

The bridge between sustainability vision and actions; preliminary case study results

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to analyze the gap between the vision and actions leading to a more sustainable company, focusing on the area between the vision on a more sustainable entrepreneurship and its actions towards it. In all companies we observed a bigger or smaller discrepancy between the vision and actions.

Motive

From January 2009 until December 2010 the Dutch consultancy firm BMD Advies organized 10 company meetings, the BMD roundtable on sustainability. The purpose of these meetings was to unite several companies to come together and exchange experiences and knowledge on how sustainability into practice was seen and executed. The attendance for these meetings was free. In total 300 entrepreneurs from the Dutch provinces of North Holland, Utrecht, Gelderland and Limburg attended. The meetings were always held at a company to have the practice as close as possible. The themes that were discussed during the meetings, arose from the needs of the attendees. The participating companies concluded that the in-corporate sustainability had the highest priority before search for cooperation in the chain or communicate their commitment with sustainability (see figure 1). As a result of this roundtable 23 case studies of SMEs and big enterprises with their main office within The Netherlands that have been analyzed from a consultant point of view.

Methodology

Since the roundtable of sustainability, several companies have asked the BMD to support them to clean up their house. This paper unites the experiences from 23 projects done with 23 companies between 2010 and 2013. The QHSE officer or the general manager took the role of the contact person in the project development phase. During the execution and/or implementation of the project employees from all levels of the organization were included. During the projects with the companies two models were applied to support the communication with the companies. These were also used to analyze the data coming from the projects. In contrary to what was stated by Fassin et al (2011), these cognitive models correspond to academic research although they are developed from the own perception of the project participants. Two of those models seemed to be very effective to support the search for sustainability by the companies.

The innovation curve

According Uhlener, Berent, Jeurissen en De Wit (2010, p. 16) there is a positive and significant association between the innovation focus of the company and its sustainable performance. The business development curve (see figure 2) is set up to use where the company stands in its development, and to identify where improvements can be found. Since the INK model has a similar purpose (Ahaus, 2003), this is taken as a basis. The first four phases of development of the INK model (activity, process, organization and chain) (Ahaus, 2003, p.20), however, are classified into the three phases of development reactive, proactive and innovative to make the figure as simple as possible in this way.

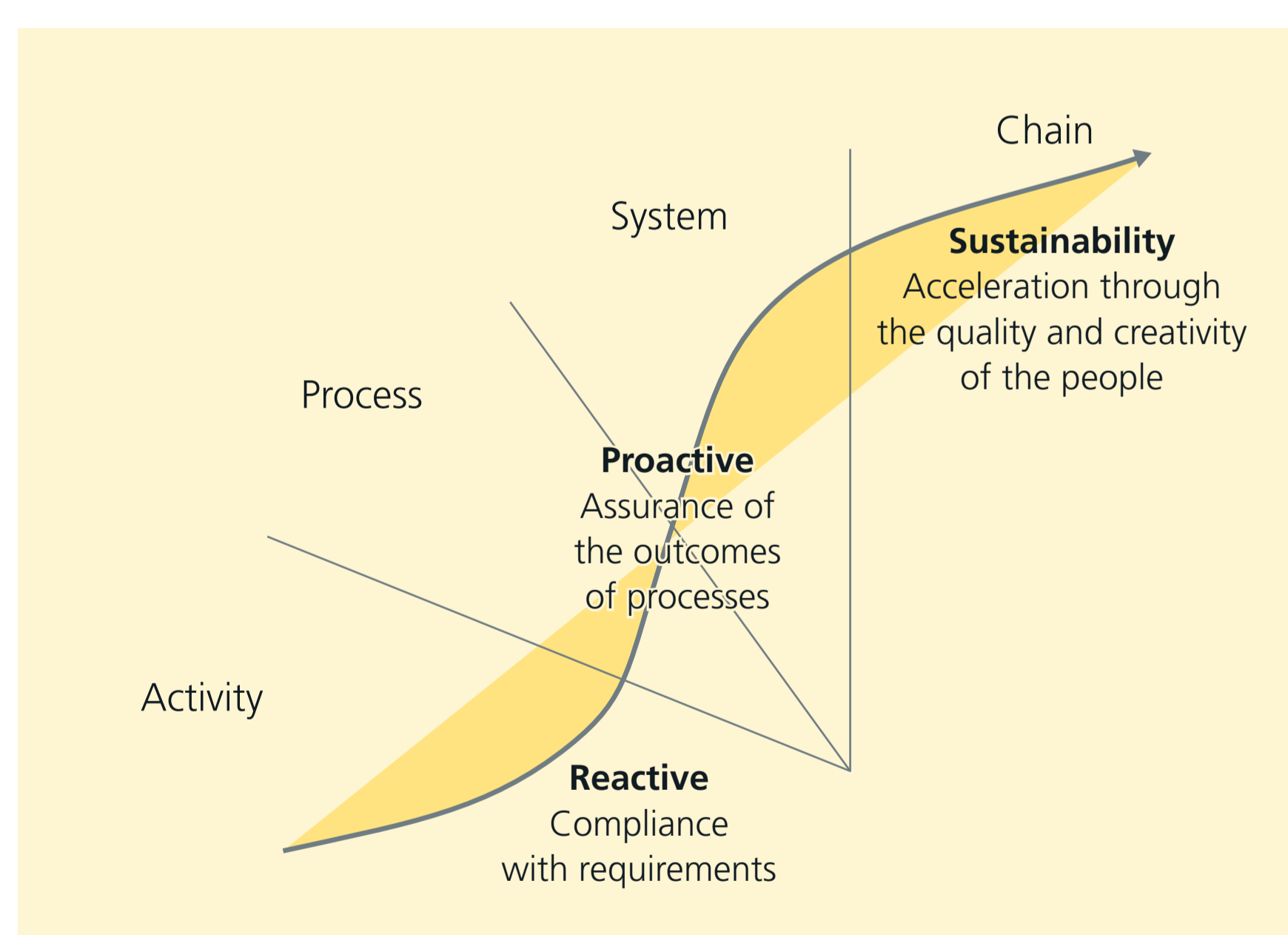


Figure 2 The innovation curve of a company

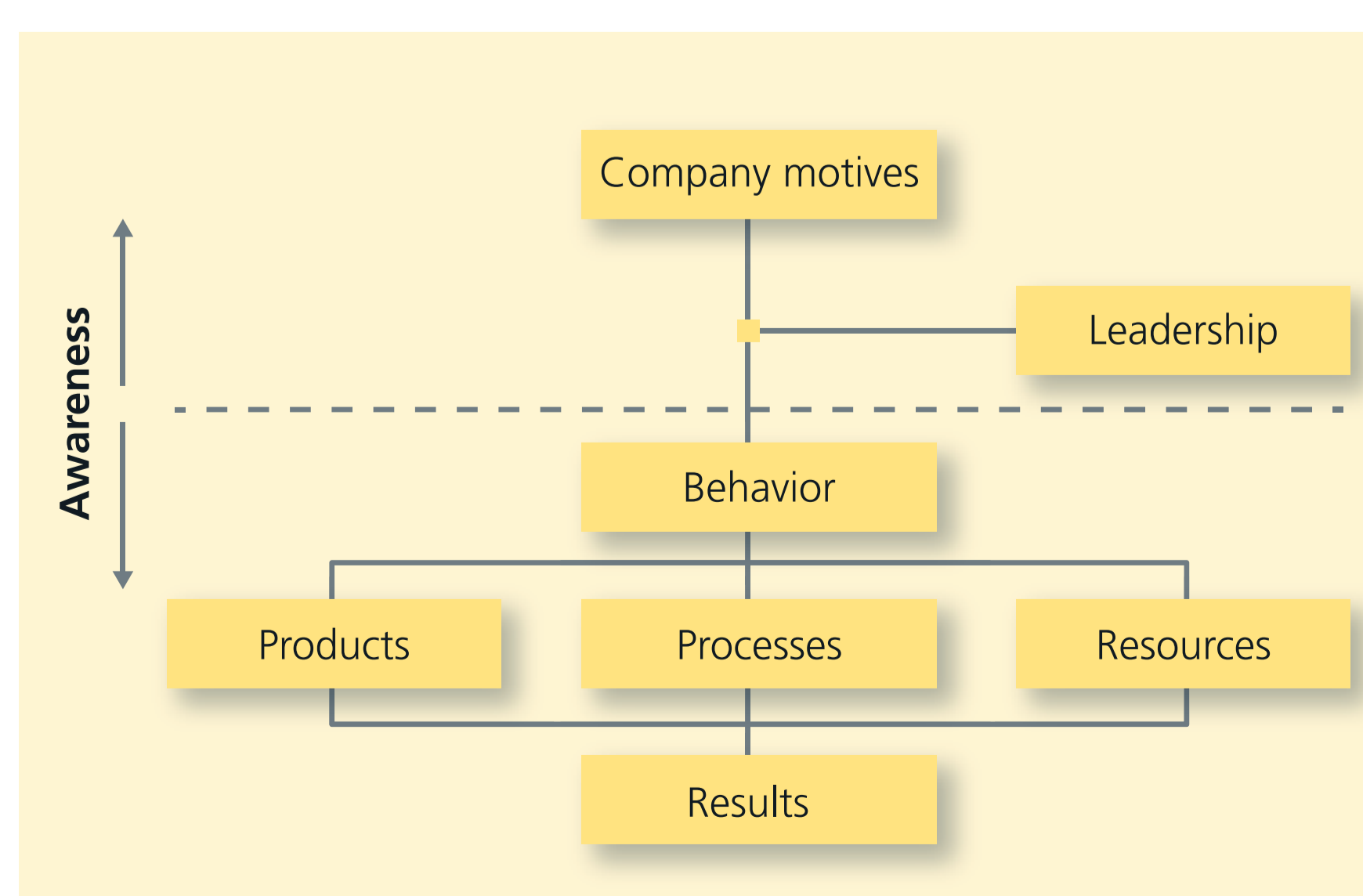


Figure 3 The physical and social side of a company

The physical and social side of a company

Graafland et al. (2003, p. 45) concluded that responsible employee behavior has a direct link with the environmental physical goals, resulting this in going it the license to operate for a company. As already showed, the innovation power is directly related to the sustainability strategy of the firm. The majority of the internal factors of innovation power are social factors. The second model (see figure 3) to be used in the support for the companies has therefore the goals to clarify the importance of social goals for the company in combination the physical ones. To be able to show the company the mirror at the field of social aspects the process model (input, throughput and output) was extended with the topics of behavior, leadership and motives.

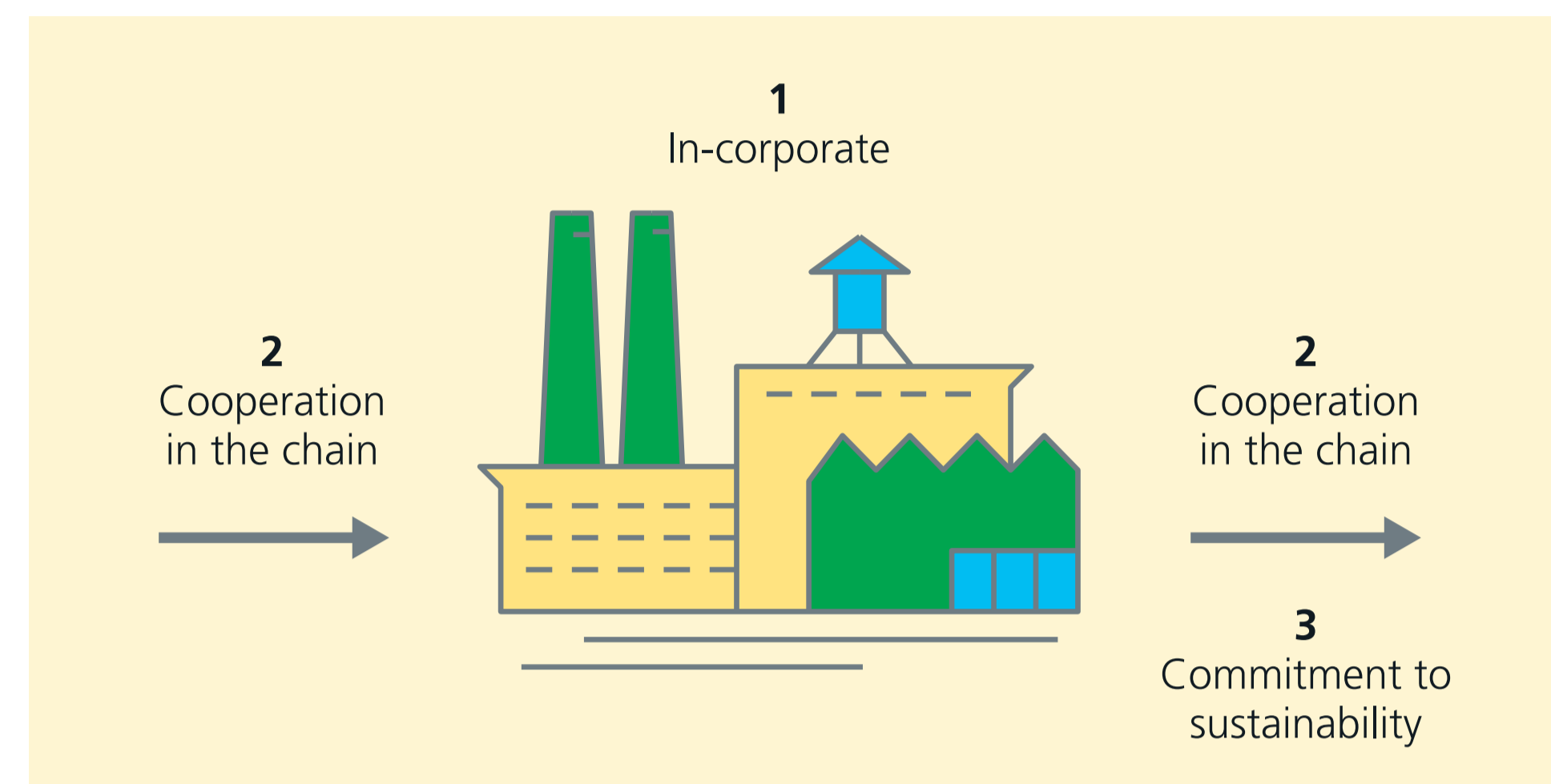


Figure 1 The prioritization of sustainability strategies

Results

By applying these two models, a first step was taken to bridge the gap between the vision on sustainability and the actions that have to lead to a more sustainable performance of the company. By following these companies over a longer period of time a better idea has been developed in which way the gap could be bridged. By observing, asking and, sometimes, even participating actively in the case study this was made possible. The outcomes can be summarized in five elements that play an important role in bridging the gap between vision and actions:

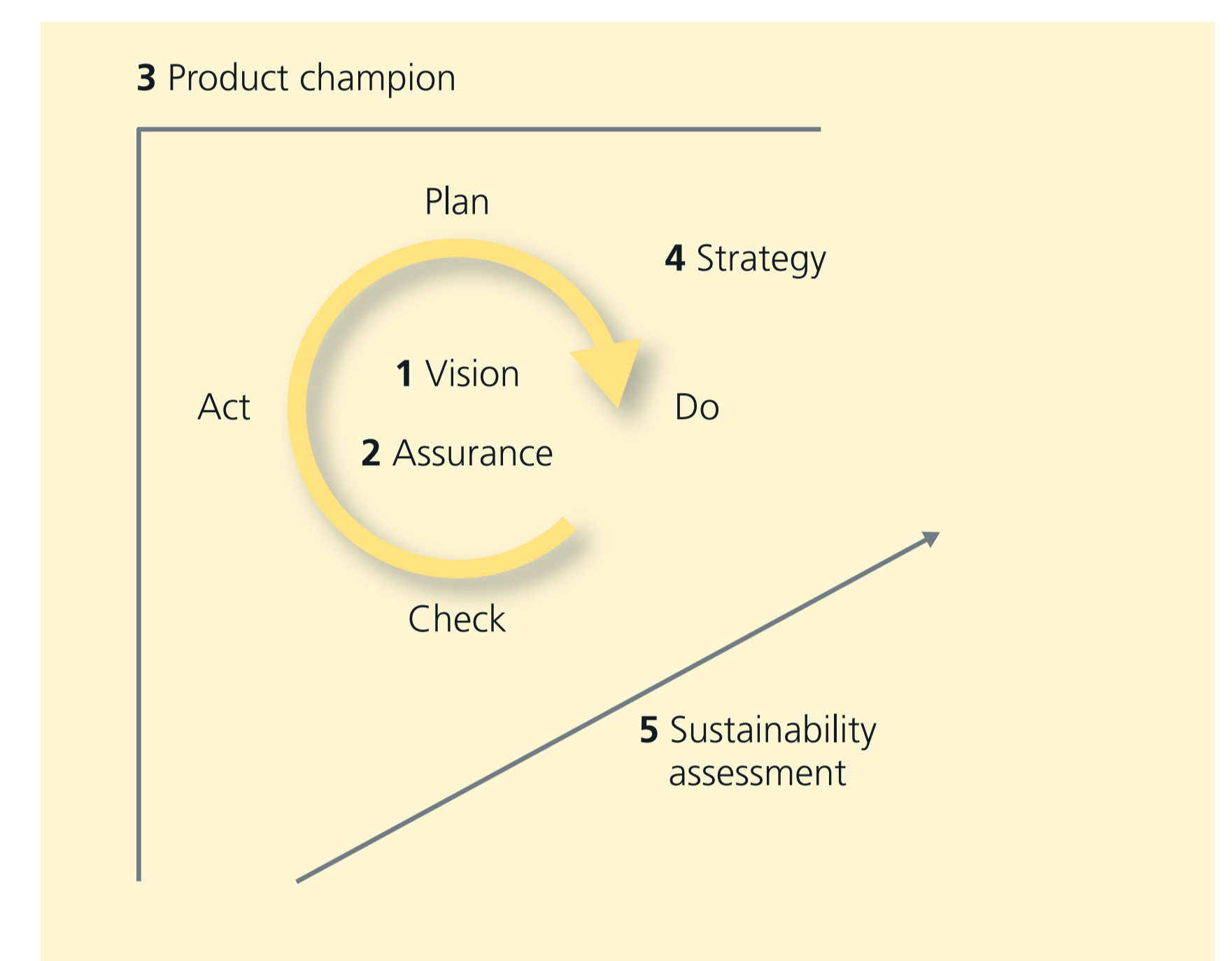


Figure 4 The five elements for bridging the gap between sustainability vision and actions

1. The vision on sustainability

For the companies that were closing the gap between the sustainability vision and the actions leading to a more sustainable performance, the process of setting up the vision was an iterative process: the process itself gave the companies in time more and more insight in the motives for sustainability. The continuous adjustment of the vision gave the company also the possibility to take a distance from the process itself. From the distance it was possible to oversee the process and determine if the direction was still the right one

2. The assurance

Critically thinking about what sustainability means for the company, looking in the mirror and after that setting out the actions lead in several cases to realize that the current management system could support the company's sustainability vision and the employees in a better way. In many situations the management systems was seen as a burden. The companies became aware of the fact that the current management system could be used in a better way.

3. The product champion

The product champion needs to identify with the vision and the actions to be carried out and bridge the gap between vision and actions and to keep the balance between the physical and social side of sustainability. Also was mentioned that the presence of the product champion internally was a success factor for making the step from pro-activeness to innovativeness.

4. The strategy to sustainability

The companies participating in this research made it clear that a sustainability strategy is an important element for success. For this strategy internal factors, like management, operations, productions, as well as external factors, like market, legislation and expectations from stakeholders are important (Székely en Knirsch, 2005). To get to a structured way of defining this road with these factors, Cramer (Cramer, 2005, p. 256) defined 6 ingredients.

5. The contribution to sustainability

To keep all involved people informed, but also motivated, clarity about the progress of the process towards a more sustainable performance is necessary. Knowing which button to press to be able to adjust the sustainable performance was a frequently heard need. Describing this in the management system of the company in the Shewhart's cycle of plan, do, check and act led to: 1. sustainable actions were defined on every level of the organization, and 2. all employees became aware and got clarity of the progress of the sustainability of the company.

This research is the first step for the PhD research with the goal to develop a model of sociological evolution as a motor for sustainability strategy.