

People, Planet, and Purpose: MEC as a Sustainable Organization

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Editor's Note: This article is published as part of the joint [Soul of the Next Economy Forum](#) (SNEF) and *Western Talent & Innovation Review* Special Edition. The SNE Forum is held in Calgary Alberta each fall and is where business, the non-profit sector, government, and educational institutions converge to change the way we do business and impact society. The article below was written by an attendee of the September 2018 Forum.



Abstract

A representative of MEC (Brad Clute) spoke at the 2018 Soul of the Next Economy Forum. This article discusses Clute's presentation and the organizational behaviour implications of Clute's presentation and MEC's sustainable strategy. This article focuses on what makes MEC an optimal example of a holistically responsible organization: their corporate decisions, workplace culture, business structure, and their organizational behaviour.

Sustainable Organizational Behavior is the summation of various components concerning operations, culture, and ethics within an organization. It also includes concepts such as environmental stewardship and corporate social responsibility. A truly sustainable organization strives to innovatively fulfill the calling for businesses to produce conscientiously, increase quality of life for employees and customers alike, and to “punch above their weight.”¹

Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) is a local and current expression of what a sustainable organization looks like. The organization concerns themselves with the entire quadruple bottom line of people, planet, products, and purpose, meaning they are able to produce sustainable decisions and actions. This article focuses on what makes

MEC an optimal example of a holistically responsible organization: their corporate decisions, workplace culture, business structure, and their organizational behaviour.

Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC)

Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) is a Canadian retail co-operative that harbours an emphasis on outdoor recreation. As an organization, MEC enthusiastically provides education, resources, and experiences to equip consumers for a broad range of outdoor pursuits and active lifestyles.² Not only dynamically dedicated to offering high-quality and high-performance products, MEC is also built upon a commitment to environmental protection and social initiatives.³

A topic of many scholarly articles, magazine articles, and newspaper features, MEC is culturally a magnet to the subject of employee wellbeing, social purpose, and environmental stewardship. For example, several articles delve into various aspects of MEC's sustainable behavior. These articles mention numerous components that MEC encapsulates, such as: cultural integrity; employee passions for outdoor recreation and MEC products; commitment to social and environment concerns; orientation towards service and helping others; training programs for employees wanting to expand outdoor experience and knowledge; organizational flexibility; conservation efforts; and close monitoring of factory safety and standards.⁴

MEC promotes sustainable organizational behavior, as well as leading differently from other organizations, in the structure of their business itself. Operating as a co-operative means MEC is built upon member ownership, as well as social purpose and codependency between business and community. A particularly unique aspect to this is MEC's ability for share redemptions, where MEC actually returns a portion of profits back to their shareholders, or in this case, membership card-holders. MEC gives back in this manner, and also in other philanthropic and active ways. For instance, beyond active donation funds for environmental projects, MEC also offers organizational support in the form of grants to like-minded environmentally-active businesses.⁵

Additionally, the leaders of MEC are also examples of optimal corporate social responsibility in regards to their social presence and footprint. Their social presence is characterized by hosting informative community meetings, developing theories of change, innovatively creating various funds to support local issues and causes (i.e. The Environment Fund), and unique partnerships between environmental sustainability efforts and products produced.⁶ MEC's products act as evidence of sustainable organizational practices. For example, they produce fleece jackets and pants fabricated out of recycled polyester made from plastic bottles. They also hold a focus on innovative projects such as the utilization of rooftop solar systems on their shops that feed power back into their community grid. MEC also joined a group titled "1% for the Planet", where they donate 1% of sales to environmental causes. These are a few select examples showing MEC's sustainable behavior.

MEC's Organizational Culture

Present at the 2018 Soul of the Next Economy Forum, MEC's Community Investment and Sustainability Coordinator, Brad Clute, spoke to MEC's culture of maintaining social purpose and defending their causes as a form of organizational operations.⁷ Speaking to a culture of growing conservatively and intentionally, MEC is able to uphold their social presence and purpose ethically, creatively, and intentionally. Clute shared that this is due to the lack of greed within MEC's culture – their culture of social need is greater than organizational growth or greed. A form in which MEC implements this firsthand is in their policy on expansion. The company expands when they have a sizeable presence of already-existing members in an unoccupied area, rather than expanding to gain new customers.

Further, MEC's ability to operate in a sustainable manner is directly linked to their Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB). OCB consists of employee behaviors that go above and beyond role requirements.⁸ Typically, OCB stems from "positive job attitudes, task characteristics, and leadership behaviors", all of which are organization

behavioral elements evident throughout MEC.⁹ MEC accomplishes these through employee engagement, training and empowerment, and their manner of leadership. For example, MEC provides countless stories on their website of sustainable involvement in the outdoor community, careful discernment in products they choose to carry that reflect their organizational values, and employee support and empowerment. They also provide information on how they provide firsthand employee training on outdoor experience, providing personal knowledge, emotional attachment, and organizational commitment for their employees. Each of these aspects originate from their culture. Even MEC's listings of job openings are emboldening, honest, and speak of organizational sustainability utilizing words such as *loyalty*, *collaborate*, *inclusive*, *integrity*, *awareness*, *innovate*, and *inspire*.¹⁰ This shows a dominant culture of striving, stewardship, and activism, speaking to MEC's deep roots of sustainability.

MEC's social capital is robust and valuable. Whereas it is historically more likely and expected for employees to be loyal and self-sacrificing for a business, MEC has proven that a business can reciprocate that loyalty and sacrifice to its people. An example of this would be earlier in MEC's history, several staff members took leave and trekked to Vancouver Island in personal efforts to help clean up an oil spill.¹¹ MEC not only supported their individual passion and drive by letting them do so, but also paid them honoraria and reimbursed their costs and expenses. In doing this, MEC proved loyalty and self-sacrifice as an organization. Through such a key experience, MEC's organizational culture of support, purpose, and action came to the forefront. It is this that influences their ability to operate in strong consideration of the environment, their employees, and the community that is MEC's lifeblood. Simultaneously – through this act and others alike, whether large or small – MEC does not only talk the talk, but also walks their walk.

Sustainable Organizational Culture

In order to truly achieve the value of sustainability, a certain sort of optimal organizational culture is needed. This culture ought to be one of not only trust, honesty, passion, and strong, effective teamwork, but also partnership with customers, members, and employees alike. MEC does profoundly strive to achieve this through their actions, their team roles, leadership behaviors, OCB, and their business format as a co-operative. MEC has publicly stated their existence is to offer more than merely products; they raise the organizational bar with their standard of “We offer passion.”¹² This statement has produced fruit and has not gone un-met. They accomplish it through a culture surrounding quality, integrity through socially and environmentally responsible decisions, “co-operation, creativity, leadership, sustainability, stewardship, humanity, [and] adventure.”¹³ “This internal culture speaks volumes to the organizational perception of their employees, hearkening to McGregor's “Theory Y”, where employees are believed to be inherently mature, creative, capable, and trustworthy. With this sort of glue holding them together, MEC's visions of inspiration, achievement, and connection are achieved.

An organizational culture of employee value and empowerment is a way of maintaining their stance as a company prominent in sustainability. In this, they become leaders with a mindset of leadership as gardening a living entity, as it were, and “preparing the soil for trees and flowers to grow.”¹⁴ This goes in opposition to a managerial perspective like McGregor's “Theory X”, or that of viewing employees as a machine-like creation. When leadership holds a mindset of fostering and empowering, and seeks to provide employees with resources and training - as MEC does - they are better equipped to achieve an enhanced organizational system on the whole.¹⁵ This is fundamentally important to MEC due to the fact that organizations are the people in them.¹⁶ With their employees as the face of the business, treating them fairly and allowing them to stoke and pursue their passions of adventure, sustainability, and innovation is important; thus, the “face” of MEC remains a positive and sustainable one.

Another example of optimal culture is the culture MEC holds between their organization and their stakeholders. As a cooperative, MEC is completely dependent upon the communities around and within their business. In this, MEC holds a larger social responsibility than most non-cooperative organizations. One avenue in which they show engagement with this responsibility is in light of the social causes they engage in. For example, earlier in 2018, the CEO of MEC spoke on his company's decision to stop selling brands linked to Vista Outdoor, a U.S. gun-making

company. They implemented this suspension in efforts to be a “catalyst for a conversation around gun control” following a school shooting in Florida.¹⁷

The focus of this was based upon the fact that, as a co-op, MEC listened to their members, and as a result, chose to focus on the issue of gun control.¹⁸ This event demonstrated MEC’s close link with their societal role, responsibility, and power. Their CEO also elaborated on this further by stating “We know that we have no control over the issue... but I do believe we are able to influence.”¹⁹ In understanding the social power of their organization, this situation showed MEC’s discernment on how to utilize this power in a way that echoes the voices of their community and their organizational values. In regards to the future of MEC, such an organizational culture of listening, communication, innovation and courage is paramount. This is because they are a company founded upon, consisting of, and existing for the community. As such, with community always changing, MEC does need to adapt alongside and in partnership with the community, or the risk of becoming disconnected or obsolete becomes prevalent. I believe this is something MEC will hold fast to, as they have proven time and again to be a beneficial societal and community presence, as well as a sustainable organization.

Conclusion

In summary, through demonstrating their dependency on the people that make up their business world – both employee and customer alike – MEC takes a unique stance on what it means for an organization to behave sustainably. For MEC that means promoting environmental and social activism, as well as getting their proverbial and literal hands dirty in prevalent and meaningful issues. This is what it looks like for a company to be equally conscientious of people, planet, and purpose. Through the examples shared, MEC shows their values in action; this is what achieves their organizational vision of shared value. MEC accomplishes this through: organizational achievement and integrity; employee wellbeing and engagement; environmental conscientiousness and activism; and social responsibility. In essence, it is these features that form the culture that MEC needs to uphold in order to truly nail their vision of being a sustainable organization.

About the Author

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Endnotes

¹ Clute, B. (2018). *Soul of the Next Economy Forum 2018* [Conference Presentation]. Calgary, AB: Ambrose University.

² See <https://www.mec.ca/en/explore/mission-and-values>

³ See <https://www.mec.ca/en/explore/mission-and-values>

⁴ Cultural integrity. (2009). *Retail Merchandiser*, 49(4), 60-62. See also Worker rights. (2014). *Corporate Knights Magazine*, 13(3), 11.

⁵ See <https://www.mec.ca/>

⁶ See <https://www.mec.ca/>

⁷ Clute, 2018.

⁸ Organ, 1988, as cited by Bolino, M.C., Turnley, W.H., & Bloodgood, J.M. (2002). Citizenship behavior and the creation of social capital in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 27(4), 505-522

⁹ Bolino et al., 2002, p. 505.

¹⁰ See <https://www.mec.ca/>

¹¹ See <https://www.mec.ca/>

¹² See <https://www.mec.ca/>

¹³ See <https://www.mec.ca/>

¹⁴ Dervitsiotis, K.N. (2005). Creating conditions to nourish sustainable organizational excellence. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 16(8/9), 925-943, p.925

¹⁵ Dervitsiotis, 2005.

¹⁶ Schneider, B., Brief, A. P., & Guzzo, R. A. (1996). Creating a climate and culture for sustainable organizational change. *Organizational Dynamics*, 24(4), 6-19.

¹⁷ CBC Radio. (2018, March 02). *MEC chief executive on why his company is pulling brands linked to U.S. gunmaker*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-thursday-edition-1.4557434/mec-chief-executive-on-why-his-company-is-pulling-brands-linked-to-u-s-gunmaker-1.4557449>

¹⁸ CBC Radio, 2018.

¹⁹ CBC Radio, 2018.