

Sustainability is not sustainable without consistency

By [Chetan Mistry](#)

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A friend of mine recently lamented the state of their garden. They have a lot of weeds, so now and then, they put in a herculean effort to clear the unwanted plants. They make a big push, clearing swathes of the invading brush. It takes all day, leaving them exhausted. Then they take a break for a few weeks - enough time that all the weeds start growing back.



Image source: Steve Johnson from [Pexels](#)

My friend has wondered about using pesticides or getting rid of their garden. But they have another choice: remove a few weeds every day. That's the power of consistency.

We all have good intentions. We want to make the world a better place, and we'll put in the effort. We'll apply passion, discipline and willpower. We'll make plans, even detailed strategies. But then it all falls apart. Why? We're not consistent.

I often run into the consistency problem. Working on Xylem's different social investment projects, I meet people overflowing with passion for change and improving the world. I engage with companies eager to do their part to make themselves and society more sustainable. The desire and focus they have is essential. But without consistency, they are likely to fall short of their goals.

Not just another check-box

Sustainability theory consists of three elements: efficiency, consistency and sufficiency. In that realm, consistency refers to how well companies use cradle-to-cradle processes. It's an important concept. But in this article, I want to unpack consistency as a general habit and why it matters to make anything sustainable.

To explain, let's look at the opposite of such consistency. Let's look at box-checking.

Box-checking is having a list of items to complete to reach a particular goal. Let's say a company decides to become

serious about recycling. Their checklist likely includes setting up recycle points, assigning people the collection of recyclables, and sending memos about the new policy. All of these are necessary steps to deliver on the recycling expectations.

But does it work? Initially, it will. Yet if nobody takes long-term ownership of the policy, the gains soon disappear because the recycling programme doesn't grow. It doesn't convert people to being more conscientious about recycling. It doesn't expand to include other recycling opportunities. The recycling benchmark remains static while the company benchmarks change, and eventually the recycling programme becomes a feel-good white elephant. It ticks all the boxes, but it accomplishes little of substance.

Such a system lacks consistency.

Feedback loop

Now, you might say that the programme is consistent. People recycle paper consistently into bins, emptied often and their contents sent to recycling centres. But proper consistency requires a feedback loop. Does anyone inform the employees, "Hey, we recycled x amount of paper this month" or "Here's how your efforts helped make our recycling effort work"? Is the recycling plan ever on management or board agendas? When you ask if, after the year, the programme had made progress, is there an answer?

Sustainability requires effort, and people's participation improves effort. Yet they lose interest when they don't see results or have a sense of involvement. Passion and willpower will get you out of the gates but won't carry the momentum. Ironically, while passion and willpower can create effort, effort also refuels them.



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Consistency supports efficient effort, which leads to sustainability. My friend can keep their garden free of weeds if they do a little daily. It will take less time overall and use less energy. We can apply this principle to any ongoing tasks where we want to keep experiencing positive results. The best path to sustainability is to be consistent. Rather do a little often than a lot now and then.

It's not easy being consistent, at least at the start. We don't lay the groundwork for a consistent practice if we just check boxes. And if we start with passion but no efficiency, we'll burn out and need time to recover. Consistency is a type of effort that rewards us more over time. Sustainability is the same. They go hand in hand.

If you want anything to be sustainable, focus on creating consistency. Passion and good intentions will get you started. But to keep going, consider the next step, not just the destination. That's how we can create a better world for everyone.

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