

The World's Most-Influential People and Sustainability Champions: What do they have in common?

By Graham Pyke



Barack Obama

Despite some drawbacks, the recent Time Magazine list of the top 100 influential people in the world (see May 5-12 edition) makes interesting reading. No definition is provided for what 'influential' actually means, though it is clear, from the brief biographical sketches provided for those on the list, that some individuals have been included because they have really and substantially 'made a difference' through changing what many others think, say and do, or how they feel, or their state of wellbeing.

Others seem to have been included on the basis that they are heads of state, affecting large populations, or have extraordinary numbers of followers (e.g., via Facebook), or have developed widgets or systems used by so many of us. Also

missing are definitions or descriptions for the various categories that sub-divide the list, including Titans, Pioneers etc., but once again one can get a vague idea from reading the various bios.

Based also on the biographical sketches, it seems clear that most share three attributes, namely Significance, Influence (with a capital 'I') and Presentation, which I previously discussed in my post re Sustainability Champions. However, these terms require broader understanding in the present context. Those on the Time Magazine list have generally pursued an issue of high significance, be it the provision of health-care, food, communication, entertainment, governance, and so on, to large numbers of people. These issues contrast with sustainability where there is really only one issue



Cristiano Ronaldo

Sustainability for humanity, but no larger human population exists. Members of the Time Magazine list have also generally sought to have high influence through changing the ways in which people view certain issues (e.g., status and rights of women, gays, non-human animals etc), with no one achieving great influence without trying. Finally, the Time Magazine list members have generally had extraordinary presentations, in many cases through their powers of communication through oration, acting and the like, but also on account of their wealth or fame. Wealthy people can influence issues by channelling funds in support of others. In this way 'money speaks'! Famous people may have attentive audiences even before they speak.

In other words, Sustainability Champions and the World's most influential people have all pursued issues of the highest **Significance**, while seeking maximal **Influence** and relying on great **Presentations**. These attributes therefore seem a recipe for success, regardless of one's 'walk of life'!

However, one glaring omission from the top 100 list of influential people is anyone speaking out about environmental issues in general, or environmental sustainability in particular. Other sustainability issues, relating to Economics, Social and Health, are all included, but not sustainability in terms of the Environment. At first glance this seems surprising, given all the current assaults on our environmental well-being and the fact that environmental sustainability affects a lot of people, in fact all of us. But then, the omission is totally consistent with declining interest from the general community in environmental issues and similarly declining concern that we humans may be steadily destroying planet earth, our only home. Put simply, the Time Magazine list reflects the things that the general community regards as important, rather than issues in proportion to their effects on us. In this way, gossip about the private lives of movie stars may be more influential than accounts of environmental issues and how to solve them.

Addressing these attitudes is one of the major reasons for this blog and the present post. We trust that you will continue to stay tuned in.

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