

## Meyer's Management Models

# 66. Sustainability Maturity Ladder

What are the different levels of sustainability that my organization can achieve?

### Key Definitions

A product or practice is *sustainable* if it can be continued over a longer period of time without depleting natural or social resources. So, *sustainability* is the quality of engaging in current activities in such a way that future possibilities are not diminished.

Organizations have always been concerned with their *own* sustainability, wanting to ensure their survival as a business or a not-for-profit actor. But more recently, organizations have paid increasing attention to the sustainability of their *surroundings*, given the organization's impact on the environment and society (the indirect consequences that economists call *externalities*).

### Conceptual Model

The *Sustainability Maturity Ladder* outlines the five levels of sustainability that organizations can achieve. Typically, organizations will progress through each level as a developmental stage, gradually climbing the ladder to become more mature as sustainable organization. The framework details the characteristics fitting to each stage, although in practice organizations will not neatly fall into these five categories, nor go through all stages in the same way and at the same speed. The framework is intended to help organizations map where they stand and suggest what a next development step could be.

Central item, key importance	Transforming industry rules	Central to organizational culture	Inspiring industry role model	<b>5. Purposeful</b> Achieve net positive impact	System-wide execution abilities	Radical reinvention initiatives	Performance management system	Advocacy-oriented reporting
Frequent item, high importance	Proactive, key differentiator	Structural engagement approach	One of best in class	<b>4. Strategic</b> Strive for net zero impact	High internal execution abilities	Innovation-driven initiatives	Extensive performance dashboard	Extensive reporting to stakeholders
Regular item, medium importance	Opportunistic, balance risk & return	Regular engagement initiatives	Quickly following industry norm	<b>3. Tactical</b> Reduce negative impact	Supportive culture & abilities	Best practice-driven initiatives	Selected performance indicators	Selected performance reporting
Occasional item, low importance	Defensive, minimize risk	Occasional bottom-up engagement	Slowly following industry norm	<b>2. Compliant</b> Conform to legal rules	Low ability & neutral culture	Compliance-driven initiatives	Compliance-oriented measures	Legally required reporting
Rare item, minimal importance	No consistent policy	Ad hoc bottom-up engagement	Not actively following others	<b>1. Ad Hoc</b> No structural ambition	Minimal skills & conflicting culture	Random adaption initiatives	No structural measurement	No information sharing
<b>Agenda</b> Priority level to top team	<b>Strategy</b> Type of policy pursued	<b>Engaging</b> Involving internal people	<b>Leading</b> Driving external parties	©Ron Meyer 2024	<b>Capability</b> Capacity to implement policy	<b>Activities</b> Type of initiatives taken	<b>Measuring</b> Internally assessing initiatives	<b>Reporting</b> Externally presenting results
<b>Mobilization: Sustainability Willingness</b>					<b>Realization: Sustainability Ability</b>			

### Key Elements

The five development levels on the ladder are:

- 1. Ad Hoc Level.** At the lowest level, sustainability is not an issue that receives structural attention, but a rare topic that is reactively dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

2. **Compliant Level.** Once sustainability gets on the radar screen, it is seen as a nuisance that needs to be managed. Organizations minimize risk by sticking to the legal rules.
3. **Tactical Level.** As organizations realize their responsibility for externalities, they will make regular efforts to reduce their negative impact, as long as it doesn't hurt their core business.
4. **Strategic Level.** Once organizations embrace the ambition to be fully sustainable and have a net zero impact, it becomes a central plank of their strategy and key to their identity.
5. **Purposeful Level.** At the highest level, organizations can strive to be more than sustainable, making it part of their organizational purpose to give back more than they take.

Each of these five development levels has eight distinguishing characteristics:

1. **Agenda.** This refers to the extent to which sustainability is seen as a topic with which top management needs to be actively involved. How high is it on the boss's to-do list?
2. **Strategy.** With what type of approach does top management react to the topic of sustainability? Do they see it as threat or as opportunity?
3. **Engaging.** To what extent is sustainability an issue that involves of a large portion of the organizational population? Is it a rallying cry that mobilizes internal people?
4. **Leading.** How does the organization position itself vis-à-vis other organizations on the topic of sustainability? Does it want to follow or lead external parties?
5. **Capability.** To what level has the organization developed the skills and culture necessary to be sustainable? Does the organization have the ability to behave sustainably?
6. **Activities.** How advanced are the types of sustainability initiatives that the organization implements? Are the interventions conventional or more innovative?
7. **Measuring.** How sophisticated is the internal system for assessing sustainability performance? To what extent can the organization track and trace how well it's doing?
8. **Reporting.** How sophisticated is the system for externally publicizing sustainability performance? In what way does the organization present its results to the outside world?

## Key Insights

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- **Sustainability is about safeguarding future potential.** To act sustainably is to ensure that an organization's impact on its environmental and social surroundings doesn't diminish future possibilities for the organization and others. It's about not running things down.
- **Sustainability can be approached at five different levels.** Organizations can engage with the topic of sustainability at five levels of intensity, varying from a standoffish attitude to fully embracing its central importance. Organizations can react haphazardly (*ad hoc level*), defensively (*compliant level*), opportunistically (*tactical level*), proactively (*strategic level*) and idealistically (*purposeful level*).
- **Sustainability levels differ with regard to willingness to be sustainable.** The five levels can be differentiated based on how each takes a different approach to *mobilizing* people to deal with sustainability. They differ in how high the topic is on the *agenda*, the type of *strategy* pursued, how internal people are *engaged* and how external people are *led*.
- **Sustainability levels differ with regard to ability to be sustainable.** The five levels can also be distinguished by the organization's ability to *realize* sustainable behavior. They differ in what type of *capabilities* have been developed, what type of *activities* are carried out, how performance is *measured* internal and *reported* externally.
- **Sustainability levels are the rungs on a maturity ladder.** Some organizations have started at a high level, but most are in the process of gradually climbing the ladder to a higher level of sustainability maturity. However, this evolution differs wildly by organization.

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## **Meyer's Management Models**

### ***Insightful Tools to Kickstart Your Thinking***

#### **Publication Schedule**

<b><i>July 2019</i></b>	<b><i>Mind the Gap Model</i></b>	<b><i>Change Management</i></b>
<b><i>August 2019</i></b>	<b><i>Digital Platform Map</i></b>	<b><i>Digital Strategy</i></b>
<b><i>September 2019</i></b>	<b><i>Interaction Pressure Gauge</i></b>	<b><i>Interpersonal Interaction</i></b>
<b><i>October 2019</i></b>	<b><i>Revenue Model Framework</i></b>	<b><i>Revenue Model Typology</i></b>
<b><i>November 2019</i></b>	<b><i>House of Engagement</i></b>	<b><i>Organizational Engagement</i></b>
<b><i>December 2019</i></b>	<b><i>Confidence Quotient</i></b>	<b><i>Trust Building</i></b>
<b><i>January 2020</i></b>	<b><i>Competition Tornado</i></b>	<b><i>Competitive Strategy</i></b>
<b><i>February 2020</i></b>	<b><i>11C Synergy Model</i></b>	<b><i>Corporate Synergy Management</i></b>
<b><i>March 2020</i></b>	<b><i>Leadership Fairness Model</i></b>	<b><i>Leader-Follower Interaction</i></b>
<b><i>April 2020</i></b>	<b><i>Strategic Agility Model</i></b>	<b><i>Strategy Process Approach</i></b>
<b><i>May 2020</i></b>	<b><i>Control Panel</i></b>	<b><i>Corporate Control Dimensions</i></b>
<b><i>June 2020</i></b>	<b><i>Rising Star Framework</i></b>	<b><i>Talent Management</i></b>
<b><i>July 2020</i></b>	<b><i>Strategy Development Cycle</i></b>	<b><i>Strategy Process Steps</i></b>
<b><i>August 2020</i></b>	<b><i>7I Corporate Center Model</i></b>	<b><i>Corporate Organization</i></b>
<b><i>September 2020</i></b>	<b><i>Storytelling Scripts</i></b>	<b><i>Leadership Communication</i></b>
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<b><i>May 2021</i></b>	<b><i>Knowledge Sharing Bridges</i></b>	<b><i>Best Practice Sharing</i></b>
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<b><i>January 2022</i></b>	<b><i>Market System Map</i></b>	<b><i>External Analysis Framework</i></b>
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<b><i>May 2022</i></b>	<b><i>Corporate Value Creation Model</i></b>	<b><i>Corporate Level Strategy</i></b>
<b><i>June 2022</i></b>	<b><i>Change Manager's Toolbox</i></b>	<b><i>Change Methodologies</i></b>

<i>July 2022</i>	<i>Sustainable You Model</i>	<i>Personal Sustainability</i>
<i>August 2022</i>	<i>Value Proposition Dial</i>	<i>Business Level Strategy</i>
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<i>December 2022</i>	<i>Corporate Management Styles</i>	<i>HQ Management</i>
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<i>February 2023</i>	<i>5I Innovation Pipeline</i>	<i>Innovation Process</i>
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<i>August 2023</i>	<i>Activity System Dial</i>	<i>Value Creation Analysis</i>
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<i>October 2023</i>	<i>Status Snakes &amp; Ladders</i>	<i>Leadership Branding</i>
<i>November 2023</i>	<i>Stakeholder Stance Map</i>	<i>Stakeholder Management</i>
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<i>March 2024</i>	<i>MOVING Mission Framework</i>	<i>Organizational Mission</i>
<i>April 2024</i>	<i>Leadership Circle Map</i>	<i>Leadership Skills</i>
<i>May 2024</i>	<i>Digitalization Staircase</i>	<i>Digital Strategy</i>
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<i>July 2024</i>	<i>Wicked Problem Scorecard</i>	<i>Organizational Decision-Making</i>
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<i>September 2024</i>	<i>Guiding STAR Matrix</i>	<i>Objective Setting Approach</i>
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<i>November 2024</i>	<i>Self-Centered Thinking Traps</i>	<i>Thinking Styles</i>
<i>December 2024</i>	<i>Sustainability Maturity Ladder</i>	<i>Sustainability Management</i>
<i>January 2025</i>	<i>Topline Growth Pie</i>	<i>Growth Strategy</i>
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<i>April 2025</i>	<i>Change Management Phases</i>	<i>Change Management</i>
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<i>July 2025</i>	<i>Embedded Innovation Pipeline</i>	<i>Innovation Management</i>
<i>August 2025</i>	<i>Performance Assignment Matrix</i>	<i>Corporate Strategy</i>
<i>September 2025</i>	<i>Triple Diamond Model</i>	<i>Organizational Decision-Making</i>
<i>October 2025</i>	<i>Interpersonal Interaction Levels</i>	<i>Communication Approaches</i>

November 2025	Synergy Value Matrix	Corporate Level Strategy
December 2025	Embedded Identity Model	Personal Awareness
January 2026	Dynamic Organization Paradigm	Human-centered Organization
February 2026	Leadership Journey	Leadership Development