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## Tapping the Potential Within an Inspired Workforce

Source: [Tilde Herrera](#)



Motivated employees can make the difference between success and failure for corporate initiatives that revolve around environmental stewardship or the broader concept of sustainability.

While researching an article on topic several weeks ago, I met Judah Schiller, executive vice president of Saatchi and Saatchi S. The company was hired by Wal-Mart to create a culture of sustainability within its 1.3 million-strong workforce.

Judah recently joined GreenBiz Radio to talk about the tools used to engage Wal-Mart's employees, as well as to offer advice to companies looking for ways to inspire its workers to carry forward sustainability efforts.

**Tilde Herrera:** Good Morning, Judah. So why don't you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your company, and the services that you provide.

**Judah Schiller:** Sure. My name is Judah Schiller. I'm the executive vice president of Saatchi & Saatchi S, which is an amazing new organization that was born out of the acquisition of Act Now Productions, which was founded by Adam Werbach and who was the youngest president of the Sierra Club. It was founded almost 10 years ago now.

What we are is a combination of a consulting firm and agency in the realm of sustainability. So, we work with some of the world's largest companies and organizations to help them achieve their sustainability goals and really define a path for them. It's really uncharted territory.

As a company, our approach has always been to provide a trifecta of services around sustainability. So, it's a combination of the high-level macro strategy, the sustainability visioning and design, the changed management and the operational technical piece.

And then we've got this really interesting niche that not many companies seem to be doing right now, which is this H.R.-meets-sustainability. That's really where we go in and we work with the employee population of large companies and really create cultures of sustainability within the organization so that everyone within the organization is aligned, everything and everyone is firing on all cylinders and really driving to meet the North Star of the organization.

And then finally, we do the creative work: the sustainable brand strategy, green marketing, external communications. That's an area that again we've got a lot of expertise in the green marketplace and so we're really able to provide unique services in that area.

**TH:** Now how does the company define sustainability?

**JS:** That's a great question. You know obviously one can always look to the Brundtland Commission, and these sort of traditional definitions of sustainability are nice but they're, you know, good for what they are.

For us, sustainability has always meant something more personal. It's a 14-letter, six-syllable word. Not many people know what it means. Certainly, the mass consumer base doesn't know what it means.

And so for us, we've always been striving to make sustainability something that's fun, easy to digest, accessible to everybody -- man or woman, old or young, regardless of ethnicity or religion or political orientation.

For us, it's about securing our dreams for tomorrow without sacrificing today. That's really the thrust of it is keeping sustainability something simple. We believe that sustainability needs to be defined much broader than the traditional environmental sustainability.

So for us, we have four different streams of sustainability. We have the environment. We have economics. We have a social component and a cultural component. Our approach really focuses on, 'Yes, the environment matters,' but honestly, a lot of people come to sustainability because of health and wellness, because of their own financial interests, and for a variety of different reasons. As we talked about earlier, saving the trees isn't really the primary one.

People obviously have their daily needs in life. People have families and they have homes and they need money to get to work everyday and gas to put in their cars.

And so, that's how we try and frame up sustainability and make it much broader and much more accessible than traditional definitions or approaches.

**TH:** Now the company's signature sustainability offering is the Personal Sustainability Project. What is this and how did it evolve?

**JS:** So, the Personal Sustainability Project, or PSP for short, came out of a phone call from Andy Ruben, who was the VP of sustainability for Wal-Mart Stores Inc., and has since left that position a couple of months ago but was really one of the leaders in sustainability for a long period of time working with Wal-Mart.

He had approached Adam Werbach probably sometime in 2005 and really wanted to work with Adam and see if he could help figure out this people piece -- you know, Wal-Mart has 1.3 million associates just in the United States alone, and how could we engage the people to really create a culture of sustainability within Wal-Mart?

In 2006, the summer of 2006, we started working and agreed to work with Wal-Mart, which was a big decision to make. A lot of us had been outspoken against Wal-Mart for many years, and Adam certainly was a vocal critic of Wal-Mart.

But we saw the opportunity and the opportunity was really quite immense if you think about it. What if you could touch 1.3 million people with sustainability and speak to them directly?

So that's how we decided to work with Wal-Mart, and we knew from the beginning that PSP, this Personal Sustainability Project, needed to be something that was grassroots. It's impossible to speak directly to 1.3 million people. We needed to have a really effective train-the-trainer model.

So that was the approach and we started building and really working with the Wal-Mart

associates -- and by that I mean the cashiers, the truckers, the assistant managers in the stores, hourly associates -- and really listening to them and understanding what were their aspirations and what were their challenges and what mattered to them in life. How do they see sustainability? How did they want to relate to sustainability?

And so that's how we began to build a really grassroots, authentic project within Wal-Mart, and that's something that we do for every one of our clients, is really listening to the people and building it from the ground up.

One of the other primary features of PSP is that it's voluntary. So no, you can't make anybody be green, or as we say, be blue -- that's the color we ascribed to sustainability because we feel it's more expansive than traditional green. You can't make somebody do that. So how can we actually inspire people to want to learn more and want to do more and embrace sustainability within their daily lives?

And so it was almost nine months of piloting and scaling up and testing our systems and again, always going back to the associates and checking in with them. Is this authentic to you and to Wal-Mart? And it was helping them to see that they're the ones who are in the best position to make decisions in their local communities, not consultants and not executives in Bentonville (Ark.), but people in local communities.

And then finally in March of 2007, we rolled out nationally and delivered over 120 PSP workshops across the country to really touch the, if you can imagine, the tip of the iceberg, the tip of the pyramid for the Wal-Mart organization.

And then they would go back after a day of learning with us and then teach and enroll and inspire 10 more people. And then those 10 people would then go and enroll and inspire the other 4-500 people in every store. You know there's 4,000 stores across America.

After that, we've been supporting them with a variety of communication tools from video, print, Web and a whole slew of different resources, and really working with them every step of the way building this with them over the past year.

And right now in 2008, we're actually doing a deeper dive into health and wellness, which again, in the sustainability context, a large percentage of the Wal-Mart population really took to this out of health and wellness. Seeing what they consumed on a daily basis, exercise, and how that tied into consumption of resources.

A good example I always like to give is if you're eating a lot of fast food, well, that's a lot of fat and sodium. Then you think about how much paper and cardboard and plastic goes into packaging and wrapping the food that you eat and then the garbage that comes out after that.

And so when you put that to somebody who eats a lot of fast food and said, "What if you prepared a meal once or twice a week, and so you can both have an effect on your personal health -- you're eating healthier -- but you can also have an impact on the environment. You're consuming less and you're using less and you're wasting less." So that's how we tied that in.

So we're doing a deeper dive in 2008 and then also touching on financial sustainability and how we can help people have greater financial health in their lives (so) they're better able to support themselves. And then also (we'll focus on) community and outreach, so I think you'll see a lot of amazing things come out of Wal-Mart in the latter half of the summer around outreach and volunteerism.

**TH:** Now what did you learn from creating and trying to implement this approach?

**JS:** That's a loaded question. I think every one of us here at Saatchi & Saatchi S was really blown

away by what happened with PSP and not the least of which was Adam, myself and another partner, Dave Steuer, and the other folks here. You know, PSP really continues to show a great deal of promise and I'll leave it at that. It's really a unique tool within the employee engagement arena and we learned that when you talk to any large group of people, they're the ones with the answers.

Whenever you've got a bunch of people sitting around a conference room table, you're only going to get as much as the minds in that room have to offer, and that's really the thrust of PSP and that's why it's really a compelling tool within an organization to use in that it's based on distributed problem solving.

And so we have this problem and this challenge of creating a sustainable Wal-Mart and that was not something that we could ever have achieved if it was just, you know, even the brightest minds that we would bring in to sit around a table. But we've got so many ideas from the Wal-Mart associates in Arkansas, in Nebraska, in California, in Texas, all across the country and that's really what we learned is that this actually is much bigger than us.

**TH:** And how do you measure success?

**JS:** So, a variety of ways. Obviously every organization, of course Wal-Mart as well, wants to know what's the effect of PSP both in terms of the bottom line and the top line.

So we had a tracking tool, an online tracking tool that we used so that every store could actually report their progress in terms of their individual accomplishments and also their collective accomplishments.

So, one of the things we looked at was weight loss. Wal-Mart as a whole, you know, has some health issues and some health challenges that they're trying to solve. And through Personal Sustainability (Project), collectively, Wal-Mart associates lost almost 200,000 pounds of weight. So that was one area that we really were interested in seeing.

And then also smoking: Almost 20,000 associates quit or reduced their smoking habits, their consumption. So you know those are really big numbers. When you punch some of those numbers into national statistics, the savings to an organization like Wal-Mart, I think for smoking alone, was over \$30 million in savings. And then of course, there's a savings to the associates who gave up some of their smoking and now that has a financial impact on them as well.

We also looked to exercise, and we looked to recycling. And then we also did some interesting work in October, Wal-Mart was really pushing the sales of CFL light bulbs, also working with compacted Tide (laundry detergent) and Pur water filters -- so with P&G and General Electric -- and really seeing if you can take a 1.3 million people and create a powerful sales force for sustainability. Can we move the needle forward on sustainable product sales?

And so that was another area where we actually saw great results that when you come to the associates and you ask them which products do you feel passionate about getting behind and they feel passionate about these three products -- the compacted Tide, the Pur water filters and CFL bulbs as all being sort of emblematic of sustainability, at least where we are right now -- they actually got a very nice lift in their sales and that was something that everybody was proud about and that's frankly what needs to happen.

Consumer demand needs to drive the manufacturers of consumer packaged goods to innovate faster, to innovate more, and that's how we'll see more of these sustainable products hit the shelves.

**TH:** Now what about resistance? Did you face resistance and how did you overcome it?

**JS:** So, by and large, the resistance was minimal and that's tangible resistance. Now you can imagine, in every organization there's going to be a bell curve. You're going to have some people who are extremely passionate, very excited, really want to embrace personal sustainability and then go out of their way to be a part of it.

And you've got the rest of the population who are happy about it. They're enthusiastic about it. They want to participate. And then you've got the tail end in every store, in every facility or office that for one reason or another, they're not ready to walk through the door of personal sustainability quite yet and that's natural.

In terms of resistance, we saw a little bit in a few pockets across America where people were really already practicing a lot around sustainability. They were already recycling. They were already composting. And so for them, it was, "O.K., it's nice that Wal-Mart is doing this but we've already been doing this for 20 years." And so that was actually an opportunity for us to come to them and say, "Fantastic, can you help us to lead this?" So that's how we were able to overcome that resistance.

And then at the organizational level, so more at the corporate level, this has been a big period of change for the Wal-Mart organization. So I don't know if I would call it no resistance necessarily. I think people are cautious. A lot of people's livelihoods are at stake, and every decision, and really every word, that comes out of the executives at Wal-Mart has an effect either on suppliers, or literally on people's lives. And so, some people tended to be cautious but I think at this point now, PSP is really core to the culture and core to the business of Wal-Mart.

**TH:** Now how is PSP different from other sustainability approaches or frameworks such as Natural Step, for instance?

**JD:** Well I mean in the large picture, PSP being a completely bottom up, grassroots, viral framework differs from just about every traditional top down, check-the-box engagement program that's ever been created.

So implementing something viral within an organization and using the tools to do that is something pretty, pretty new.

Natural Step is fantastic. I'm a big fan of the Natural Step. I think where this is different is that in terms of the communications, certainly, I think (there's) a greater degree of simplicity, and the approach that we created at Saatchi & Saatchi S is just markedly different than the Natural Step. And it's something that if you go to our Web site, you can read a lot more about PSP and really what it looks like and what it feels like.

**TH:** Now let's take a step back. What lessons can a company manager or say a small business owner take from all of this? If they're looking for ways to engage their employees to embrace sustainability or green initiatives, what are the key ingredients here?

**JS:** It's a good question. So, I think the first place is to look outside. There's such an abundance of resources, certainly on GreenBiz and a variety of websites, just to educate oneself about the current trends within sustainability. What are some of those great tools and resources? Even coming to our website and just looking at what PSP is and what a bottom up program looks like?

I think that's a great place to start for a manager or an owner of a small business. I think sitting down and really setting out on paper: What are the organization's three goals? What are we trying to accomplish here?

Because the whole point of engaging your people is you want it to benefit them personally, but you also want them to be aligned with organizational goals and to be playing a vital role in driving towards those goals.

So, you know, (it's) setting out: What is my company's North Star? Where do I want to be in three years, in five years, and asking, "What if?" What is the dream state for my company? Is it being a zero-waste company? Is it being fueled by 100 percent renewable energy?

You know whatever it might be, ask yourself, "What if?" That, I think, is really some of the best thinking that can be done from the onset.

And then again, green or sustainability or blue, as we call it -- you can't force anybody to change and that's a surefire way to turn people off. Make it voluntary. Find a way to inspire your people and if they're inspiring their people, it's a great leadership test. Can you inspire your people to follow this new vision and walk this walk of sustainability?

And then also too, attend conferences, go out there. There's so much going on. There's such amazing thinking and really, as you know, amazing people out there with a lot to share and who want to share. And so there's certainly no lack of help out there.

**TH:** And what are the low hanging fruit here?

**JS:** The low hanging fruit in terms of the small business or in terms of large organizations?

**TH:** Say the small business.

**JS:** In the small business, sure. Find somebody within your office who is the most passionate person around sustainability, around the environment, or health and wellness, and walk the office with that person and just look around (from) top to bottom.

Are people printing out on both sides of the paper? Look at the margins. I mean, there was one statistic, which I don't have off the top of my head, but if we just narrowed our margins by, I think like a half an inch nationwide, we'd save millions and millions and millions of trees. I mean small, small things that when you think about it have a very massive effect on the large scale.

Look at your light bulbs. Look at where your garbage is going. How big is the garbage can under your employee's desk? Can you make that garbage can smaller? What if you made it smaller? Where would people throw their garbage? Maybe they wouldn't have so much garbage.

So there are all sorts of things that you can just look at as you walk the office. And then obviously, you can go farther and look at the transportation needs of your employees. What if people actually worked from home once in a while, and what kind of impact that would have. Going over travel plans-- can trips be consolidated? There's lots of low hanging fruit out there.

**TH:** Now you can't talk about the importance of making initiatives voluntary. What else don't you do? What don't you do to turn people off from embracing these sort of initiatives?

**JB:** Yeah. I think you certainly don't compel them. You don't have it be check-the-box because that really doesn't fuel innovative thinking. You have to also respect people's lives and you have to be aware of how much time you're asking them to allocate to this. So, you want your sustainability effort to be sustainable in and of itself.

So this is a long distance race, as you've heard before, and it really is. So thinking about how can I make sure that my valued employees really at the core of my organization are in this for the long haul. You don't want to stifle people's ideas. You want to bring everybody to the table so you want to have mechanisms where people can offer their ideas and have their ideas respected and really looked at appropriately.

You don't want to, depending on the size of the organization -- a small business can (have) quite

a large number of people -- you don't want to be caught off guard and not have the systems to process the hundreds of ideas that will ripple out from across the employee population. So you can't think that you're going to roll something out and that it will carry itself forward.

You really ought to think about who's going to be the shepherd. Who's going to project manage all of these ideas? All those sorts of things so, some planning needs to go into this.

**TH:** Is there anything that you would like to add, Judah?

**JS:** I think that we're always looking for ideas. And we're always looking for advice from either organizations or NGOs, or we always look to nature for the best advice. And this is a joint effort and so I always like it when I frequently get phone calls from people in organizations across the country and really across the world just asking about PSP. And I really encourage that and I'm always happy to share some of my ideas and I think that this is really a way where the employee is boss.

And, you know, look at the working world, and if we can really leverage our collective strengths and touch employees across this country and across the world, what will change? How will that impact our lives and the world around us? And so this is really a collective effort.

**TH:** Well I thank you so much for joining us today.

**JS:** Thanks very much.

*Tilde Herrera is the associate editor at GreenBiz.com.*

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