

The Failure of Green

A Whitepaper Addressing the New Best Practices in Environmental Standards

By the Green Clean Institute (GCI)

March 10, 2014

The question of Green and sustainable efforts has experienced grave concerns for the ability to implement a program that has guidelines or standards of performance. The confusion about environmental measurement has compounded the problems of economic austerity and mixed messaging. Is it possible to install an environmental program that is practical, profitable, and beneficial in the face of the present failure of Green?

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Adopting Mainstream of Health

The immense enthusiasm for Green buildings a decade ago seems like a bubble of interest akin to the Delorian debacle. A retrospective examination of what went wrong with the Green era may allow the next generation to make a better choice. So, why did Green become mostly passé?

Mixed Messages: There was never one clear definition for Green. The term quickly became ubiquitous. Green was about energy savings. Green was about building construction. Green was a zen-like simplification of life. Green was recycling and minimization.

Going Green became the Yellow Brick Road to an unknown and utopian-like future. This lack of definition become insidious. There were Green cars, Green coffee, Green clothing, and Green transportation.

The demand to perform on multiple levels without any point of recognized success has led to a dissatisfaction that any investment is now regarded as a thimble of water in an expansive desert.

No Standard of Compliance: Into this void of confusion, various systems attempted to become the standard of compliance. USGBC, ISO, Green Globe, EPS's DfE, Green Seal, EcoLabel, and even UL; all tried to become the true measure of a Green program.

There were other, lesser known, Green programs such as: Six Sigma, FSC, GreenGuard, Energy Star, Green-E, and Green Lodging. These programs have various areas of focus and sometimes conflicting agendas.

Greenwashing: Making matters worse, the more enterprising businesses saw the Green movement in near-singular vision as a money-making opportunity. Going Green became a tool to sell a product, provide a service, or provide a certification.

This feeding frenzy was made worse by the hollow nature of the service providers. Without any standards for a Green business, a Green vendor or service could add a token Green element and claim that their business is the "Green Alternative" to all the other competitors even though the Green commitment has the thickness of a coat of Green paint.

Failure to Thrive: The promise was that Green was also more efficient. The investment in a Green program would have an ROI that would be no more than ten years. Unfortunately, these kind of claims by organizations like the USGBC concerning the LEED program and others, proved wrong more often than right.

In the business world, ROI miscalculation is not an easily forgiven error. Therefore, the business world has hardened in its approach to Green ideas.

Economic Pressures: When the economy hit bottom, the easy money that might have been available for Green speculation dried up. Compounding the ROI miscalculations, companies had to make hard decisions to survive the financial siege that could have put them out of business, and sustainable projects were put on indefinite hold.

Therefore, the Green concept went dormant waiting for a better day to emerge. In that idle time, Green ideas turned into common sense applications that had the ability to stand on their own as good ideas. Gas saving vehicles were sold less for the eco value than the high price of gas and public willingness to buy more fuel efficient cars.

Energy efficiency was only coincidental to the underlying facts that energy efficient equipment worked as well as standard equipment, but saved money over the life of the product. Recycling proved that raw goods could be recovered at a better price than the raw product.

Essentially, the next iteration of Green were what might be called “**Eco Solutions**” meaning that the more environmentally-safe solution that could stand on their own merits without pretense that the environmental solution had to be tolerated in hope of an unproven reward.

Green has Gone Mainstream

In the new phase of Green, environmental solutions will be not just termed as “Green” or “Sustainable”. They will be real, proven, and demonstrate value to the person or business. Green is no longer a something to buy, but has validity and real impact on the everyday operation. Yet, there is a real trend toward environmental stewardship that has not been forgotten. It needs emerge in with practical value that works on many levels.

Frankly, the words “Environmentally safe, healthy, or beneficial” seems to be more trusted defining terms than “Green” or “Sustainable”. These terms suffered from marketing abuse until they lost their true nature. The difference is that **environmentally-safe** or **environmentally-healthy** are demonstrable rather than a promise.

Environmentally-healthy speaks to the everyday issues we all have for products that foul the air, water, home, school, or workplace. In the face of more and more reports about the short and long-term impact of cleaning or building products, the new generation of environmentally-healthy products have a proven value. Health is a topic

that we all can embrace, and we know that the work or community environment is part of the process.

Environmentally-beneficial products and services use proven methods to improve life for all. There may be an economic benefit to these environmentally-safe products, and there may be clear evidence that they make our life or world better today and into our future.

GCI has lead in this process before it became popular to hold a standard of performance to Green innovations. The new challenge is to introduce proven systems that enhance to safety, health, and benefits of any environmental process or service.

Environmentally Healthy Services (EHS) embodies the new movement to adopt proven strategies that are not just for bragging rights. No certification has true value unless it represents the progress of any business, organization, or community to a better standard of performance, health, or efficiency.

The future of environmental projects will be more than an investment into Green speculation. The mature form of environmental success will be a pragmatic step toward ideas, services, and products that have demonstrable value to some aspect of the business, workers, industry, or community.

The Goal is Progress, not Perfection

The best approach to any environmental achievement is the incremental inclusion of transparent standards, incorporating proven practices, services, or products. There is no single solution or path to an environmental program. It is done by adopting the obvious solutions appropriate for the organization.

Therefore, there is no end point for environmental success. The measure must be a year-to-year comparison of the kaizan effect of the organization.

kaizen (kai'zɛn) *n*

1. *(Philosophy) a philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices that underlies total quality management and just-in-time business techniques. [literally: improvement]*

When used in the business sense and applied to the workplace, kaizen refers to activities that continually improve all functions, and involves all employees from the CEO to the assembly line workers. It also applies to processes, such as purchasing and logistics that crosses organizational boundaries into the supply chain. By improving standardized activities and processes, kaizen aims to eliminate waste (lean manufacturing).

Kaizen was first implemented in several Japanese businesses after the Second World War, influenced in part by American business and quality management teachers who visited the country. It has since spread throughout the world and is now being implemented in environments outside of business and productivity.

Incremental improvement is not new. It is a proven strategy that seeks to identify weaknesses, flaws, or inherent problems before they manifest in critical problems. This stands in contrast to “Business as Usual” which refuses to apply the “Due Diligence” intended to protect and develop the company.

Kaizen can be applied to nearly any subject. It allows for every level of worker to sharpen the process within a guided program of constant review and allocation of resources.

The environmental program of any organization is best applied in a kaizan-type approach seeking to improve the operation in small and great ways to best address the needs of today’s and tomorrow’s demands.

Therefore, systems that measure annual progress are preferred over fixed systems that represent an achieved goal. For example, installing solar panels may be an excellent step in energy efficiency, but would not be the end of energy efficiency considerations.

Recycling of waste is another good step, but leaves other areas wanting. If we end our pursuit of environmental improvement with recycling, we are neglecting “Source Reduction”, “Internal Policies for Less Waste”, and “Environmental Purchasing”.

Environmental programs are not created by an arbitrary source that favors a select few improvements, but the measure of organizational improvements from year to year. Frankly, if a point system is used to measure progress (regardless of the type of improvement), companies will see value in small steps in the overall environmental success.

While a point system is not available for every environmental sector, GCI has developed a point system for environmental health services. Because cleaning programs are common to all types of organizations, this is one of the best areas to prove the value of an incremental approach to the environmental process.

How GCI Values Environmental Success

GCI has been a standard for environmental fidelity for more than a dozen years. When many jumped into “Green for Show” programs, GCI required proof of measurable progress.

For cleaning organizations, education was the foundation for the certification of a cleaning company. The GCI Certified seal could not be bought. It had to be earned by requiring the management and the front-line workers to earn a certificate based upon educational courses.

GCI also certified products. Those products that could legitimately uphold their claims with honest studies, facts, or research could obtain the GCI Certification.

Facility management wishing to earn the new GCI, EHS Gold certification for their building, have available a credible, best practices standard point’s scale applied fairly to all. It is a program that is validated by GCI and completely transparent to prevent any abuse.

These certifications were not made unreasonably difficult or purposely weak. The goal has been to substantiate the real progress of services, buildings, and products when fairly compared.

At the core, the basic question was not just the promise of something better, the importance of adding a better ingredient, or the public relations value. The best understanding of Green, sustainability, or environmentalism is that it makes our lives and world better. Each step should be measured by the impact on human health.

Health, therefore, seems to be the unequivocal environmental measure that cannot be faked. We either make life in this world better or worse by the actions we take or the products we use.

Environmental Health Services (EHS) is the guiding principal behind all GCI certification. While other points of economics, marketing value, and popular trend may still play a part in decision-making; we remain convinced that the health issues are core to any environmental issue.

Environmental Health Services

Short-term and long-term health factors cannot be a single-solution matter. Our health is a combination of genetics and environment. Just as lead paint and second-hand smoke were brought under scrutiny by the health issues they caused, we are watching the unfolding of other seemingly innocent products and practices that contribute to an unhealthy workforce and a chronically-sick older worker.

Late-term asthma is one of the all-too-common problems for janitorial workers, but it does not stop there. The nursing profession also suffers from “Occupational Asthma” commonly thought to be from constant exposure to cleaning products and sanitizers.

Also known as “Work Related Asthma” (WRA) serious studies have shown a cause and effect for this malady. Liss and Tarlo offer one of the most complete reviews of Work Related Asthma.¹

An OSHA study states: *“An estimated 11 million workers in a wide range of industries and occupations are exposed to at least one of the numerous agents known to be associated with occupational asthma. Occupational factors are associated with up to 15 percent of disabling asthma cases in the United States:”*²

The CDC has a similar study for Work Related Asthma.³ Further study will show other chronic illnesses related to workplace exposure causing chemical sensitivities in people working in what would be called “Sick Buildings”.

Mold in the building is always a health threat, but the constant introduction of various cleaning products is also a matter that we can control.

Other diseases include heart disease, neuropathy, liver disease, endocrine imbalances, and cancer depending on the types of chemicals introduced to the workplace on a routine basis.

The EHS certification addresses the issues we can control, and education is always the starting point. Workers and companies cannot blindly move to an environmental program regardless of the fees paid or associations joined. An environmentally-healthy workplace is accomplished by a consistent effort to improve the core elements no matter how insignificant they may seem.

¹ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1740344/pdf/v059p00503.pdf>

² <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/occupationalasthma/>

³ <http://www.cdc.gov/VitalSigns/Asthma/>

Hence the EHS program by GCI is a comprehensive list of possible improvements that have shown they can improve the overall building health. Not all buildings will follow the same set of items on the list, but any company earning 350 points of the over 1100 points available, has shown considerable progress toward establishing an environmentally-healthy facility.

Conclusion

The need for standardized environmental programs seems obvious. Yet, the idea of one comprehensive program covering all aspects is impractical because the broad topics in themselves cover a wide list of elements. Energy savings alone is a huge topic. Recycling processes, including Source Reduction, are equally extensive.

Building construction and remodeling can be a volume of considerations. There are further concerns for water conservation, water management, and water pollution.

When we look at sustainable practices, we find issues of vehicle purchases, maintenance, transportation, logistics, and packaging.

An article for the Huffington Post may help explain the challenge of standards in the environmental

“A growing number of people are interested in investing in companies that perform well environmentally as well as economically. Unfortunately, measuring environmental performance is not as straightforward as calculating a simple financial return on investment. Developing a yardstick for environmental performance is inherently fraught, forcing evaluators to reduce all of the complex dimensions of sustainability, greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption, biodiversity impacts and other factors into a single value. Unsurprisingly, there is no consensus on the “right” approach and a proliferation of methodologies has caused confusion and eroded confidence among potential investors. When researchers at UCLA and McGill University conducted an evaluation that disentangled the different dimensions of environmental performance, they found troubling results. The study revealed that the market appears to be measuring and rewarding sustainability efforts that don't necessarily translate into meaningful outcomes.” KC McKana – Huffington Post 3/01/2014⁴

We at GCI conclude, that it may be the best choice to “Pick Your Battle” where there is an interest and ability to achieve a stated goal and then move to another sector. If LEED certification is the goal, then make that the primary target. If there is a desire to

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ucla-inst-of-the-environment-and-sustainability/market-may-reward-greenwa_b_4881571.html

reduce the carbon footprint, go with that for now. This does not prevent ancillary improvement or focus on another sector later.

For many operations, the environmental health and safety of facility occupants is the core issue for everyone in the building. Since cleaning and maintenance is at work in every building, it seems appropriate to start with an effort to improve the environment as a contribution that has immediate and long term value.

Therefore, the question of Green, sustainability, or environmental progress, seems to be about progress at some level or any level. Progress, however, can be hard to measure, momentary. By adopting an existing international standard that offers variety in the methodology by real, measurable points on a checklist; the ability to make progress is not left to random or inconclusive efforts.

Every step forward helps. We do not live in a non-consequential world. Therefore, the ROI is not the only measurement of a sustainable program. Environmental efforts should focus on the kaizen of the program at each and every level.

There is no end to the process, but there can be recognizable mileposts that demonstrate that people, organizations, businesses, and communities are more than spectators to the issues impacting our lives.

To make environmental progress possible, we may need to choose reasonable areas of environmental improvement and attain a level of performance in one sector as a start. When satisfied that there has been good progress, this approach would allow resources to then be turned to a new sector without neglecting the work already done.

