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COMMUNICATION WITH THE STAKEHOLDERS IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper is aimed on analyzing the supporting role of information and communication technology in the process of sustainable leadership. The holistic component of sustainable leadership represents the overall focus on seeing human being and society as parts of a much bigger whole – an ecosystem that is interconnected and needs to be synchronized.

Methodology – Qualitative methods of interviews, desktop research and secondary data were used in the study.

Findings – Case study's results indicate the means, such as e-mail services, webpage interactive capabilities, Facebook as social networking site and printed media that are mostly used communication tools. "Personal touch" is an emphasized code that was stated as the reason why web communication is most often directed to email or phone call communication. Blogs as social media equivalent of personal web pages are used as a trend tracking tool. YouTube channel as content community media is scarcely used, with intention to be used more for presenting in-situ accommodation and surroundings. There is a lack of resources (financial and human) to systematically use them as well as the lack of comprehensive communication strategy in the field of sustainable tourism.

Contribution – Firstly, justification of communication channels as values in sustainable tourism sector. Secondly, developing a questionnaire appropriate for investigating communication with stakeholders in sustainable tourism should contribute within empirical part. And finally, an overview of different communication tools as valuable tools for improving sustainable leadership as well as rising the level of its recognition within society present a practical implication of this research.

Keywords sustainable leadership, communication tools, tourism, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable leadership demands from top management that it takes the macro view (Avery and Bergsteiner 2011) of the organization's mission because sustainability relates to various aspects of performance and development (Casserley and Critchley 2010): (1) personal: personal psychological and physical health; (2) organizational: maintaining working environment that allows employees the development of multiple intelligences with the aim to achieve organization's objectives, which are aligned with the objectives of stakeholders; (3) social: socially-responsible action in the wider community; and (4) ecological: conservation, sustainable environmental change. Leader's development (McCauley et al. 2010) is an extension of an individual's ability to be successful in leadership roles and processes, while developing leadership skills is

an extension of the collective formation of direction, coordination and commitment to common functioning.

Day (2001) defines developing leaders as development of their competencies in order to be more effective, while leadership development is aimed at helping leaders to develop relational capabilities, collective consciousness and manifesting shared vision.

The more an organisation adopts significant sustainable leadership (SL) practices, the higher the overall stakeholder satisfaction (OSS) is likely to be (Suriyankietkaew and Avery 2014a). The particular SL practices that positively predict enhanced OSS are amicable labour relations, staff retention, strong and shared vision, strategic and systemic innovation, and high staff engagement and quality (Suriyankietkaew and Avery 2014a). Overall, adopting sustainable leadership (SL) practices is related significantly to employee satisfaction, consistent with Avery and Bergsteiner’s model. Twenty of the 23 SL practices were found linked to enhanced employee satisfaction, the exceptions being independence from the financial markets, self-management and environmental responsibility. Specific SL practices predict enhanced employee satisfaction more than others, the strongest predictor being high staff engagement. Other practices associated with employee satisfaction are: valuing employees, ethical behaviour, considered organizational change, a strong and shared vision, an enabling culture, and quality in products and services (Suriyankietkaew and Avery 2014b). Employee characteristics of need for achievement, equity sensitivity and need for clarity moderate the relationship between four leadership paradigms and employee engagement. Zhang, Avery, Bergsteiner and More (2014a) suggest that to improve employee engagement: employers should recruit staff exhibiting characteristics predicted to generate high employee engagement. Zhang, Avery, Bergsteiner and More (2014b) showed that the visionary and organic paradigms are likely to enhance employee engagement, whereas classical and transactional styles negatively affect employee engagement.

Table 1: Sustainable leadership development activities

| Development focus | Community building | Stakeholders' collaboration | Long-term value |
|-------------------------|--|--|---|
| Leadership model | relational (commitments, mutual respect, trust) | | |
| Skills | social awareness (empathy, service orientation, political awareness, building bonds, team orientation, change catalyst, conflict management) | | |
| Communication | community learning by observing processes in the natural environment | code of ethics | communicate clearly long-term values in the market |
| Special activity | develop 10-20 year vision together with the community and other key stakeholders | alignment of system, processes and values with company's shared vision | benchmark leadership practices of companies that are in the market for 50 years or more |

Source: Adapted after G. C. Avery & H. Bergsteiner, How BMW Successfully Practices Sustainable Leadership Principles, Strategy & Leadership, 2011, p. 11; D. V. Day, Leadership Development: A Review in Context, The Leadership Quarterly, 2001, p. 584.

Since research (Avery and Bergsteiner 2011) shows that sustainable leadership builds communities, fosters collaboration among stakeholders and promotes long term value as essential elements of sustainability we propose the following sustainable leadership development activities (Table 1), derived from leadership development (Day 2001) where in this paper we focus our attention on communication in sustainable tourism sector. Roblek, Pejić Bach, Meško and Bertoncej (2013) found out that social media plays a key role in the value added chain in knowledge-based industries.

Sustainable leadership development is proactive in nature and takes care of integrating creativity with discipline in development process. Holistic approach is incorporated and development takes place through storytelling of successful case studies. It is focused on searching possibilities of collaboration with all the key stakeholders within local community. Focus is on the needs of the tourists and locals through dialogue and innovating what could be possible through regular communication process.

1. COMMUNICATION IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Sustainable leadership is considered as integrative part of broader concept of sustainability which is, hereafter, based on economic, social and environmental tourism development. In its nature, the mentioned concept includes certain elements that create a complete tourism experience and encourage the continuous improvement of tourists' experience (Lane 2009; Bramwell and Lane 2009). The concept has emerged with two aims: 1) aim of reducing the negative effects of tourism activities, such as particular degradation of natural landscapes, pollution of coastal zones, the construction of massive transport and building infrastructure, which has become broadly accepted as a politically appropriate approach to tourism development (Sharpley 2003) and 2) aim to identifying the positive benefits such are economic benefits, namely by establishing regulation and development control (Bramwell and Lane 2012). From the local perspective, the concept of sustainable development is applied to reach two complementary goals: firstly, to improve the life quality domestic people by protecting the cultural heritage as well as natural resources and secondly, to provide a qualitative experience for visitors (Park, Yoon and Lee 2008; Lane 2009; Park and Yoon 2009).

Since the sustainable development refers to development and meets the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987), it poses an imperative, on the conceptual level, to establish the node between economic development, environmental protection and social equity. On the operational level, the node should be adduced as information and communication resources and its integrated components.

Sustainability principles are in relations with the environmental, economic and social aspects of tourism development. With the aim of long term sustainability it has to be established the equilibrium between these three dimensions. In that context, Dwyer et al. (2009) stated that tourism firms should adopt so called Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach to sustainable development to ensure that firms integrate social, environmental and economic information into managerial decision-making.

From the aspect of policy making, when community leaders and other local stakeholders invest efforts to make an overall evaluation of environmental, social and economic contexts of the area, establishing a dialogue via off or on line channels becomes a *sine non qua*. Moreover, it facilitates implementation of the sustainable development strategies as well as enables the concept of participation that results with shift in attitudes across sectors and generations (Bowman 2011). Communication tools should also be used to contribute to education process between all stakeholders what also facilitates the sustainable leadership implementation. It seems that, for tourism companies, well-educated and trained staff is a core resource for its survival.

Pearce (1995) stressed the strategic value of coordinated planning as one of core factors in sustainable tourism, both in urban and rural area. In this paper it is argued that communication tools have enough capabilities to assess the comprehensive approach to sustainable tourism development and leadership. The associated process of modeling, measuring and interpreting a series of gap and analyses additionally stress the relevant role of permanent communication and its tools appliance.

Furthermore, on and off line communication tools and its promotion functionalities are used to disclose and support relationships with target markets as well as to emphasize the emotional benefits associated with a valued set of experiences (Dwyer et al. 2009). The postulate that customer orientation is considered as imperative in the marketing process encourages the companies to identify changes in technology, its embedded functionality and generic potential, with the aim to affect the interaction, promotion and stakeholder transparency within tourism area. In particular, they should monitor the extent to which new information and communication technologies affect routine forms of business and personal travel (Buhalis 2003).

As far as rural tourism is considered, it can be noticed some attributes can be particularly affected by communication technology. This type of tourism is developing as an integral part of the environment, in a sustainable way, keeping the identity of the locality and recovering some so called »lost activities and customs«. The rural environment shows the value of reality, no matter how advanced the hotels are. In that context, the presence of the Web, as one of the communication channels, implies a great opportunity for country people to attract the guests by transforming online visitors into its real guests. Thus, the service activities should complement traditional ways of agriculture as a source of income. In accordance with Sanagustin Fons et al. (2011) the communication tools should follow and measure the increase in demand for services and infrastructure that is arising in any kind of rural area and benefits people living in these natural areas (Sanagustin Fons et al. 2011).

From the technical point of view, the communication process is significantly supported by technological infrastructure. It includes components, such as hardware, software, netware, dataware and humanware, that support communication activities and improve processes inherit with sustainability, such are research, development, and training area. Since the fragmented structure of the tourism sector is still a core challenge in developing coherent sustainable tourism strategies (Papatheodorou 2004), the role of communication process supported with technical infrastructure is expected to become more and more relevant over time.

The technology that can support mentioned activities should be mostly addressed as Internet based technology and its “resources”, such as Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0.

Named technologies have been developed to support community building, foster collaboration among stakeholders and promoting long-term value of sustainable tourism. According to Spivack (2013), during Web 1.0 phase i.e. the first generation of the web belonging to the period from 1990 to 2000, the web has been developed for business purposes. Web 1.0 has recognized as “read-only web” allowed the Internet users to search for information and read it. Although user interaction and content contribution was low, Web 1.0 resource has supported establishing an online presence and enabling information availability to anyone at any time. Intending to trace the increasing demand for online services, lots of tourism supply units have established websites to promote their services and products, and to strengthen their relationship with customers (Law et al. 2010, Šerić and Gil Saura 2012).

Web 2.0 can be illustrated as a series of technological innovations that facilitate collaboration, content creation, and interoperability on the World Wide Web. Applying Web 2.0 technologies produces a set of sociological effects caused by (1) shift in locus of activity from the desktop to the Web, (2) shift in locus of value production from the firm to the consumer, and (3) shift in the locus of power away from the firm to the consumer (Brethon et al. 2012, 262).

Within the sustainability context, using above mentioned technologies can induce the change of conceptual basis for natural resource management by encouraging interactive activities among public-private institutions in the process of governance. Active interaction and collaboration facilitated adaptive co-management (Plummer and Fennell 2009) and resulted with shifting attitudes about societal challenges.

Generally, transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 was supported by emergence of social media platforms that encourages participation, sharing and collaboration, rather than straightforward advertising and selling (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Social media platforms refer on blogs, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia) and content communities (e.g. You Tube), i.e. the social media which enabled creation of content and sharing information online in new ways by any, or all participants /consumers /stakeholders (Tokar 2009). This shift quite supports concept of sustainability by offering the platforms for change of information, attitudes and opinions relevant for its further development and evolution.

Moreover, mentioned content communities, appear within wide range of different media types, such as text, photos, PowerPoint presentations and videos, which additionally support the process and quality of community building and foster collaboration among stakeholders. The high popularity of content communities transforms them in attractive contact channel for many tourism firms. For example, the tourism firm may use a combination of social networking sites and content communities to present the range of its products and services (either in real environment, either in augmented reality) to its customers/stakeholders or to connect with them by combining photos shared on the content community, with groups on

social networking sites. Anyway, using different contact channels can be a worthwhile strategy for promoting the concept of sustainability as long-term value of the firms.

Web 2.0 services engage customers (Sashi 2012) and modify the traveler behaviors (Leung et al. 2011). Following the changes and dynamics in consumer behavior many companies have already integrated social media into their strategic plans, especially in the areas of communication and decision making.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

In the first research phase a questionnaire composed of three parts was sent to informant at Raduha case – Mrs Martina Breznik. According Mrs Breznik statement: *“House Raduha is located in the old centre of Luče, Slovenia. It got its name from the Raduha Mountain, which slopes down a ridge to the rocky threshold Breznica right at the edge of the village. The only things separating the house and the Breznica threshold is the Savinja River and garden, which features living units in a beautiful architectural distribution. House Raduha, known among the locals as 'pri Medetu', has been welcoming guests ever since 1875. The cooking skills of grandmothers have helped hone the mastery of granddaughters for four generations.”* (<http://www.raduha.com/en/index.php>).

In the first part of questionnaire it is examined the general overview and acceptance of sustainable tourism concept within Raduha case. Furthermore, in the second part, the role of communication within its sustainable tourism practices has been inquired. Finally, in the third questionnaire part it is examined the supporting role of new technologies to the communication process.

Based on the analysis of the received open questionnaire from Raduha informant on 3rd January 2015 we designed an additional in-depth questionnaire in order to research the reasons for usage and non- usage of certain web communication tools. In the second questionnaire (received 2nd March 2015) a new stakeholder group was identified – creditors where we were interested to know how communication flow differentiates in relation to mass tourism entity (eg. Do banks more trust to sustainable tourism entity that is following long-term value of investment?).

The authors of this paper conducted desktop research of 14 sources (http://www.raduha.com/en/o_nas.php and) conducted 3 telephone conversations with Mrs Martina Breznik. One field visit to Raduha was carried out in November 2014. In accordance with practice that each qualitative researcher needs to justify why the case was chosen, in this case the authors establish the interest for researching Raduha in the fact that it is a distinguished sustainable tourism entity as Raduha received Sejalec award for creative and innovative tourism achievements that contribute to the recognition of Slovenian tourism.

By defining the research question, such as: *How does a business entity in sustainable tourism sector manage communication?* and based on the theoretical background, the authors propose the following:

Proposition 1: Sustainable tourism is dependent on the effective co-operation of all the stakeholders in the industry, for example, suppliers, intermediaries, public sector and consumers.

Proposition 2: Communication is the basic tool of leadership development in sustainable tourism and communication supported by technology enables a competitive edge in the market.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Communication with the stakeholders in sustainable tourism is founded on personal communication tools that are more and more adjusting to the needs of an active traveler that uses web communication more and more. It was identified that web communication is an especially appropriate tool for active, prosocial and younger generations. Web communication with the Raduha clients, focused on awakening all senses and emphasize the integration of the object into nature and its connectivity with primal components of Raduha existence. Web communication channels quite authentically transpose the Raduha experience from Raduha to its clients: *»The quite extraordinary experience of living in the crown of a linden tree will not only impress you with the incredible view of the river, it will also give you a sense of freedom, awaken your imagination, and reconnect the urban man with the beauty of nature. The interior design will surprise you with artistically crafted walnut wood, a comfortable bathroom and a massage pool on the terrace«* (Raduha webpage <http://www.raduha.com/en/hiska.php> 9. 12. 2014). One of the identified key characteristics is commitment to eco-conception which means that in the starting phase of doing business is needed to focus on the impact that the service or product will have on the society and environment.

This research identified that communication with clients, as well as with intermediary institutions that include numerous tourism (on and off line) agents (eg.travel agencies, tour operators, negotiators,...), is slowly moving to web communication (Table 2).

Table 2: Usage of web communication at Raduha case

| Communication with/through: | Clients | Suppliers | Public sector | Educational institutions | Intermediary institutions |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------|--|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Blogs | No | No | No | No | No |
| Social networks (Facebook; Twitter) | Facebook, adwards, Trip Advisor | No | Facebook, promotion with SPIRIT Slovenia | No | Facebook |
| Content community (Flickr, Youtube) | Youtube | No | No | No | Youtube |

Source: Own conceptualization.

More detailed, according to Table 2 the communication with Raduha clients is supported with the social networks (Facebook and TripAdvisor) and content community (YouTube channel) that furthermore unfold opportunity to Raduha

management to be active whenever their clients are. Apart from this, blogs, if used, would offer additionally option to the Raduha management to update employees, clients, and shareholders on trends, developments and sustainability requirements they consider to be important.

Focusing on the expression of co-operation of stakeholders within sustainable tourism and used communication tools as research variables the case of Raduha represents a preliminary study into the problematic issues of sustainable tourism entity management and offers propositions how improving communication tools can aid in strengthening communication within sustainable tourism stakeholders. At Raduha they emphasize that values have the key role in their daily functioning (Questionnaire I 3.1.2015): *»The very place suggested to us that it is necessary to preserve nature, cultural heritage and tradition. So for us it goes without saying that we need to carry on with our work and continue what our ancestors already started. We need to observe the surroundings and adapt to it, and not the other way around that we expect the surroundings to adapt to our wishes«*. The authors add and argue that digital information transmission facilitated by web channels present a great potential for observing the surroundings and its adapting. Using web communication as quoted in above enclosed Table 2 means that the firm should offer a wide range of sending and receiving information options with capacity to strongly support achieving both sustainability concept aims defined previously by Sharpley (2003) and Bramwell and Lane (2012).

Our research findings identify 5 key emerging themes in analyzing communication in sustainable tourism: (1) intergenerational communication; (2) communication with creditors; (3) community building; (4) communication with key stakeholders; and (5) long-term vision as a value in sustainable tourism.

Intergenerational communication among family stakeholders and key stakeholders is vital in transferring tacit knowledge through personal experience sharing (Questionnaire II 2. 3. 2015):

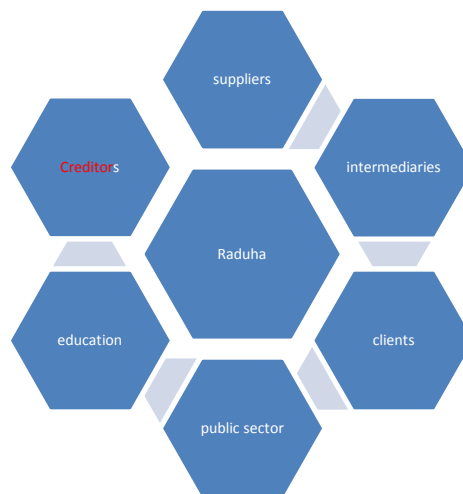
“My knowledge is transmitted to the younger generation very spontaneously, mainly unknowingly. They [children] notice how we work with local masters, to what factors of work we put more emphasis and how we preserve the tradition of our environment during our daily work. Of course, occasionally transferring knowledge is also very apparent through a discussion and demonstrated activities. However, children observe well, this is our way of life. I noticed that some people advertise some things that to us are totally normal and common practice. Children simply imitated certain knowledge during their lives. Tradition is not only capital, the most important is the transfer of knowledge through generations. I feel that we have similar views and attitudes of people, space, etc.”

Although intergenerational communication is not still supported by web facilities, social media and its potential for saving text, picture, videos, if applied in Raduha context, should encourage the knowledge categorization and data storage and, consequently, support the explicit knowledge generating.

Communication with creditors is difficult and collaboration is at its initial stage (Questionnaire II 2. 3. 2015):

“Sustainable tourism is, unfortunately, in Slovenia little known or under-appreciated. It is just talked about, because they have heard that this is something fashionable. Therefore, it is quite difficult to convince the lender about our work and its outcome.” Although it is revealed that appropriate communication flows are established with the majority of the observed stakeholders, there is still need to improve the mentioned segment with creditors and public sector in the future (Figure 1). The reason we highlighted stakeholder(s) creditors in red is the fact that they are identified as the most critical stakeholder for the sustainable tourism entity Raduha and that we have identified this in the later stages of our research process.

Figure 1: **Effective co-operation of stakeholders within sustainable tourism**



Source: Own conceptualization.

A proper social media use offer real possibility to foster the promotion process and consequently, to “attract” creditors. Accordingly, creating a strong brand name and brand recognition within web sphere is also considered as segment that can distinctively upgrade and improve the relationship with creditors.

Community building is an aim of sustainable tourism and embedding guests into local activities is an added value dimension of that kind of tourism (Questionnaire II 2. 3. 2015):

“I think that the guests can feel at every step our genuine contact, relationship and time we devote to them. We demonstrate them this with fresh flowers from our garden, fireplace in the evenings, prepared dinner with love, desserts, which are served in the afternoon in the garden ... I am relaxed with guests and in good spirits. I chat with them about cooking, hiking or fishing, certainly about the majority of the activities for which they decide to visit our valley. Since they receive tips and advice first-hand, they

really like this personal touch. With my husband we sometimes accompany our guests to the winemaker.”

Communication with the key stakeholders is difficult due to the lack of strategical framework of sustainable tourism at a national level (Questionnaire II 2. 3. 2015): *“When it comes to theory a key player should be the local community, with government guidance and supervision. Determined should be the scope and speed of sustainable development. Actors are, unfortunately, only individuals, but are quickly connecting to each other, because we are connected by the same interests.”*

Apart from that, above named communication should be significantly encouraged with social media use since its Web 2.0 applications transformed the Internet from an information source to an opinion source (Dippelreiter et al. 2007; Schmallegger and Carson 2008). Within that process any information, either product offered within sustainable tourism supply either comment in a social network can be evaluated and rated in some way (Xiang and Gretzel 2010) by local community or any other tourism authority engaged in strategical framework procedure.

Long-term vision as a value in sustainable tourism is present in business community/network of sustainable tourism entity (Questionnaire II 2. 3. 2015): *“In my circle of business partners I have a lot of like-minded people.”* It is identified that younger generations are more open to sustainable tourism services: *“In any case, we can see that, for example, younger generation is more susceptible to recycling and is already considering how to minimize costs through their buying pattern. If there will be role models there will also be a better future.”*. Anyway, the dynamic nature of web communication is grateful mean to introduce, adduct and finally recruit younger generations as proactive players in sustainable tourism. Social media platforms, named previously *as platforms for change of information, attitudes and opinions* are also appropriate for long term vision process creation.

The long life learning about new technologies generally is also suggested as welcomed option to encourage its implementation and fruitful use.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable tourism functions in a different business setting than mass tourism, therefore it is important to conduct a stakeholder analysis of mayor partners, clients and local community. Raduha as a case of sustainable tourism entity operates in the local community as well as in global environment, therefore it needs to do a stakeholder analysis in order to identify potential conflict areas among stakeholders, before they appear. Sustainable tourism objectives and policies are recommended to be a strategical guidance that incorporates also communication strategy and tools, available to all stakeholders in a visible and easily accessible place, such as webpage of the sustainable tourism entity or profile within a particular social network or community. The authors propose that sustainable tourism is dependent on the effective co-operation of all the stakeholders in the industry, for example, suppliers, intermediaries, creditors, public sector and consumers. It is also proposed that communication is the basic tool of

leadership development in sustainable tourism and communication supported by technology enables a competitive edge in the market.

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