned. The loss of income at a time when the household has no secure alternative source of support may be destabilizing and even perilous.

Again, unless the broader impact of a given effort is assessed, the serious implications of that action may be missed. What you don't know can hurt. Current management practices with a sole 'eye on the prize' may actually win nothing at all.

But it is not enough simply to ask the right questions. It is important to ask them at the right time.

Questions regarding broader context and likely impact should be posed as early as possible – prior to embarking upon the journey rather than at the end of the road when it is too late to alter the plans. An initial assessment of the potential environmental, economic and social impact of an investment ultimately could change the destination and/or the route to get there.

A technology that asks broadly about the environmental implications of the production process may adjust the way the technology is designed (or even halt its development). An economic investment that could have a significant impact upon local employment may point to the need for training around certain areas of knowledge and skill. It may speak to the need for transitional assistance to enable adaptation. Or it may stop the proposed change altogether.

It is also essential to ask questions, at the very earliest stages of investment, about the cultural context of a given initiative. The proposed effort must ensure that it respects local culture. Work that may involve Aboriginal Canadians, for example, must engage them in project design and ideally in assessing its impact. Early consideration of cultural values and traditions could change considerably the way in which a project proceeds – if at all.

The assessment of any potential investment or project should apply a sustainable development screen that inquires about the how, who and what of that process. The proposal may then be improved, modified substantially or withdrawn entirely. Anticipating at the outset what might happen is equally important to counting what happens at the end.

Managing for sustainability moves away from a sole focus on outcomes. It considers, at the earliest stages, the likely environmental, economic and social impact of these results. It then weighs these potential effects against the anticipated outcomes. Only at that point is it possible to conclude that a given investment was worth it.

Managing for sustainability means looking not only for good results. It also means looking for results that do good.

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