

Businesses Take “The Natural Step”

By Robin Byerly

To many businesses, the challenge of becoming a powerful force to stop planetary degradation may seem like an impossible task. It's not. More and more American businesses are learning how to grow and prosper while operating in greater harmony with the natural environment. You might even say it's a *natural step*.

The Natural Step, an organization developed by Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt, teaches large and small businesses how to build environmental management into their basic operations. Like a compass, this framework guides participants step by step to gradual sustainability.

Although The Natural Step was only introduced in the U.S. in 1995 and is still in the early stages of development, many businesses, like IKEA, Interface, Smith and Hawken, and Scandic Hotels, as well as entire communities have embraced the logic of action-oriented environmental thinking. The Oregon Natural Step Network (ortns.org), for example, formed to support Oregon businesses as well as local governments and educational institutions interested in using the framework.

The Natural Step sees business as a vital force in moving society toward sustainability in a non-prescriptive, non-confrontational, and non-judgmental encouragement of “best practices.” The companies mentioned above and many others have reduced costs on a grand scale and boosted their bottom lines while achieving genuine progress toward sustainability. In four years, Interface has realized approximately \$75 million in *savings* by adopting The Natural Step. Scandic Hotels' program has reduced demand (and costs) for energy, water, and handling of unsorted trash.

The Natural Step is different for each company, which must first understand how natural systems work and then identify how its individual activities impact those natural systems. For example, the Interface Corporation, a carpet producer, has targeted seven key paths toward sustainability:

- 1) *Elimination of Waste* – Interface's new policy is to create zero waste.
- 2) *Benign Emissions* – Priority is given to the elimination of molecular wastes that have negative or toxic effects and are emitted into natural systems.
- 3) *Renewable Energy* – Focus is given to reducing the energy demands of work processes while substituting non-renewable sources with sustainable ones.
- 4) *Closure of the Loop* – Most industrial systems are linear, while Mother Nature is cyclical. Interface is redesigning its processes and products to mimic nature, where one entity's “waste” equals another's entity's “food.” In other words, outputs from one process become inputs for others.
- 5) *Resource-efficient Transportation* – This includes moving people, products, information, and resources. Efforts to make these areas more ecologically efficient involve more teleconferencing, making packages lighter, manufacturing closer to the customer, planting trees, experimenting with natural-gas powered fleet cars, etc.

- 6) *Sensitivity Hookup* - The company is trying to help its associates, business partners, and customers better understand these factors and their challenges. It is teaching and sharing to spread the word.
- 7) *Redesign of Commerce* – This is a serious challenge requiring investment and innovation to transform the company’s basic product to better mimic natural cycles and close the loop.

To learn more specifics about *The Natural Step* framework, visit www.naturalstep.org. You will better understand how to merge the economic and the ecological into the planning, design, innovation, and operational procedures for any money-making business.