

# Backcasting

A Proven, Systematic Approach to Effective Sustainability Planning



*Our systematic, comprehensive approach drives consistent successful results*

Sustainability is serious business. Ultimately, the goal is to avert a global ecological crisis, and perhaps even restore some of the damage already done to our remarkable planet. In this context, however, short-sighted decisions can squander scarce resources and undermine core business or organizational priorities essential to competitiveness and long-term success. Therefore, sustainability must be addressed carefully, strategically and systematically, with a clear view to overarching organizational goals as well as the urgency of challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

To keep these various and sometimes conflicting priorities in balance requires a step-by-step, proven process. At Brightworks, we use a proven model utilized with outstanding results by organizations large and small - a process we call "backcasting."

## WHAT IS "BACKCASTING"?

Backcasting – the opposite of forecasting - is a four-step process, and applies equally well to a production process, a business unit, an enterprise, or an entire community. While forecasting means starting where you are today and projecting where you think you will be at some point in the future, backcasting starts with an end goal in mind – full sustainability – and then works backwards to the current situation, providing a road map how to get from where we are today to this ambitious, long term target.

The University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) used this process to craft their landmark campus sustainability plan. So did the Community of Whistler, a ski resort in British Columbia. So did Interface, the largest carpet manufacturer in the world. In addition to the UCSB project, Brightworks has used this approach successfully with clients including NBC and Los Angeles World Airports (operator of LAX), and on landmark LEED Platinum buildings including the first LEED Platinum highrise in the world and the first LEED Platinum condominium in the US.

### 1 Awareness – Sustainability 101

The first step is to develop a basic vocabulary and understanding about sustainability – the scientific basis of sustainability, and how sustainability differs from 'green.' This is the platform from which the actual Backcasting process can be developed.

### 2 Baseline

The next requirement is to understand in complete detail where you are today. To create a roadmap for organizational change or to establish a path to sustainability, one must first accurately and precisely describe the starting point - in all of its technical and resource flow dimensions - and identify areas for improved performance. We help our clients create a detailed Baseline Map, including inputs, internal processes, and outputs – product or service, and waste streams. In the case of a building design or masterplan, the baseline consists of "how would you normally design it?"

### 3 Vision

Next, we help you establish what we call the "Full Sustainability Targets." We know where you are going. Over time, all organizations will either achieve Full Sustainability or vanish into obsolescence. Long-term targets must include climate neutrality, zero waste, and effective stewardship of all resources. But given limited resources and competing demands, prioritization and careful identification of challenges and their solutions requires a systematic approach. Through a facilitated brainstorming process, we help our clients set visionary goals grounded in practical awareness of what can be done today, what can be a short term strategy, and what is better left as a long term target.

### 4 Plan

The next step is to create an action plan: What are the easy early wins, or the high-ROI investments? The strongest brand or market differentiation opportunities? What are the targets for year one, year five, and beyond? Who are the responsible parties and what are the key metrics? Once a vision is established, we help your team identify strategies, obstacles, opportunities to overcome those challenges, and a systematic program to move from where you are today to your vision of a Full Sustainability. In short, we help our clients build capacity to develop comprehensive, integrated, and practical strategies to achieve visionary results.

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