

Center for a Sustainable Future
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**Book Review: *The Natural Step for Business: Wealth, Ecology
and the Evolutionary Corporation***

**CSF White Paper No. 4
(March 27, 2012)**

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The *Natural Step for Business* by Brian Nattrass and Mary Altomare introduces the Natural Step framework of consciousness and actions for the business community. The Natural Step framework, which was developed by Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt, a physician specializing in cancer research, acts as a guide for businesses that wish to become sustainable, whether for moral reasons or to remain competitive in a quickly changing economic and social climate.

The Natural Step introduces the concepts of the resource funnel and the four system conditions for a sustainable society. The resource funnel is a diagram that illustrates how the behaviors of society and business have led to a shrinking window of opportunity with regard to available resources. As more resources are taken from the earth and more waste accumulates, the walls of the funnel grow narrower, creating conditions that are not conducive to success in business as well as a reality where environmental degradation imposes severe limits on what can be accomplished. The Natural Step framework encourages businesses and business leaders to anticipate the narrowing walls of the funnel and act accordingly, which involves rethinking every aspect of the activities in which business involves itself. Making changes now eventually leads to cost savings in the future by anticipating increasing energy cost rates as well as future taxes that could be imposed to offset environmental degradation.

The Natural Step framework provides four system conditions for society to become sustainable. The conditions state that in a sustainable society, nature does not face threats from humans relating to extraction of resources from the earth's crust; man-made, non-biodegradable substances that are deposited onto the earth; or physical degradation by humanity, such as the destruction of natural habitats and resources like forests and water supplies. Also in a sustainable society, all human needs can be met. These four guiding principles underlie all thought processes

and actions behind the Natural Step framework, and can be applied to any business that intends to work towards becoming sustainable.

The Natural Step for Business provides four case studies of businesses that have employed the Natural Step framework. It provides the back-story on how each business became drawn to the Natural Step framework, noting the various challenges and successes that each business has experienced through the process. The businesses chosen for the case study include: IKEA, Scandic Hotels, Interface, and Collins Pine. Each firm operates at different levels of the supply chain, possesses varying sizes of workforces, and faces different challenges on the continuing path to sustainability. By discussing these challenges with the people responsible for decision-making within the organizations, *The Natural Step for Business* provides a unique inside look into each operation. The book concludes by analyzing the types of challenges exhibited in the four stories and reaffirms the value and purpose behind the Natural Step framework.

Three particular ideas or themes of the book are especially intriguing. The book illuminates the vastness and breadth of becoming sustainable. It illustrates how sustainability is hardly a trend, but is firmly rooted in society, going back much further than some might imagine. Finally, the underlying philosophy of the Natural Step framework cuts to the truth of living - that we can become conscious of and begin to shape our own evolutionary path through positive visioning. These ideas show how critical sustainability is to businesses and society. While it poses a great challenge, it offers an incredible opportunity to those who wish to take it.

First, the book illuminates the vastness of what I consider to be the breadth of becoming sustainable. By exploring the four different companies interactions with the Natural Step

framework, the book displays very clearly that sustainability involves every aspect of a process and can be applied to situations both large (business) and small (household, individual). This point is reiterated throughout the text if for no other reason than it is the most important concept with regard to the Natural Step and becoming sustainable. In order to embrace sustainability, individuals must first reorient their thinking, casting aside the thick cultural phenomenon of take-make-waste. Businesses must consider all points of their products' life cycle: acquiring the supplies, manufacturing, shipping, sales to the customer, and the eventual end of product usefulness prior to being discarded, recycled, or the materials repurposed. Though this process may be difficult, the book stresses the importance of the very small, noting that to be perfect, while a noble aspiration, is not the point of the Natural Step process. Each company presents a list of all the small things it has done and been able to accomplish toward becoming sustainable, but no one said they had reached a plateau or that they were done. The importance of working hand in hand with suppliers to ensure that the whole process becomes sustainable demonstrates how quickly sustainable practices might spread throughout the world. The eventual cost-savings of sustainable practices also offers further motivation for businesses to go this route.

Second, of the four businesses examined, the Collins Pine story intrigued me the most. I was very happy to read about a company that has essentially been working toward sustainability since the 1930s. This example really hits at how sustainability is hardly a trend, but is firmly rooted in society, going back much further than some might imagine. I truly cherish forested land, and to see Collins Pine's approach to managing its forests shows me how very possible it is for people to meet their needs for wood products and still maintain and ensure that forests will be protected and continue to give us the priceless yet entirely free benefit of pure oxygen. My family used to take trips to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan when I was younger, and we saw

first hand many instances of forests being clear-cut. To me, that kind of destruction is senseless, so to see companies out there that think far enough ahead to truly care for and properly manage forests brings me some joy.

Finally, the underlying philosophy of the Natural Step framework cuts to the truth of living. The idea that humanity has arrived at a juncture where we can become conscious of our own evolutionary path strikes right to the core of what I want to do. The idea of positive visioning becoming critical to businesses and society in general poses a great challenge, yet an incredible opportunity to those who wish to take it. By visualizing a successful outcome and working backwards, or “back-casting,” truly amazing things might be able to happen. I definitely felt by the end of the book that the concepts discussed throughout the text could endear themselves to just about anyone, save only the most narcissistic and shallow armageddon-ists. Hopefully more businesses, communities, and individuals will get on board with the Natural Step framework and help to advance the “shared mental model” of sustainability.

Primary Resource

Natrrass, Brian F. and Mary Altomare. *The Natural Step for Business: Wealth, Ecology and the Evolutionary Corporation*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society, 1999.

Additional Resources

Cook, David. *The Natural Step: Towards a Sustainable Society*. Totnes, Devon : Green Books for the Schumacher Society, 2004.

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Natrrass, Brian F. and Mary Altomare. *Dancing With the Tiger: Learning Sustainability Step by Natural Step*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society, 2002.

Robèrt, Karl-Henrik. *The Natural Step Story: Seeding a Quiet Revolution*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society, 2002.