

**Keys to the kingdom:
The key to sustainability in the African American community may simply be in
putting it to work**

George B. Brooks, Jr., Ph.D.

Dr. Brooks is the Executive Director Arizona Commission on African American Affairs and publisher of Southwest Green, the first magazine in the Phoenix metropolitan area to focus on sustainability.

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Understanding the Issue

To survive slavery, Jim Crow and all of related challenges, African Americans have always been ingenious (Nalebuff and Ayres 2003, Whitaker 2005, Alozie 2008, Whitaker 2008). They had had to figure out how to maximize the benefit from the assets and tools at hand. Today, there is a new tool that when properly put to work can bring significant benefits to the African American community and serve as a model for others to follow. It is called Applied Sustainability.

In my opinion, Green or more properly Sustainability really has not been sold well. By its common definition, sustainability (sustain + ability) means to be able to keep a process, business, family or society viable for an extended or even indefinite amount to time. Google the term however, and more than 20 additional different definitions will appear ranging from the environmental to economic. From what I have seen, this lack of a clear understanding as to what Sustainability is has left the general public understandably confused. Never the less, as witnessed by former Vice President Al Gore's Academy Award winning movie "An Inconvenient Truth" and Van Jones' 2008 bestseller "The Green Collar Economy," green is the "cause celeb" of the day. Arizona State University's Morrison Institute for Public Policy recently described it as "for Arizona, the Issue of Our Age" (Heffernon et al. 2007).

Rachel Carson whose landmark book *Silent Spring* (1962), opened the eyes of the American public to environmental concerns and likely inspired today's Green movement once said "*Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species -- man -- acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world.*" Her words were prophetic for it is now nearly common knowledge that the world has recently crossed an environmental tipping point (Gladwell 2002, Wright 2005). Unless solutions are found, the increasing environmental, social and economic costs will call the long-term viability of our society into question. These costs or externalities are now not only having an effect on global scales but on the individual as well. In other words, the sustainability problems of the world are now a matter of personal responsibility. As witnessed by recent

statements by both former presidential candidates, McCain and Obama, leadership now understands that for society to survive into the future, it must go green (Brooks, Personal Experience 2008).

In a response to global needs, the application of “green” has been focused largely on reducing energy use, waste production, better management of the bio/physical environment and on how to integrate these concepts into business and government institutions (Epstein 2008). The sheer scale of what is being proposed for a new sustainable world is staggering. In order to do more with less, more cleanly and more safely, nearly every facet of society will have to be changed. The recent advent of “Hybrid” high gas mileage automobiles and energy saving Compact Fluorescent Light (CFL) bulbs are only the tip of the iceberg. As Van Jones states in his aforementioned book, millions of people will be needed to fill the new Green Collar jobs that are coming (Jones 2008).

Thanks to the volumes of information now available, sustainability is today seen as a critical goal to achieve. Regrettably however, it is often managed as an environmental compliance issue that does not necessarily add readily perceived value to business or government and so may be seen as a liability on the short term. This misperception is compounded by the fact that though most of the new sustainable technologies are cost effective, initial production costs, economy of scale issues, and an intensified regulatory environment have combined to increase the initial price of going green in some cases (Epstein 2008).

As a case in point, at the opening of a recent business “green” roundtable as is traditional, the host asked each participant to introduce themselves and their business. However, to make things a bit more interesting, she also asked for each person to provide their opinion on “if one can be “green” and also make a profit?” For those in that room the answer was yes. However, they were all “green” practitioners and so slightly biased in their opinion. There must be better way of doing things where such questions as posed by the host need not be asked.

All I have said, can be summarized by the following comment made by a junior college vice president from a school in California I interviewed recently on how his institution is implementing sustainability. His response to my question echoed others I had heard many times, *“We have only so much money and we know going green is expensive. With trying to keep the school stable we just don’t have the resources to do the environmental thing right now.”* One may argue as to the wisdom of this viewpoint, but it is non-the-less common. Most importantly it provides a concise metaphor for the challenge of implementing sustainability in the African American community where often the individual trying to keep his family or business alive today, is really not overly concerned with saving the world for tomorrow. For sustainability to be better understood and more widely adapted by the general public I suggest what is needed is a fresh way to approach the issue.

Flipping the Script

Approaching a question in a counterintuitive manner can sometimes provide new insights, encourage ingenuity, and generate on occasion, game changing innovations (Sheahan 2008; Nalebuff and Ayres 2003). Consider John F. Kennedy’s challenge of “Ask not what the country can do for you, but what you can do for your country?” This simple statement “flipped the script” and brought an instant understanding to a nation of its needs and responsibilities, galvanized public opinion for a new cause and generated new ideas that we are still using today. So following Kennedy’s example and changing the question, the key to accelerating the move to sustainability for any community and organization may simply be to put it to work.

The “Value Chain comprises all the activities an organization needs to undertake in order to create or add value to its products or services” (www.quantum3.co.za/CI%20Glossary.htm 2008). Putting green to work by placing it in the value chain changes the question from “how to comply with the need to be more sustainable?” to “how can sustainability or more accurately the processes and technologies used to become sustainable, help to add value?” The technical term for this

process is “Applied Sustainability.”(www.appropedia.org/Applied_sustainability 2008). As with John Kennedy’s admonition, this simple idea flip adds considerable clarity and new dimensions to the challenge of being green. A proactive means of creating Sustainable Value as opposed to Figge, & Hahn’s, (2004, 2005) assessment based model, adding green to the value chain allows new process synergies and benefits to be derived that can be exploited to give better short term and long-term results. Most importantly, it changes the perception and perhaps the reality of sustainability from being one of a potential liability to that of a valuable asset.

Putting sustainability to work is not a new idea. It is part of American culture that our grandmothers knew well and put to good use. Consider what our grandmothers and great grandmothers who lived through the depression did to survive. They knew how to make do and how to make a way out of no way. They knew that to survive they had to keep their family and community together, healthy, housed and well fed. They knew how to stretch a dime and turn it into a dollar, plant a garden, reuse, renew, rebuild and how to do more with less. They knew how to create value. They knew how to sustain. Our grandmothers were green (Brooks 2008).

In this context, being sustainable is to make and apply long term environmentally, socially and economically sound decisions to solve short term problems. Our grandmothers did not know it but this exactly what they were doing. They were not trying to be green, just take care of their families the best way they knew how. Unknowingly, they had discovered that sustainability could be a powerful proactive tool to use to reach greater goals, like survival. (Brooks 2008).

According to a variety of news reports (<http://greenited.com/blog/?p=251>), the administration of President Barack Obama has also seen the value of the putting green to work strategy. At the time of this writing, the nearly trillion dollar 2009 federal stimulus package is under debate in the U.S. Senate. Within this package are a number of provisions where green processes and technologies are being used not only for their

ability to save the world, but instead to solve the short term problems of creating jobs, rebuilding infrastructure and insuring the nation's energy security.

Creating a New Reality

I admit that the idea of putting sustainability to work is a paradigm shift. It is somewhat akin to learning that it matters more what one does with the water than whether the glass is half full or half empty. This change in thinking however, now allows us to ask new questions and seek different proactive solutions to the continuing challenges facing the African American Community. The potential of this shift is difficult to measure but will clearly affect every individual living in the world today.

The Chinese sage Lao Tzu once suggested, *“the true nature of things cannot be explained in words so why try. However, what cannot be explained can be demonstrated”* (Heider 1985). As did our grandmothers, there are today individuals and agencies that are harnessing the power in sustainability and are putting it to beneficial use within Arizona's African American community. Their actions provide excellent examples of what can be done and will inspire others to do more. The following are three of their stories:

The Arizona Minority Business Enterprise Center: Phoenix Arizona

The AzBizGreen: Minority Green Business Conference: How green can improve profitability and level the business playing field.

Project Description

In the Fall of 2007, the advent of the City of Phoenix Environmentally Preferred Purchasing program opened significant new opportunities for any business that understood sustainability and could provide the necessary products. Minority businesses often marginalized and left behind, now had the opportunity to lead and innovate in this new business area if they knew how. January 16th, 2008 at Arizona State University Downtown, AzBizGreen the first in the Nation Minority Green Business Conference took place. The conference was hosted by the Arizona Minority Business Enterprise Center (AMBEC) in association with NxTHorizon.com magazine, Arizona State University Downtown (ASU) and the Global Institute of Sustainability at ASU Tempe.

Goals

The goal of the conference was to as a pilot project, introduce the minority business community in Phoenix Arizona to:

- A. What sustainability is.
- B. Benefits that can be gained from going Green.
- C. Green business opportunities presented by the City of Phoenix, Arizona State University and a number of different entities.
- D. How to finance a green venture.
- E. How green is leveling the business playing field.

Results

The conference was a huge success with a full house of more than 140 people attending. The response was excellent. To quote Ron Busby President and CEO of the Greater Phoenix Black Chamber of Commerce, *"When they came to us years ago with construction opportunities, as a whole, we were not ready. When the same happened later with biotechnology, we were not able to field businesses. However now with green we have the chance again and we will not miss it this time."*

The conference program provided a general overview of green business opportunities including "Building a green procurement program, creating a green home, what is sustainability, the City of Phoenix and Arizona State University Environmentally Preferred Purchasing Programs and Financing your new green business venture. All PowerPoint presentations that were used as part of a workshop were archived on the web for future access.

Because the conference was the first in the United States, it was featured in Black Enterprise Magazine and the Phoenix Business Journal. The Wright Place Television from Los Angeles filmed the event and it appeared as part of PBS special later in the year. In addition, the conference was able to attract a number of corporate sponsors

including Arizona Public Service, Salt River Project, the City of Phoenix, City of Phoenix Aviation and Evo Earth.

Social Outcomes

- Based on the information that was presented, those attending should now have an improved knowledge of the benefits of sustainability. As they implement sustainable practices within their business and homes the resulting reductions in environmental impacts will allow for the direct social benefits of improved economic stability, health and improved living and working environments. They will also now be able to put green to work by applying the sustainable practices that they have learned to achieve other goals.
- The conference participants are now new potential proponents of Green, thus moving the nation further along the path to long-term sustainability. In addition, by the conference receiving national press, many more may now seek a greater understanding of sustainability and what can be done with the process..

Economic Outcomes

- The participants learned that because green opportunities in business are so new, small nimble businesses that have the knowledge and can move quickly can compete with larger more established entities that are not as flexible for market share. In other words at least for the short term, green is leveling the business playing field. This is an opportunity that may not occur again in decades. This improved understanding of green will increase their ability to make a profit by competing in the sustainability arena.

Environmental Outcomes

- The participants now have an improved knowledge of the benefits of sustainability. This increases the opportunity for the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution and landfill bound waste through the implementation

of sustainable practices by in the attending businesses and the owner's households.

Southminster Social Service Agency: Phoenix Arizona

The Green Survival Initiative: Putting green to work to help mitigate high-energy costs on low-income homes.

Project Description

The Green Survival Initiative seeks to provide low-income (fixed or otherwise) homeowners or renters who pay their own utilities with easy to use and highly cost effective green technologies. The purpose is to help mitigate increasing energy costs. The project seeks to provide each home a Green Survival Sustainability Starter Kit containing for example: Twenty-one (21) CFL light bulbs, two (2) low-flow shower heads, a kitchen thermometer and a simple tire gauge. Proper use of this equipment could allow \$300 to \$500 of annual energy savings per household. Training will also be given in how to use the resources as well as in other ways to save energy if the homeowner wishes. Additional information will be provided on how to access additional help with utility bills and weatherization through the Federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and related local utility, the Obama administration's green initiatives and other government and charitable assistance programs.

Tentatively, to qualify for this program, a household income must be at or below 150% of the Federal Low Income guidelines. The poverty rate in Maricopa County (Phoenix Metro) Arizona is currently hovering around 13% (City of Tempe 2007). This means there are literally hundreds of thousands of people that could be helped. Most importantly, every dollar that is saved goes back into the local economy. This could mean millions of dollars back in circulation to help reverse the current economic downturn.

Middle-Income Assistance

Green/Sustainable living can be of even greater assistance to those of middle-income, so called Main Street USA. Throughout Maricopa County there are energy programs where

the local utilities will help homeowners and small businesses be more energy efficient. Some programs even offer rebates and possible loans on upgrades that will reduce home energy use. Along with assistance to those of low income, the GSI will also offer information to middle income families on what they can do to reduce energy costs through sustainability.

Partners

Partners in this project include Southminster Social Service Agency, Southwest Green Magazine, Arizona State University on-line, the City of Phoenix Neighborhood and Human Services Departments and the Arizona Minority Business Enterprise Center.

Pilot Program

As the program's Fiscal Agent, Southminster Social Service Agency is designing a pilot project. Located in the 85040 zip code within the South Mountain Village of Phoenix Arizona, the goal of the pilot is to assist a minimum of 1,000 families within the next year. An administrative area of the City of Phoenix with nearly 100,000 residents, South Mountain Village is the most ethnically diverse region within the City. It is also one of the most economically diverse boasting neighborhoods of million dollar homes as well of areas of poverty, high unemployment and low high school graduation rates. The official launch date is scheduled for March 1, 2009.

Goals

General:

- To use sustainable practices to help mitigate high energy costs in 1,000 low-income households.
- To help stabilize and revitalize a low-income neighborhood through the social, economic and environmental benefits gained from this 1,000 home pilot project.

Social:

- Energy costs reduced for 1,000 households allowing for additional resources be focused on improving family quality of life including food, health, recreation, and education.
- Improved sense of self-reliance, personal responsibility and economic security allowing for additional and synergistic benefits to be desired by each family.
- Thousands of families experiencing the benefits that sustainable living would bring along with hundreds of thousands of others who would through media releases be aware of the program.

Economic

- \$300 to \$500,000 annually added to the local economy in the middle of a recession.
- 100 million dollars worth of homes in less danger of foreclosure.
- 1,000 home in less danger of losing critical utility services.

Environmental

- Neighborhood carbon footprint reduced by 5.4 million pounds of carbon dioxide annually. (Estimated from the reduction in electricity usage resulting from the use of CFL lights, reducing water heater temperatures to 120 degrees, the increase in gasoline mileage gained from maintenance of proper tire air pressures and the reduction in the use of hot water as a result of the use of low flow showerheads.)
- Neighborhood use of gasoline reduced by 30,000 gallons annually. (calculated from a 3% increase in fuel economy generated by participants maintain proper air pressure in their automobile tires.)
- Neighborhood use of water reduced by 26 million gallons annually. (Generated by each household reducing water usage in their showers from 4+ gallons per minute to 1.6 gallons per minute.)

**Keys Community Center South Mountain Village, Phoenix Arizona:
Neighborhood Garden Project:** “Youth go green and dare to dream”
How can Green be used to help meet the Center’s neighborhood outreach goal.

“Knowledge, Education, Youth and Society (KEYS) are the foundation precepts of KEY'S Community Center” (www.southwestleadership.org/keys.html 2008). Under the leadership of Executive Director Deborah Chapman, its mission is to provide training for the personal and professional betterment of South Mountain Village and in particular area residents within the 85040 zip code the same as for the Green Survival Initiative. The focus of KEY's Community Center is on and professional skill enhancement including GED preparation, continuing education computer preparation. Job readiness classes and case management services provide supplemental assistance. In addition, the center offers a variety of outreach services to area youth to tackle the challenges of teen development.

Goals

Part of the mission of KEYs Community Center is to promote wellness and youth development, while creating a beautification and community involved project for the youth participating in the Dare to Dream Youth Development program. The goals of the Dare to Dream program are:

1. To bring people from different backgrounds together to work on a common community project;
2. To provide the youth in the area a real-life experience of team building and community action,
3. To provide a vehicle that promotes economic development, which can in turn increase income for residents in the community (Chapman, 2008).

KEYs uses an Asset Based Community Development approach based on the concept that all communities have significant resources that can be invested to its benefit beyond the economic. This hand, heart, head approach seeks to understand the talents that are inherent in the people and looks to see how they can be used to the benefit of the individuals and the community as a whole. It was this analysis that lead KEYs to the Community Garden projects. In doing a community asset survey, they discovered a common interested in gardening that crossed the age, socio/economic and language

barriers. To quote the executive director, “Almost everybody had a garden story where it was source of health and community connection for their families.”(Chapman 2008).

Partners

Partners for this project include The Home Depot in collaboration with the Mexican American Soccer League, Salt River Project, Southminster and Valley Presbyterian Churches (Chapman, 2008; Brooks personal experience, 2008). The Home Depot, along with partners provided volunteers, tools, transplants, compost, fencing, and a beautiful mural to symbolize the efforts to revitalize the community and engage youth in positive forms of community development.

Outcomes

The community garden concept is growing rapidly and in November of 2008 The Home Depot in collaboration with the Mexican American Soccer League, Salt River Project, and Southminster and Valley Presbyterian Churches helped to launch a garden planting and community center renovation at the KEYS Community Center main site. More than 100 youth, residents, master gardeners, and members from local churches attended (Chapman 2008; Brooks personal experience 2008)

Social

- The results of this effort have been encouraging. Starting with a small test garden neighborhood youth began to learn the concepts of applied sustainability. They were taught how personal responsibility and an eco-friendly strategy could leave a positive footprint on the earth while helping their community and their families at the same time. Some of the vegetables produced were also to go back to the KEYS pantry demonstrating servant leadership. All of these things combined provided the students with the foundations to become the Green Collar workers of tomorrow and to create sustainable value in their communities today.

- The youth participating in this program that were initially very disconnected and uncaring about their neighborhood are now starting to show pride in their work. In addition they are now starting to take the skills learned here back to their homes.

Economic

- In that the garden is a potential revenue source and so are learning the tenants of business including money management, and entrepreneurship.

Environmental

- As the youth begin take the skills learned here back to their neighborhoods and homes, environmental benefits of healthier living conditions and organic fruit and vegetable sources will be gained as student based home or school green project begin.

Conclusion

I will not be “Pollyannaish” and suggest that the application of sustainable principles in the value chain will always provide dramatic results. Therefore, the traditional and deeply ingrained compliance view of green will remain for it adds significant value to the process. However, as more and more individuals and businesses learn that green is a powerful proactive tool that can help build value and achieve superior results, the number of projects finding new ways to put sustainability to work will increase and so will the economic, social and environmental benefits that accrue to the Community.

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