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Case Western Reserve University
Weatherhead School of Management
Cleveland, Ohio, United States

weatherhead.case.edu

March 2012
AACSB International
The Fowler Center for Sustainable Value

One of the primary objectives at the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value at the Weatherhead School of Management is to push business beyond just being “less bad” or compliant, and instead changing the direction and way business is carried out, explains Beau Daane, Fowler Center Manager. In addition, the Center “leverages interdisciplinary scholarship and practice to help leaders capitalize on new profitable business opportunities to solve the world’s growing social and environmental problems,” and focuses its activities in both scholarship and outreach.¹

Beginnings & Core Concepts

The Fowler Center, previously named the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit (BAWB), was founded in 2002 by Weatherhead faculty member Dr. David L. Cooperrider², who believed that in order to make a positive change in the world, businesses would need to be involved, as they are the most likely force to have the necessary impact. Collaborating with colleague Dr. Chris Laszlo³, the two gathered short stories and examples of companies and organizations that successfully incorporate sustainability in their business practices. Laszlo is well known for his work on sustainable value – one of the core concepts of the Center.

In 2009, Char and Chuck Fowler endowed the Center with 7.5 million USD (now the primary funding source of the Center’s activities), and so the Center changed its name to the Fowler Center for Sustainable Value. Chuck Fowler is CEO of Fairmount Minerals, a mining company based in Northeast Ohio that has collaborated with Cooperrider to improve the sustainability of its operations. The Fowler Center is currently led by Dr. Roger Saillant with a team of students, faculty, administrators, distinguished fellows, and other colleagues.⁴ An Advisory Board⁵ comprised of both academic and business leaders was created in 2011, and meets twice a year for a day and half to evaluate and guide the Center’s activities and priorities.

The Fowler Center’s projects, education programs, and corporate products are informed by two core concepts: Appreciative Inquiry and Sustainable Value, explained in more detail below.

- **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**, developed by Cooperrider and Dr. Ron Fry at the Weatherhead School of Management, is a strength-based approach that focuses on the “power of positive inquiry for igniting innovation and whole-system change.”⁶ The concept of AI has become a global movement in which practitioners aim to: 1) identify the unique strengths of individuals, businesses, and systems, and 2) leverage and unite those strengths to greater effect throughout whole systems. The ultimate aim of AI is to solve problems by capitalizing existing strengths to the extent where organizational weaknesses become irrelevant.
• **Sustainable Value** was developed by Laszlo, who defines the concept as:

> A dynamic state that occurs when a company creates ongoing value for its shareholders and stakeholders. By ‘doing good’ for society and the environment, the company does even better for its customers and shareholders than it otherwise would.

The objective is to not serve as a better environmental strategy, but rather to respond to a radically different market reality in which the economic, ecological, and social spheres are unified into a single integrated value creation space. As a result, at Weatherhead, sustainability is not about the triple bottom line or about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), environmental sustainability, or social responsibility for its own sake, but about a market in which environmental, health, and social issues are viewed as business opportunities.

**Scholarship**

As mentioned earlier, the Fowler Center focuses on two primary areas: scholarship and outreach. The realm of scholarship includes research, development of case studies, and education activities. Saillant points out that all individuals (faculty) connected with the center teach some form of graduate and/or executive education courses at Weatherhead. Furthermore, faculty and staff lead discussions, present in panels, publish books, host forums, and develop case studies which are used as teaching tools for management students around the world.

One notable scholarship activity is the World Inquiry, a worldwide action-research initiative using AI to learn about the role of business in society, particularly as an agent of social and environmental benefit. The World Inquiry Innovation Bank – a collection of more than 2,000 stories on business innovations in sustainability and social entrepreneurship that aim to spark conversation about “the role and potential of business to act as an agent of world benefit.” Students interview entrepreneurs or business people who have implemented sustainable innovations. On occasion, companies who would like to highlight an effective practice supply their own stories, which are vetted by faculty against set criteria before acceptance. The interviews include questions rooted in positive psychology and AI and aim to answer the following the questions:

• *How differently will the world's environment and the quality of life of its people appear to you when business serves as an agent of community and world benefit?*

• *How can companies create a healthy environment and healthy profit margins through use of the means and tools of Sustainability and Social Entrepreneurship?*
The World Inquiry is used by business schools to help students learn the “practical how-to’s of doing well by doing good,”¹¹ and why and how businesses engage in responsible leadership and social and environmental stewardship.¹² Companies also look to the World Inquiry for effective ideas that can be replicated within their own operations.

Faculty members and Fowler Center team members Cooperrider and Fry co-edit the Journal of Corporate Citizenship (JCC), which integrates theory about corporate citizenship with management practice and aims to advance CSR and sustainability worldwide.¹³ The Center’s group of doctoral fellows engage in research related to the Center’s core concepts, as well as topics such as “spirituality in business” – a theory claiming that development of deep personal meaning among business leaders results in a better sense of systems that support humans in a natural world—i.e., the more “spiritual” its leaders, the stronger a business becomes.

Outreach

The outreach area is where “the rubber meets the road,” says Daane, and comprises a number of activities and projects in which the Fowler Center leverages its expertise to build on organizations’ strengths. The Center’s team works individually with businesses or organizations to embed sustainability in their culture and practices, by providing strategies, tools, and methods to build Sustainable Value. Products of the Center’s consulting activities include:

- **Workshops and Seminars** that combine theory, best practices, and practical exercises, and offer a general introduction to Sustainable Value as a strategic advantage.
- **Sustainability Circles**, in partnership with True Market Solutions, that take businesses through a peer-based learning process with curriculum co-developed by the Fowler Center and True Market Solutions.
- **Whole System Appreciative Inquiry Summits** – an intensive change-management methodology that engages the entire system—shareholders, stakeholders, and other potential players—in a strength-based, co-designed process for Sustainable Value creation.¹⁴

Clients include organizations such as the American Red Cross, Boeing Corporation, and United Way.

The Sustainability Circles Program, mentioned earlier, is a peer-based learning process in which six to 10 organizations are grouped together and set forth to improve their financial performance by fully embracing sustainable business practices. The Fowler Center aims to make the process affordable and accessible, and one that “builds brand equity and revenues, reduces costs and manages risks, engages employees and stakeholders, and builds strong community.”¹⁵ The group meets one day a month for six months,
coupled with individualized coaching sessions, to launch their Sustainability Action Plan and Carbon Footprint Assessment, along with other sustainability projects. Daane adds that these groups are composed of diverse companies, including public, private, and non-profit, large and small, as well as multi-billion-dollar companies.

Another noteworthy initiative that the Fowler Center substantially supports is the Sustainable Cleveland 2019 initiative—a ten-year campaign commenced by Cleveland’s Mayor Frank Jackson for “building an economic engine to empower a green city on a blue lake.”16 The initiative started with a summit held in August 2009 at which more than 700 stakeholders attended. There, Fowler Center faculty led an Appreciative Inquiry summit focusing on shaping a sustainable economy in Cleveland. The Weatherhead School of Management remains engaged as a key thought partner with the Mayor and the City of Cleveland in its vision to engage the community to work together to design and develop a “thriving and resilient Cleveland region” that would leverage its wealth of assets to build economic, social, and environmental well-being for all.17

Embedding Sustainability

The heritage of the Business as an Agent of World Benefit (BAWB), from which the Fowler Center was created, emphasizes sustainability rather than CSR. Saillant mentions that from his observations, discussing ethics in a classroom is an easy feat, but actually incorporating ethics into culture and practice is more challenging. When Sustainable Value and Appreciative Inquiry are practiced, ethical behavior and practices appear often to be a natural byproduct. However, Daane stresses that neither the Fowler Center nor the Weatherhead School of Management discounts the importance of ethics, and does address this issue on campus and its course offerings, as well as through channels such as the Journal of Corporate Citizenship and various other projects with which the Center engages.

The editorial team’s introduction to the Journal of Corporate Citizenship nicely summarizes why sustainability plays such an important role at Weatherhead:

> Corporate citizenship is on the eve of its most important pragmatic era, and that sustainability is truly emerging as the business opportunity of the 21st century… It is a lens that will dominate the management agenda for the next thirty or more years. Even more important, the outcomes will define the next episode in stakeholder capitalism and ultimately will determine the wellbeing of our imperiled planet.18

Daane explains that the Fowler Center uses a very dynamic process for embedding sustainability in all its activities. The scholarship generated through the Center is embedded into the curricula at the business
school, and there is constant interaction with faculty to encourage integrating the topic matter and the theories that underlie it into existing subject-matter and courses. Daane stresses that at Weatherhead, faculty and staff deliberately refrain from conveying sustainability as a separate subject, or creating it into a major alongside finance or marketing, for example. Rather, the goal is for “sustainable value” thinking to be infused at all levels and courses at the business school and beyond to all of the schools at Case Western Reserve University, and to “develop a lens by which everyone sees how they can integrate sustainability.”

Acknowledgements: AACSB International is grateful for the assistance of Dr. Roger Saillant, Fowler Center Executive Director and Beau Daane, Fowler Center Manager.
End Notes