



10 THINGS I'VE LEARNT ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY



Richard Gillies spent 29 years with M&S in a variety of leadership roles including Director of Plan A. He joined Kingfisher plc in 2013 to help the business realise its Net Positive restorative ambition. Shortlisted for a 2Degrees Award last Wednesday, Alex Duff, quizzes him about the 10 things he's learnt as one of the country's most successful sustainability leaders.

1. What's the one character trait you think a sustainability leader needs to be successful?

Resilience... and a sense of purpose. As sustainability professionals we are asking people to change and re-learn how to do their jobs and run their businesses. That means you are going to come up against resistance. You need to build resilience and have an unwavering passion for your end goal – that's not to inhibit business but to create a better one, that is economically, socially and environmentally more sustainable.

2. What's the biggest mistake sustainability professionals make?

A failure to successfully align the objectives of the business (or the part of the business they are trying to change) with the sustainability outcomes they're trying to

achieve. We can't have 'either/or' situations because invariably it is no good for business or sustainability. There are sweet-spots where business and sustainability agendas overlap and you have to invest the time to identify these. Always begin where you can deliver a win/win relatively easily. Doing so gives people the confidence to take the next step. That's when they can begin to explore new ways of doing things that are perhaps more difficult but can deliver better business, societal and environmental outcomes.

3. What's been the biggest change to the sustainability leadership role in the last five years and how do you predict it will evolve in the next five?

We've gone from being advocates of sustainability (trying to win hearts and minds by engaging people in the challenges we face), to offering practical solutions and using compelling stories to make those solutions accessible. The next five years will continue to be about providing solutions, the difference will be delivering solutions to bigger problems that no individual or business can solve alone. My prediction is that we'll see collaborative skills becoming far more sought after as partnerships between organisations find momentum. There are already examples of this happening, like Kingfisher's VIA collaboration to help address deforestation with IKEA, Tetra Pak, IDH and the ISEAL Alliance, but at the moment that is still the minority rather than the majority of activity.

4. You moved from M&S after 29 years. How important is it that your personal values align with those of your company and how can you be sure that they do before you make the leap?

It is very important that you can relate to your company and, ultimately, its purpose. Here at Kingfisher our ambition to deliver 'Better Homes, Better Lives' is extremely compelling. My decision to move into this role was based on the personal values of its leader. It's not always possible to gain insight at that level but look at what a company is saying about itself and what others are saying about it. No business is perfect but a willingness to 'walk the talk' and having a clear sense of its purpose and direction of travel are helpful indicators in understanding if your values will align.

5. What influences have helped you become a better sustainability leader?

People sometimes feel they need to leave their personal values at the door when they come to work. We've been taught not to blur the line between our personal and professional lives but I don't think it's helpful to divorce the two – you are shaped and can draw inspiration from outside the business sphere. I was brought up by a science teacher, my father, with a love of the outdoors and my formative years were spent on hikes. At the time hiking wasn't really how I wanted to spend my Sundays but those experiences clearly fostered my love of the great outdoors and an appreciation of the environment. I think those experiences support my sense of purpose today and my deep-held belief that we can be great stewards of our planet and can create a fair and just world through the development of flourishing businesses.

6. Who is your sustainability hero and why?

There are a number of people who deserve recognition for their passion and commitment in really driving the sustainability agenda. Both Al Gore and Dame Ellen MacArthur, who I've had the pleasure of working with, are inspiring leaders in this area. My real heroes though are generally those who don't work in sustainability but affect change at scale by transforming their area of a business. I've had the amazing good fortune to work with many such individuals, both in the businesses that I've been involved in and in the wider business community through organisations like the World Economic Forum and BSR.

7. Where do you get the most valuable feedback as a sustainability professional?

From customers and Finance Directors. I believe, rightly, neither are prepared to compromise on product, service or financial performance. That keeps sustainability professionals honest. It drives us to innovate and find solutions that genuinely deliver environmental and social benefits, whilst contributing to economic business success.

8. What's the best way you've found to engage your wider leadership team in the sustainability challenge?

My understanding of what needs to be done is based on a series of experiences, visiting everything from cotton farms and anaerobic digesters, to factories in China and meeting apprentices in the UK. Simply talking at people and sharing your experiences is never enough. People have to go on their own journey of learning and understanding. Finding ways for people to experience both the sustainability challenges and the solutions that are increasingly emerging, help with that process. At Kingfisher we've been taking colleagues through the sustainable leadership programme at Cambridge University and running our own leadership sessions in each of the countries in which we operate. That's proving extremely successful in opening people's minds to the opportunities that exist to create a sustainable and economically successful business.

9. What are you most proud of in your sustainability career?

Understanding the power of effective storytelling and the collection of stories I've been able to share. It's all about how you make things real for people. How you connect them to the sustainability agenda through stories, in a way that makes sense to them and by using their own language.

10. You've been an advisor to the boards of organisations like BSR, Critical Eye, LWEC and BiTC. Why do you do that and what do you gain from such advisory roles?

Spending time in other organisations gives you a real sense of perspective – it helps you move beyond the rhythm of your business of quarterly results, which can suck you in and prevent you focussing on the long-term trends and real challenges. Those external roles have also allowed me to make amazing connections and to discover some interesting ideas that I've brought back and adapted in my own organisations. Whilst in those roles I've also openly shared my experiences and learnings in the hope of being able to provide that kind of insight to others.

The world of sustainability requires us to rethink what we do at almost every level. You don't have to be a board advisor but the inspiration and ideas to affect the level of change we need are unlikely to arrive on your desk. You have to go and find them. You have to go and visit, sometimes apparently unrelated businesses to find new solutions you can bring back to your own organisation. That's the power of a platform like 2degrees – it makes it so much easier to connect to great people, ideas and solutions. By sharing our compelling stories, we ensure our profession never stops learning or connecting with the challenge.

Richard Gillies was shortlisted for the 2Degrees Sustainability Leader of the Year 2014
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