

Change agents for corporate sustainability: the role of competencies in sustainability transformations

This paper investigates the competencies that change agents apply to enhance corporate sustainability transformations in different opportunity contexts.

The importance of individual agency and the competencies needed to advance sustainability transformations have widely been discussed in fields such as education for sustainable development, sustainability management and also strategic management, leadership and innovation studies. In these fields, competencies contributing to sustainability are described as, among others, systemic and anticipatory thinking. However, these competencies are often not linked to the roles that change agents can adopt in different kinds of transformative processes and stages. Facilitators, initiators, or promoters are, for example, such roles and the competencies needed in these roles are different. Furthermore, the ability for change agents to use certain roles and competencies also depends on the opportunity contexts. Opportunity contexts are situations that demonstrate certain ‘windows of opportunity’, in which change agents can apply their competencies to foster transformative processes. Westley’s model of strategic agency (2013) serves as theoretical basis for this paper, because it allows to investigate the dimension of individual agency in opportunity contexts, in which change agents operate.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine the link between sustainability competencies observed in different kinds of change agents roles, which are used in varying opportunity contexts. Qualitative interviews with twelve change agents from business and societal contexts are conducted. The research contributes to a better understanding of the interrelation of change agent roles, their competencies and the dynamic nature of applying these in different opportunity contexts.

Key words: change agents, corporate sustainability, sustainability competencies, transformation, resilience, windows of opportunity, sustainability management