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# What's it like from the inside?

## The Challenges of Being an Organisational Change Agent for Sustainability

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Penny Walker

*Independent facilitator and coach specialising in sustainable development*

There are a handful of people inside organisations who are the initiators and champions of sustainable development, and they come in a variety of guises. They may be volunteers who have taken on this role unprompted because of their interest and commitment. They may have environmental management, energy efficiency or social impacts as part of their job. They may be in a strategic role, or in a communications team. They may be relatively senior in their organisation. They may have operational or core-business roles, or they may be in a separate expert team. This article looks at organisational change for sustainability from their perspective, exploring the tensions which make this change challenge particularly stretching. These tensions are over and above the usual challenges and choices which face organisational change-makers in other situations, and they are related to the sustainable development change agent's self-perception as being part of a wider sustainability change movement. The survey shows that: (1) they think change isn't happening fast enough and isn't ambitious enough; (2) it is hard to find genuine win-wins which meet organisational needs as well as sustainability goals; and (3) they recognise that emergent, systemic change is needed but struggle to reconcile this with the need for tangible short-term progress and measurable goals.

- Change
- Systems
- Emergence
- Sustainable development
- Agency
- Change agent
- Empowerment
- Organisational change
- Survey

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## What kind of change agents responded?

SINCE THIS PAPER RELIES ON THE RESULTS of an online survey (Walker 2011) for its findings, it is useful to briefly understand who the respondents are.

There were slightly over a hundred responses:<sup>1</sup> 48.5% of respondents were specialists in some aspect of sustainability, 22.3% were directors or senior managers with lead responsibility for sustainability in their organisation, most of the remainder had other roles with some explicit link to sustainability and only 4% were working to change their organisation without formal recognition. With respect to sectors represented, 64.7% were from businesses, 13.7% from the governmental or public sector, 6.9% from charities or foundations, 4.9% from academic or educational institutions and 3.9% from social enterprises or not-for-profit companies. Despite being an online survey, the bulk of the responses were from the UK and Europe: 68.9% UK, 17.9% other Europe, 13.2% wider world.

The respondents were largely motivated by values (see Table 1): a commitment to sustainability and the belief that they can contribute to bringing it about by trying to change the organisation they are working for.

**Table 1** I am working to change my organisation to make it more sustainable because . . .

<b>Most popular reasons</b>	<b>Strongly agree (%)</b>	<b>Agree somewhat (%)</b>
I want to do work which is in line with my values and interests	88.6	9.1
It is my contribution to a wider change in society which I think needs to happen	72.7	23.9
It looked interesting, challenging, exciting or stretching	56.8	39.8
It is a satisfying use of my expertise, knowledge and capabilities	56.8	39.8
<b>Least popular reasons</b>	<b>Strongly disagree (%)</b>	<b>Disagree somewhat (%)</b>
I have been told to, and I wouldn't be doing it if I could avoid it	89.8	4.5
I know it is a good career move and will be rewarded by my organisation	34.1	17.0

<sup>1</sup> Some questions weren't answered by everyone, and some respondents were excluded from some analysis or not asked certain questions because of their answers to previous questions (e.g. if they had been at their organisation for less than a year, their responses about how much it had changed were filtered out).

## Are their organisations changing?

So how are they doing: are their organisations changing?

I invited respondents to place their organisation on the widely recognised spectrum of responses to sustainability from Dunphy *et al.* 2003: first for where it was when they joined and second for where they think it is now (see Table 2 and Figs. 1–3).

The results show that our respondents do indeed think that their organisations are changing, and mostly in the right direction!

There has been a clear shift towards the right of Dunphy's spectrum, and those respondents who have been in their organisation for longer have seen it move further. Three respondents classified their organisations as 'sustaining corporations' when they joined them: two businesses and a charity. Nine said their organisations are 'sustaining corporations' now (but not when they joined them). These star 'changers' are all based in the UK and include charities, business, not-for-profits and a local government body. There were some big leaps, including an organisation perceived to have moved from 'non-responsiveness' to 'sustaining corporation' albeit over a period of more than ten years.

There were some interesting comments about the *role of individuals* in bringing about change. This respondent's organisation had moved from being in the 'efficiency' category to 'strategic proactivity':

My organisation has moved on quite a bit in five years. Much of the change has been down to individuals who are both passionate and knowledgeable about sustainability issues. However, change is still very dependent on individuals and has not yet been embedded 'systemically' from strategy to practice.

Another credited the CEO with getting things moving: 'New chief exec has set significant goals re reducing environmental impact, and thinking about how we do business' ('strategic proactivity' to 'sustaining corporation' in over 10 years).

Many people commented on the *multiple positions* within an organisation: one department might be at the cutting edge while another is dragging its feet:

[Company X] is a very large organisation and so there are pockets of good practice that would be placed further up this scale but overall we're still just achieving compliance ('rejection' to 'compliance' in over 10 years).

But the project work that I am involved with is 'the sustaining corporation'—we're probably in a transition phase with a foot in both camps ('efficiency' to 'strategic proactivity' in over ten years)

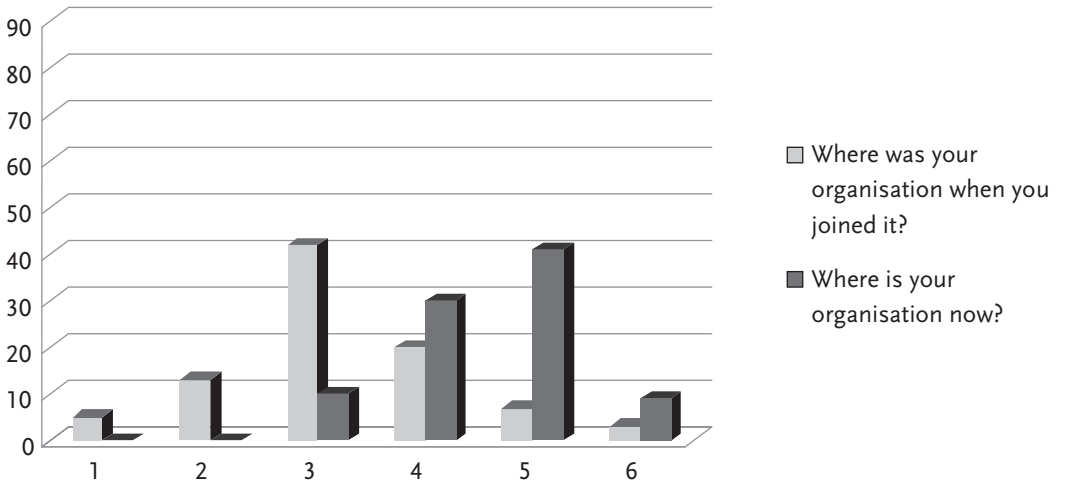
We are a European company and the level of maturity varies from country to country. It also can be, locally, stable for a long time and then suddenly change ('non-responsiveness' to 'efficiency' in between five and ten years).

A number of people commented on the difficulty of using Dunphy's scale for organisations which have been set up with *sustainability at their heart* from the very start.

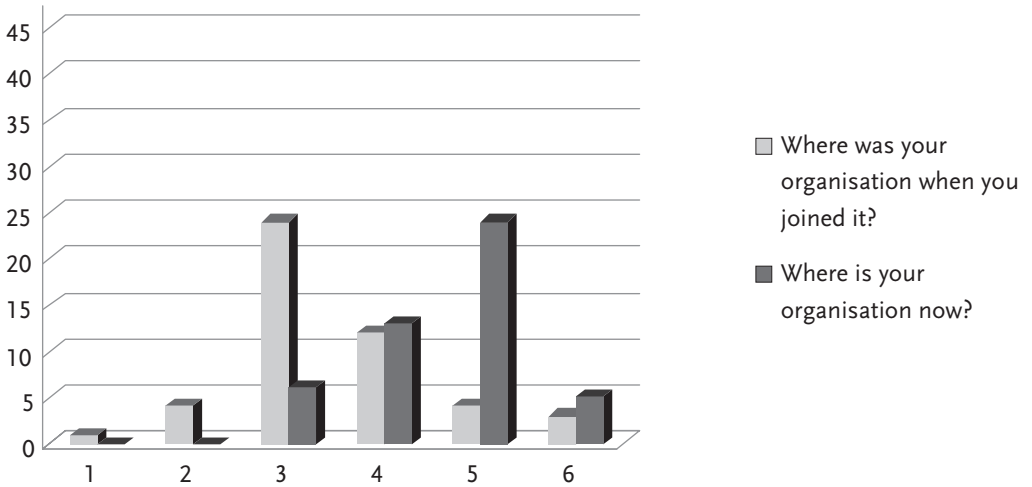
Table 2 Are their organisations changing?

	Rejection <i>Stealthy saboteurs</i>	Non-respon- siveness <i>Bunker wombats</i>	Compliance <i>Reactive minimalists</i>	Efficiency <i>Industrious stewards</i>	Strategic proactivity <i>Proactive strategists</i>	The sustaining corporation <i>Transforming futurists</i>
<i>Those respondents who have been with their organisation for at least one year (n=90)</i>						
Where was your organisation when you joined it?	5 (5.6%)	13 (14.4%)	42 (46.7%)	20 (22.2%)	7 (7.8%)	3 (3.3%)
Where is your organisation now?	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (11.1%)	30 (33.3%)	41 (45.6%)	9 (10.0%)
<i>Those respondents who have been with their organisation between 2 and 5 years (n=48)</i>						
Where was your organisation when you joined it?	1 (2.1%)	4 (8.3%)	24 (50.0%)	12 (25.0%)	4 (8.3%)	3 (6.3%)
Where is your organisation now?	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (12.5%)	13 (27.1%)	24 (50.0%)	5 (10.4%)
<i>Those respondents who have been with their organisation for six years or longer (n=42)</i>						
Where was your organisation when you joined it?	4 (9.5%)	9 (21.4%)	18 (42.9%)	8 (19.0%)	3 (7.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Where is your organisation now?	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (9.5%)	17 (40.5%)	17 (40.5%)	4 (9.5%)

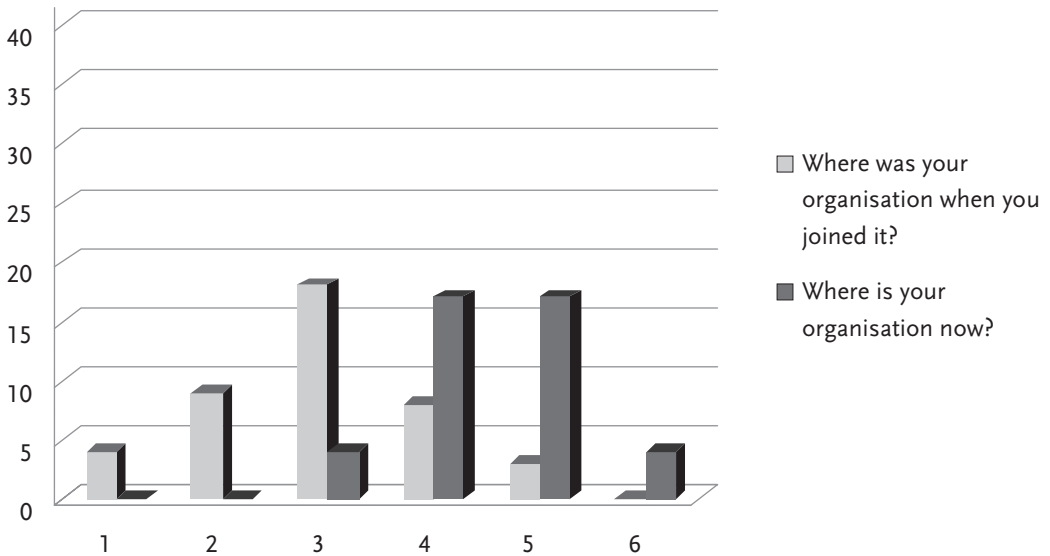
**Figure 1** Are their organisations changing? All those who have been at their organisation for at least 1 year



**Figure 2** Are their organisations changing? All those who have been at their organisation between 2 and 5 years



**Figure 3** Are their organisations changing? All those who have been at their organisation for six years or more



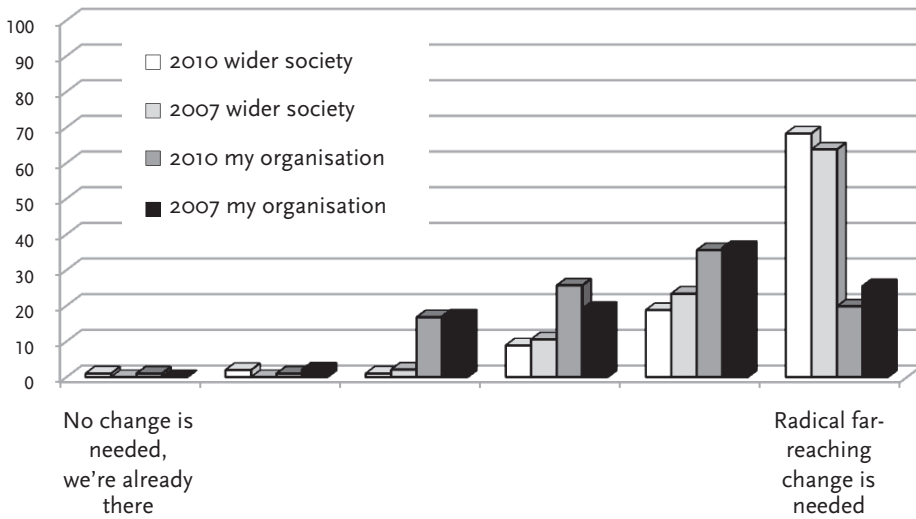
I think even for an organisation like mine which is 100% focussed on sustainability, there is a next wave of strategy for sustainability—which is how do we work with others to catalyse systemic change, which is beyond just making 1 org sustainable ('sustaining corporation' at the start).

... your scale wasn't helpful. We started at we want to do the right thing and be socially and environmentally responsible. Over time we have better understood what that means and have become more strategic in our position also a wider understanding across the business ('efficiency' to 'strategic proactivity' in over 10 years).

## How is this change perceived?

As well as asking about how much their organisations had changed, I wanted to find out what our insider change agents thought about change towards sustainable development in wider society. In common with the people who answered this question in a previous survey in 2007 (Walker 2007), these organisational change-makers think that a lot of change is needed in society, and slightly less in their own organisations, to get us on to the path to sustainability (see Fig. 4).

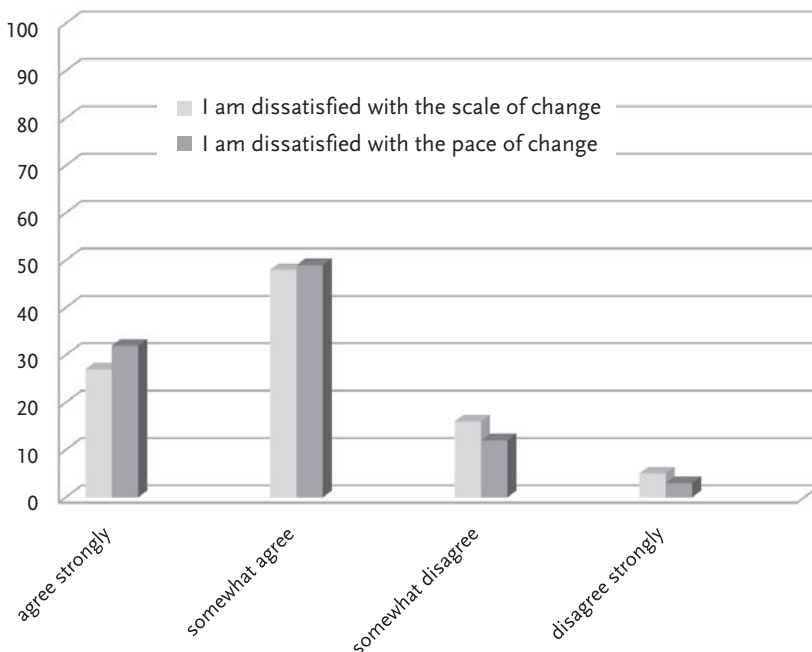
Figure 4 How much change is needed? 2007 and 2010 responses



They want to see change and they are seeing change. How do the aspirations and the experience match up?

‘Our CEO, who is an advocate of sustainability, has described our organisation in relation to sustainability as being at the *cutting edge of mediocrity*’. This respondent is not satisfied with the progress of their organisation: it has not gone *far* enough. Others are dissatisfied with the pace of change—organisations not changing *fast* enough (Fig. 5).

Figure 5 How change agents feel about the pace and scale of change in their organisations





Around 73% of organisational change agents for SD agreed or strongly agreed that they are dissatisfied with the pace *and* scale of change in their organisation. These people agreed strongly that the pace or scale (and sometimes both) were dissatisfying:

I feel and I see that changes are coming in many parts of my organisation but this process is far too slow.

My organisation has a culture which is generally slow to change—it is large, bureaucratic and hierarchical.

These people also agreed strongly that they were dissatisfied, and added some observations on how they expect change to happen and what it feels like to be in the midst of change:

A lovely dilemma: we know that change needs to be democratic, and based on others understanding the 'whys', to avoid trying another oppressive regime. Experience seems to indicate that this requires patience, but patience in the faith that our mere acts now, however small, may lead to an exponential explosion in the 'right' activities, just in time . . . I now try to hold this tension very lightly and not let it distract me from what I'm doing day to day, in the moment. But I can't pretend to be that successful at it . . .

With a perspective that this is a 'human community' not a machine! And that dissatisfaction needs to motivate (not frustration/anger etc.) and shape through positivity (not blind optimism or out-of-touchness) . . . And a personal sense of niche—what's in my gift, power, influence etc. . . .

And these people 'somewhat' agreed:

I am also encouraged that we are changing at all—it was never certain that we would. Every day I come across disheartening obstacles and delightful encouragements in roughly equal measure—maybe slightly more encouragements than obstacles.

In truth there is a huge change programme going on right now, however the scale and outcomes are at present unknowns. How this impacts on what we want to do, and what I believe we should be doing is too early to say.

There were a few outliers, who were satisfied with the scale or pace of change. They provided comments which shed light on their satisfaction. These comments point to the patience of the change agents, rather than the rapidity of the change.

My organisation is at a Gladwell 'tipping point' in terms of climate change measures, renewable energy and eco-efficiency. If I succeed on that path I have been on for 18 months there will have been a fairly massive change in my organisation but some of the change is for the wrong reason (deploying PV not to harness green energy and stop emitting CO<sub>2</sub> but because there is a tariff attached . . .) Call me a purist but some of this change is frustrating.

Our new mission has been in for less than a year and significant work is being done, but there are always delays in implementing new strategies in large organisations.

Change for a large organisation takes time and there is a danger that by rushing change an important element or important group of people are not considered consistently to demonstrate the benefit to them. This can damage the credibility of the sustainability agenda.

My organisation is very conservative and has about 50-odd nationalities; change is slow not just in the sustainability space. I think the most important thing is to keep the team motivated, when we are finding it difficult to move forward. I get them to focus on something else that they can achieve, it's about balance.

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## What are the tensions that change agents experience?

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Concern over the scale and pace of change is one of the four key areas of tension for sustainability change-makers which I had previously identified (Walker 2008) and wanted to test through this survey. The others were:

- ▶ Can I find the true win-win which satisfies a business case and a values case?
- ▶ Should our change efforts be focused internally or externally?
- ▶ Does my place in a wider change movement leave me out of step with my colleagues? As part of that wider movement, am I making enough difference?

### Business case, values case

How often do our change agents find that they have to overplay the business case, to get agreement to something which has a great values case? Or vice versa?

*Roughly two-thirds of them don't find this a problem and roughly a third find that they 'struggle to find win-win solutions'.* The figures are slightly different for people from non-business organisations: a bigger percentage of them find it straightforward (c. 70% of those from non-business organisations mostly find it 'straightforward' compared with c. 60% of people in for-profit organisations) (see Figs. 6 and 7).

The business case does exist—but it's often hard work/a finger in the air to quantify the benefits to the business (sometimes 'struggle', sometimes 'straightforward' to find win-win).

Beyond the obvious efficiencies driven by water/energy/waste/materials bills falling, it is hard to demonstrate why capital should be spent, or people put in place, to resource a longer-term, environmentally appropriate solution where either the rate of return is lower than the hurdle, or the impact on revenues is negative ('struggle' and find it 'straightforward' at different times).

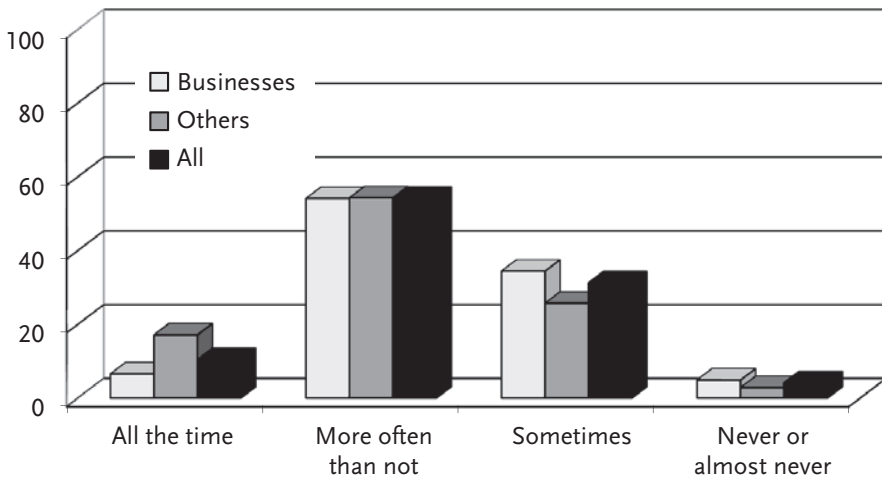
When there is a struggle, which way do respondents need to go, to get agreement to a solution?

The business case is much more frequently ‘overplayed’ than the values case (see Table 3 and Figs. 8 and 9).

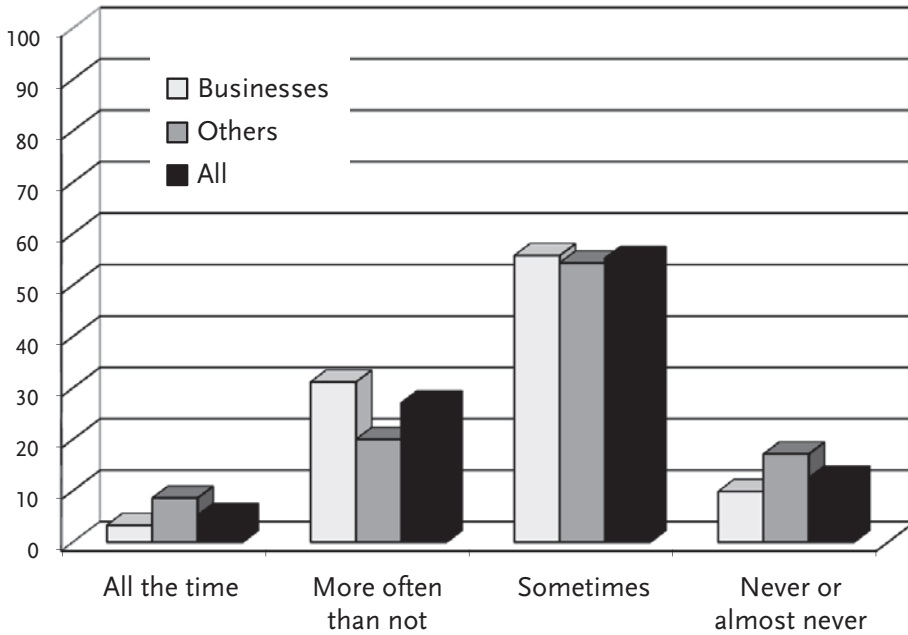
**Table 3** Change agents overplaying the business case or the values case

%	I overplay the values case all or nearly all the time	I overplay the values case more often than not	I overplay the business case more often than not	I overplay the business case all or nearly all the time
Businesses	4.92	24.59	26.23	19.67
Others	5.71	20.00	48.57	8.57
All	5.21	22.92	34.38	15.63

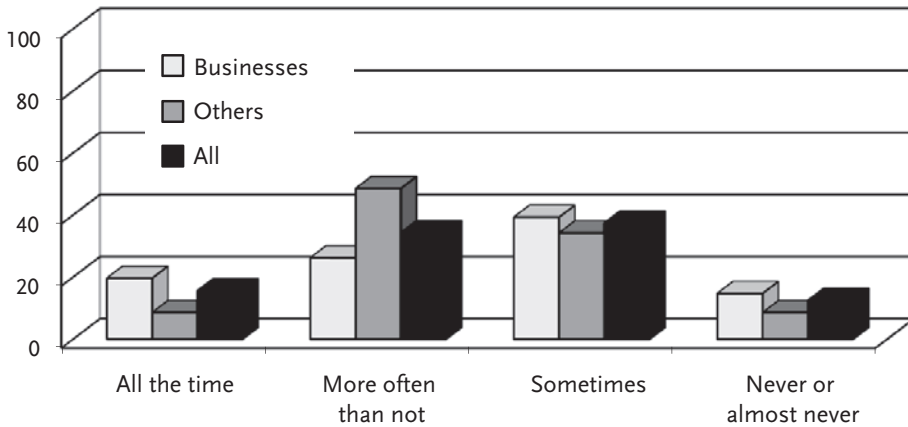
**Figure 6** Change agents find it straightforward to find solutions which are good for people and the planet, and their organisation . . .



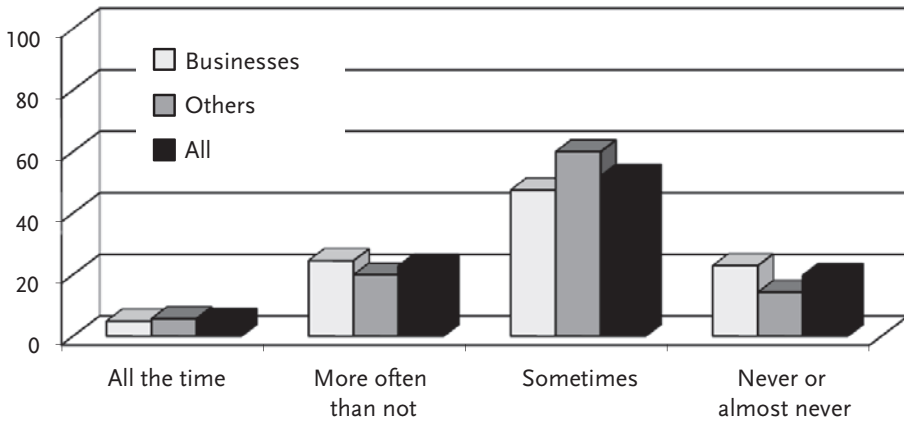
**Figure 7** Change agents struggle to find solutions which are good for people and the planet, and their organisation . . .



**Figure 8** Change agents overplay the business case in order to get agreement to things which are good for people and the planet . . .



**Figure 9** Change agents overlay the values case to get agreement to things which are good for the organisation/business . . .



For some respondents, there’s no question about this: ‘it’s all down to money and what it costs’. However, not all of them are happy with this:

I have reluctantly had to face facts that the moral case for SD just doesn’t do it for the majority of people in my organisation. Making the business case for SD has helped me make a considerable amount of progress.

This is a tension which, according to another respondent, must be managed by taking a long-term approach: ‘I am very conscious that if I oversell this year I will not be credible when I go back next year and that will be more damaging in the long run’.

Overlaying may be useful in the short-term, but is a poor strategy over time:

I don’t overlay anything. There are almost always win–win solutions. The way forward is to expand your horizon (in time and/or space) until you have the right analytical frame. To overlay/spin things [means] people lose trust. Tell it like it is—but be sure you know how it REALLY is.

**Focusing on changing the organisation, or the wider system?**

Dunphy’s spectrum suggests that once organisations have got their own house in order, they look to change the context within which they—and their peers and competitors—operate. How far do organisational change agents feel an urge to work on the wider system, and are they able to do so?

Of the change agents, 29% agree strongly that they currently focus on changing their organisation, 12% agree strongly that they currently focus on changing the context and 18% strongly agree that they currently focus on both context and organisation equally. Unsurprisingly, those who focus on the context are disproportionately found in organisations seen as being ‘strategically proactive’ and ‘sustaining corporations’ in Dunphy’s scale.

Around a third of our change-makers are not happy with their focus. Of the unhappy third, nearly three-quarters are unhappy that the organisation is too focused on changing itself, and only just over a sixth are unhappy that it is too focused on changing its context. On balance, then, it seems that there is *a nascent desire to work more on system-level change among a sizable minority of the change agents.*

This change agent would like to see more work at system level:

We have realised that we must collaborate to change the system, e.g. on pushing for higher carbon pricing, water rights etc., but we are massively under-resourced in that area compared to our internal efficiency etc. drives. Saying that, we are increasingly galvanising our suppliers.

This person is happy with their focus, which leans towards changing the wider system:

We are looking at the external context to be ahead of the curve and make and take advantage of opportunities. We actively engage in this dialogue and seek leadership positions, but equally we want to change our own organisation's practices to be more joined up and aligned, and move from pockets of best practice to widespread adoption on all our projects.

And this one is happy with a balance between organisational change and wider system change:

We have both internal change programmes, and ones looking at our broader supply chain. We have also developed external policy positions that are aimed to draw attention to legislative changes that could help move towards a more sustainable future.

### **Just a job, or part of a movement?**

*The overwhelming majority of the people who responded to this survey see themselves as part of a wider change movement, as we have already established.*

How can climate change be just a job! I paraphrase Attenborough whose quote looms over my desk: 'how could I look my child in the eye and say I knew what was happening to the world and did nothing'?

It is a purpose, but needs to evolve even more to combine my heart, guts and mind . . .

It is fantastic to feel passionate about my job. Having worked in this area, I now cannot see myself going back to a general management job even if that harms my promotion prospects.

It has to be a passion and something you believe in 100 per cent otherwise you can't do the job properly, although I've had to learn to use the passion in presenting in a way that doesn't scare the life out of people—in this country we still have a long, long journey.

You need to be really engaged in doing this and believe in it, if you are not the obstacles will be destructive for you personally and will demotivate you.

For me sustainability is a ‘life mission’. I do it in the context of a job so as to pay my bills. The job and the organisation in which I do that job, in any conventional sense, mean nothing to me.

Does this cause them problems at work?

The survey asked those who said the work was ‘more than just a job’ whether their colleagues and bosses were comfortable with this level of commitment. Most people indicated that this was not an issue for them; 17% said that their bosses were not comfortable with it; and 25% said that their colleagues were not comfortable with it. Many said that the picture was mixed.

Danger of getting pigeon-holed as an SD geek and losing all influence over key stakeholders.

It’s a confused and confusing picture: My direct boss does not value sustainability, beyond it being a KPI we have to deliver on—I am his ‘go-to’ person for this. The Board member I report to on sustainability is very positive. The firm’s leader does not value sustainability.

My boss is very ‘realistic’. He’s not big on challenging the current system etc. He has described his purpose as to be a ‘wet blanket’ on a lot of my ideas! At first I found this demotivating, but now I’ve tried to take the view that if I can persuade him of something, I can probably convince the rest of my organisation.

There is a danger that some may see some activities as a crusade, and so are not comfortable with this. Fortunately these people don’t fit the corporate vision and we can refer them back to the business case with the support of our top management. We recognise, reward and extol exemplar performance.

Do those respondents who have a very strong personal commitment to sustainable development think they are making enough difference (Table 4)?

**Table 4** Am I making enough difference?

	<b>Agree strongly</b>	<b>Somewhat agree</b>	<b>Somewhat disagree</b>	<b>Disagree strongly</b>	<b>n</b>
I am happy that I am making enough of a difference	15.7%	41.6%	36.0%	6.7%	89

Broadly, there are more who are happy than unhappy with the difference they are making. Reflections from some respondents showed a rather grudging or partial sense of satisfaction:

‘Enough of a difference’—well no, but no point in beating myself up and trading on guilt/fear—do that for too long (somewhat disagree).

I would like to make more of a difference, but feel that I’m doing what I can. More support from senior business managers would have much more of a positive impact than they realise. And not just financial support, actually understanding sustainable development and making positive contributions to it (somewhat disagree).

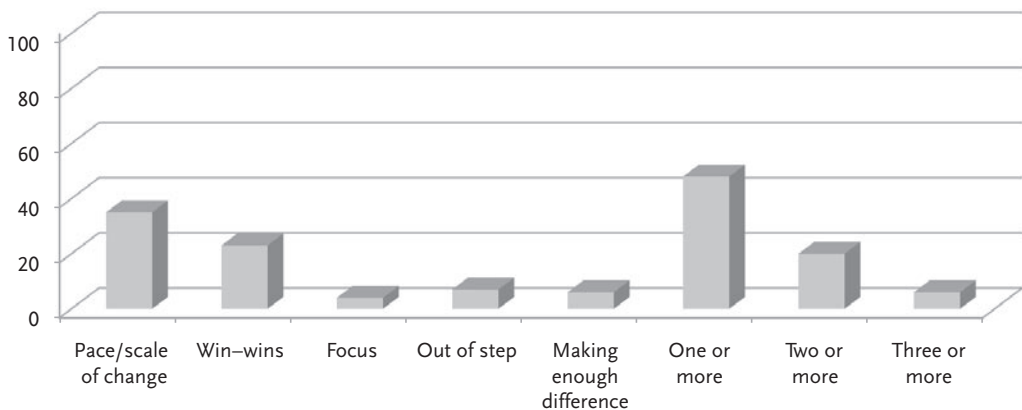
## Which of these tensions are experienced most by our change agents?

I wanted to test out how far these four sets of tensions are experienced by people working to change their organisations to make them more sustainable.

- ▶ Are we moving fast enough or far enough?
- ▶ Can I find the true win-win which satisfies a business case and a values case?
- ▶ Should our change efforts be focused internally or externally?
- ▶ Does my place in a wider change movement leave me out of step with my colleagues?

Figure 10 shows those who expressed 'strong' experience of these tensions.

**Figure 10** Which tensions do the change agents experience strongly?



Of the change agents who responded 34% strongly agreed that they are dissatisfied with the pace or scale of change (or both); 22% experienced strong tension when looking for win-wins; and far fewer experienced strong tension around the focus of their change efforts, their commitment to sustainable development vis-à-vis colleagues, or that they are making enough of a difference (approximately 4%, 7% and 6%, respectively).

At least one of the tensions was experienced strongly by 47% of respondents; 19.5% experienced at least two of them strongly; and just 6% of them experienced at least three strongly.

*So these tensions are real, but not universal. And they do not result in large numbers of change agents feeling strongly dissatisfied with their own sense of agency ('am I making enough difference?').*



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## A fifth tension: emergent change in complex systems

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In addition to the four tensions I set out to test, a fifth area emerged from people's comments.

This respondent was not comfortable being asked about 'solutions' to sustainability problems:

Solutions focus not helpful . . . per se. Systems, processes, cultural change . . . sustainability cannot be solved . . . Steps might be better . . . thought solutions/actions/projects are of their time (and solely part of long-term leadership) behaviours, outcomes, impacts and value creation . . .

This person had similar objections to the linear, incremental change paradigm implied by the question:

I think the struggle is needing to be seen to have an answer to a 'wicked' question. This need for 'expertise' and 'answers' may be better served by admitting we don't know and then working together on potential solutions.

This understanding of change as emergent and systemic is not always easy to explain to colleagues and it may be hard to justify or have a sense of progress when working within this frame.

The change will be continuing, as sustainability is not an end state but a continual journey of improvement against ever increasing public perceptions of what is expected. This is a hard sell within an organisation!

I tend to work with people who have a common view that we are a catalyst for systemic change and our role is to convene and enable others to take innovative action towards that . . . this view is not shared by everyone in the organisation and this is where the tension comes in and the need to translate our work.

We are stuck in a world where mechanistic, linear approaches are foisted onto complex, systemic problems. This is where the tension lies for those involved in bridging this.

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## Some conclusions

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Our change agents believe that *a very great deal of change is needed*, to get on to the path to sustainability.

They see change happening in their own organisations, but most of them *do not think this change is rapid enough or seeks to go far enough*. As a side note, it seems that Dunphy's scale will need adjusting for those organisations which are set up with sustainability at their heart.

Our change agents do experience tensions. The biggest is the *concern about the pace and scale of change in their organisation*, and the second biggest is the *difficulty of finding solutions which have both a business case and a values case*.

Some change agents find the paradigm of 'solutions' unhelpful: *they see the change endeavour of which they are a part as systemic and emergent*, rather than incremental and linear. This in itself can lead to tensions: *how to tell if progress is being made*, how to keep up colleagues' morale and how to sell this approach to colleagues.

Deciding the focus of change efforts and being a person who sees sustainability as 'more than just a job' are not a source of significant tension for most change agents, although many experience these tensions from time to time. *Our change agents are not daunted by these tensions*: they accept them as something which goes with the territory.

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