Alan AtKisson began professional work on sustainability in 1988, serving as executive editor of the pioneering journal *In Context: A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*. In 1990, he and other colleagues co-founded the Sustainable Seattle initiative, later recognized by the United Nations as a model project in urban sustainability and indicator development. Also in 1990, Alan began to introduce the concept of “sustainability change agents” through workshops and lectures, and to develop the tools and methods that are now called the ISIS Accelerator and used worldwide.


GM: What was the background to you writing The Sustainability Transformation?

Alan AtKisson:

When I launched my sustainability consultancy in 1992, I was virtually the only person I knew who did what I did, as a profession, though I’m sure there were a few others scattered far and wide. Now there are hundreds of thousands of people working in sustainability and related fields, from CSR to carbon management, and the field is growing. But many people working on sustainability find actually making change, especially in turbulent financial times, to be a very challenging proposition. I wrote this book for them.

GM: Can sustainability improve organizational performance?

Alan AtKisson:

Absolutely. That’s not just my opinion; that’s what I hear from many organizational leaders. Actually, you don’t have go by hearsay anymore on this question, either. It is increasingly well-researched. These days, you find articles on the positive impact of sustainability in places like *Harvard Business Review* or *The Economist*.

GM: What surprised you the most when researching it?

Alan AtKisson:

The most surprising things, for me, included the “inside story” on where money actually comes from, and how the structure of the monetary system itself drives a lot of non-sustainable behaviour. I call it “The Golden Coffin”: looks terribly alluring on the outside, but it’s a planetary death-trap. Of course, that conclusion seemed much less surprising after the financial crisis; these days, anybody can see that the financial system is one of several systems on this planet — the energy system is another — that are deeply unsustainable and in need of transformation.
GM: What can a business audience take from your book?

Alan AtKisson:

There is a whole chapter documenting how some firms have literally made billions in additional profits by embracing sustainability practices and producing more sustainable products. It turns out that the more serious you are about sustainability, the more resilient, innovative, and attractive your company becomes. Plus, this book is fundamentally about change, and how to accelerate it. In today's climate, this is something every business needs to know.

GM: What is “ISIS”?

Alan AtKisson:

“ISIS” is what we do when we do sustainable development. It's a step-by-step process for doing sustainability effectively. The letters originally stood for 'Indicators, Systems, Innovation, Strategy' - that's the sequence we use in planning as well as training - but it's not just a technical method. ISIS also includes developing the human factors necessary to conduct an effective change process.

GM: How did your background in innovation lead you to where you are now?

Alan AtKisson:

Actually, my background is very mixed. I studied science, economics, and philosophy. I did social work. I wrote songs and led rock bands in New York City. For a few years in the 1980s, I co-founded and managed a clothing design company, selling to the most famous stores in the U.S. Then I turned to journalism and started a little magazine. It turns out that this was an excellent background for sustainability work, because you have to cross so many boundaries. Then, when I learned that sustainable development involved serious amounts of change, I started studying innovation and change very seriously - and ultimately that gave birth to the ISIS Method.

GM: What is sustainable development in a business and management context?

Alan AtKisson:

It's a vision, a set of goals, a process – that's normal for business. But sustainable development involves new types of visions and goals, and new processes to realize them. You have think longer term, more systemically, and out of the box. If that sounds like a recipe for success in Silicon Valley, for example, it should: sustainability can start with incremental improvement, but ultimately, it's about inventing entirely new business models.

GM: How has the business world reacted to your ideas and recommendations? Has it accepted the business case for sustainability?

Alan AtKisson:

I have long-time clients in the business arena who have been fantastic to work with: once they "get it," they act swiftly and diligently, and they make really enormous change very quickly. And they profit from it, too, in terms of cost savings, positive branding, internal culture, sales...

But again, this field has developed so fast that I no longer have to spend a minute trying to convince my clients of the business case for sustainability: now they know it better than I do. When consulting giants like McKinsey or Ernst & Young have established themselves in the sustainability field, you know the business case is already widely recognized, and quite robust.
GM: What is your view on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – a marketing smokescreen and PR scam… a case of the Emperor’s new clothes?

Alan AtKisson:

That depends on who is doing it. Some companies are absolutely using CSR (or CR) primarily for PR - you can usually tell by the fact that they house their CSR-related functions in a PR-related department. But that's old-fashioned at this point. Leading companies in this area are totally mainstreaming their CSR work, so that it's deeply embedded in core mission, performance objectives, supply chain management, bonus pay... it's like quality. Hardly anybody remembers that "Quality" used to be a management "movement," because it's become standard operating procedure. Sustainability is heading in the same direction.

GM: Which companies or organizations exemplify Corporate Responsibility (CR - sic)?

Alan AtKisson:

Well, I am biased toward my own clients, of course. I think Levi Strauss (a client) has done some fantastic things in the last few years, for example. So has Nike (a former client). Interface, the giant flooring manufacturer (not a client), was a real pioneer... and they are still a real leader, especially in the sustainability side of CSR. I'm not sure I'd pick any large company as the one that best "exemplifies" CR, though, because it's still such a new practice. We're all still learning.

GM: What do you mean when you say, “money spent on sustainability should be seen as an investment and not as a cost”?

Alan AtKisson:

When a financial outlay produces a financial return that is greater than the amount of money you put into it, that's called an "investment," isn't it? Weirdly, even investments in sustainability that have high rates of return and very short payback times sometimes still get framed as "costs." It's a basic, fundamental conceptual error. I think misusing terms this way borders on a breach of fiduciary responsibility, because it delays companies from avoiding costs and increasing revenues.

GM: What is the return on this investment?

Alan AtKisson:

Money, to start. Lots of it. Consider Toyota: when they started really studying the impact of their environmental "costs" a few years back, they discovered that in fact, most of those financial outlays were highly profitable investments, adding well over a billion dollars annually to the bottom line. So they started re-categorizing their bookkeeping, separating the cost of things like pure regulatory compliance from the investments in innovation and efficiency that were proving so rewarding in their factories and attractive to their customers.

There are many other 'softer' returns, as well, including risk reduction, supply chain resilience, employee retention, and of course positive PR... but nothing convinces a businessman like enhanced profitability.

GM: What is the business benefit of “climbing up to the responsibility level”?

Alan AtKisson:

My friend Junko Edahiro, a leading advocate of sustainability in Japan, and I realized a few years ago that the companies realizing the greatest benefits from sustainability were the ones that made the boldest and most ambitious ethical commitments to it. When they only
expanded their sphere of responsibility to small things like compliance or "pollution prevention," they really didn't experience great returns. In fact, they might still experience sustainability as a cost. But when those early leaders set their sights high – like Toyota with its Prius and 'Zero Emissions' vision, or Interface with its aim to create a totally closed loop manufacturing process – that's when the benefits came streaming in. Being more responsible is ultimately more profitable. That was true already in 2008, when I first published The Sustainability Transformation, and it's even more true today.

GM: What is the "Sustainability Compass", and how can it be used?

Alan AtKisson:

The Sustainability Compass is a platform, a symbol you can 'stand on' when you orient yourself to sustainability. It starts with the four directions, North, East, South, and West, and renames them: Nature, Economy, Society, Wellbeing. Those are the four dimensions of sustainability. We use this Compass to frame sustainability assessments, development sustainability indicators, and organize stakeholders or management teams. It's also a simple way to "brand" sustainability, to make it memorable, something anyone can identify with. It's incredibly portable: we use it with global companies, international political processes, schools and universities... you name it. And it works all over the world, because nearly everyone is familiar with the English-language compass.

GM: What is the “Amoeba of Cultural Change”?

Alan AtKisson:

"Amoeba" is another symbol, a way of compressing a lot of ideas about culture change into a simple image. Amoebas are little blobs. To eat, they stick out a projectile until they reach their food (usually some other poor micro-organism); then they slosh up around it and absorb it.

My old boss, Robert Gilman, figured out that human cultures and groups do essentially the same thing – but they do it with new ideas. The Einsteins among us push way out and find something new. Then other folks come after them, people who can translate these new ideas to the rest of us in convincing ways, so that we'll adopt them. That's how the "amoeba of culture" changes. Everett Rogers, the father of innovation diffusion theory, called those folks 'change agents.'

GM: What is your recommended reading list for Change Agents?

Alan AtKisson:

Start with my books, of course! Seriously, those books are designed to give sustainability change agents a lot of very useful information, as well as inspiration, in a very readable package. But then you can take a deep dive into the vast literature on the topics I cover, topics like organizational change and creativity, innovation diffusion, and group collaboration processes. And don't forget books on power dynamics, which I cover extensively in The Sustainability Transformation. You can't transform anything if you don't understand how power works in organizational contexts.

GM: How can Change Agents work effectively within organizations?

Alan AtKisson:

First they need to cultivate a critical set of social skills, as well as a sense of their own personal presence – we work on that part a lot. Then there are a number of basic strategic insights that seem obvious once you know them – but they can still be hard things to do in practice. For example, one common error Change Agents make is to waste a lot of time and energy debating their opponents, instead of building critical mass with their allies.
GM: What are the “Seven Secret Powers of the Change Agent”?

Alan AtKisson:

These are subtle, simple, but unexpectedly powerful ways to make change happen - even when you don't actually have any power. I'll share one story, to give a taste of what I mean. Ray Anderson, the CEO of Interface, is a widely acknowledged leader in business and sustainability. It's well known that reading Paul Hawken's book *The Ecology of Commerce* is what 'woke him up,' as he puts it. But few know the story of why Ray Anderson read Paul Hawken's book: because he had agreed to give a speech to his staff on the company's environmental vision. Some clever Change Agent used the power of invitation to get his boss to agree to give that speech... the boss realized he had to do some reading, to prepare for that speech... and the result was the transformation of a company, and an example for the world.

GM: What's next for you?

Alan AtKisson:

We've just spun out our training programme, the ISIS Academy, to become its own company. I'm very excited about that, because we've got such an excellent faculty, and we're building on two decades of global experience. The new director, Axel Klimek, is a brilliant and highly experienced change management consultant from Germany, with a passion for sustainability and for teaching, coaching, and empowering others. It's fun to launch a brand new company that's already 18 years old!

GM: Finally, are there any closing comments you would like to make?

Alan AtKisson:

Just one: you've got to move fast. The Sustainability Transformation is an enormous opportunity for virtually any organization... but all of us are in a serious race against time, not just with our competitors in the market, but with global driving forces like climate change. If you're already doing it, do it more, do it faster – and if you're not doing it yet, the time to get started was yesterday. You've got some serious catching up to do.