The tree of knowledge: Sustainable management practices for a collaborative ecosystem amongst small to medium enterprises

Abstract

This chapter provides an understanding of the imbedding of corporate social responsibility (CSR) within small to medium enterprises (SME), through continual learning achieved by organizational development processes. Through an interpretivist case study, we investigated the collaborative relationships of 10 Australian organizations. Benefits of these relationships are reflected in improved returns, increased efficiencies and enhanced stakeholder relationships. From these benefits, improved problem solving, change intervention, and implementation were evidenced and supported a causal relationship between positive collaboration and mutual learning. The metaphor of a tree, the ‘collaborative ecosystem model’ is used to explain these relationships and the developmental stages explored; from seed to sprouting of the tree is depicted in terms of theory, corresponding action, and behaviours.

Introduction

Within in this chapter we initially identify the need for a more specific language when discussing CSR within the SME context and have adopted the term sustainable management practices (SMP) for greater relevance to this business sector. This term and other findings emerged through a qualitative inquiry into the roles of continual learning and collaboration amongst small to medium enterprises (SME) as an organizational development intervention to achieve SMP. The rich narrative gained from nine SMEs and a government department provided insight and understanding of theory validating practice. In the findings, aligned values and beliefs supported the learning cycles of innovation and knowledge necessary to develop understanding (Rooney and McKenna, 2005;Del Baldo, 2012). These outcomes and findings are synthesized into the emerging collaborative ecosystem model that forms a visual and holistic perspective of this research through the metaphor of a tree (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014). This metaphor depicts the organizational development to achieve SMP within the context of the following research question: How can SMEs benefit from collaboration through a continual learning approach to sustainable management?

In expounding on the above, approaching sustainability in the SME context and understanding how this sector learns, innovates, and responds, needs to go beyond a 'one size fits all approach' to terminology. The more common usage of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is directed at larger organizations. SMEs strongly indicate that they lack connectivity and are confused with the academic management term of CSR (Baden and Harwood, 2012;Fassin et al., 2014). Due to the many meanings, CSR is problematic to understand as a concept (Dahlsrud, 2008;Jenkins, 2009). To address this confusion the work of Stewart and Gapp (2014) introduce the term SMP, suggesting it as a more appropriate fit for the SME than CSR. SMP is defined as the actions and

behaviours of sustainability through economic, stakeholder, environmental, voluntariness, and social factors (Dahlsrud, 2008; Stewart and Gapp, 2014). Utilizing non-corporate language is important as it helps to differentiate SMEs and identify their uniqueness that distinguishes them from the corporate sector.

SMEs are highly relevant to business outcomes and hold a strong position in the global business world that is often overlooked (Spence, 2016). Despite a lack of time, financial resources, and limited access to information (Vasilenko and Arbačiauskas, 2012; Inyang, 2013; Stewart and Gapp, 2014), SMEs have less bureaucracy that creates the ability for faster decision-making and response times. Re-educating and processing new norms from a grass roots level within the smaller business context, can create a groundswell to shift perceptions to see SMP as the norm rather than the exception. With this decreased bureaucracy, the SME environment generates opportunity to extend understanding and knowledge of SMP not only to this organizational context but also to the business world in general.

Stakeholder collaboration is where opportunities build relationships through mutual interests that allows implicit sharing of experiences. This resulting development is analogous to the Gaia principle (Waddock, 2011; Hörisch et al., 2014; Spence, 2016) where Earth interacts and connects business, society and environment as a whole (Lockwood, 1956). Without a functioning Earth, business and society will also suffer. A mutual interest in SMP was shown to attract stakeholders and businesses together in search of the common cause. Trust provides a common ground for collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2012; Vangen and Winchester, 2013) in addition to developing a philosophy of sharing for the greater good (Basadur et al., 2000). In this chapter we draw on collaboration, clarified through a normative stakeholder view to provide a holistic Gaia principal of continual learning. This outcome is possible in the application

of the normative re-educative lens that led to collaborative learning based on not just shared values but synchronistic growth through participation of the actors involved in the process. The methodology follows an abductive crystallized approach (Ellingson, 2009) strengthened by Yin's (2011) five phases of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and conclusions.

Collaborative Learning

Kohn (1993) describes collaborative learning as “one of the most exciting developments in modern education.” These advantages emanate from more effective learning achieved through participating in well-functioning collaborations leading to positive feelings about one’s self, the studied subject, and others involved in the learning collaboration. Realizations of learning through collaboration across organizations are evident in the tangible and intangible benefits (Sharma and Kearins, 2011; Aragón-Correa et al., 2013; Houghton, 2013). Sharing knowledge, information, and capabilities (Dyer and Singh, 1998) such as human resource practices reveals proactive relationships in environmental strategies (Aragón-Correa et al., 2013). Collaborative alliances of SMEs are fundamental in addressing the systemic challenges relative to adopting and implementing SMP (Moore and Manring, 2009). A flexible style of collaboration is an effective way for SMEs to utilize their lower levels of bureaucracy to build strengths in adaptability, innovation, and responsiveness (Sharma and Kearins, 2011).

Gray and Wood (1991) cite advantages of collaboration to incorporate the resolution of organizational and societal problems. Lewis et al. (2014) specifically indicate that SMEs can overcome many of the barriers (e.g., resources, size, trust, and structure) in employing SMP through collaborative relationships. In their study of environmental management practices, Lewis et al. (2014) conclude collaborative

relationships have the potent to educate and engage SMEs culminating in the potential to transform this sector from the laggards to the leaders in sustainability. Further benefits of collaboration include: mutual learning, improved fiscal returns, better risk management, increased efficiencies, value creation, and enhanced stakeholder relations, along with collective benefits of improved problem-solving and change implementation (Basadur et al., 2000; Butterfield et al., 2004; Sharma and Kiran, 2013).

Collaboration is intuitively positive with connotations of diplomacy, group effort, and cooperation leading to mutual success yet issues may also arise and need to be understood in a collaborative inter-organizational relationship (Butterfield et al., 2004). Formal and informal collaboration exist with both being able to capitalize on collaborative processes (Tilley, 1999). More successful SME collaborations are produced from voluntary foundations (Del Brío and Junquera, 2003). Although collaboration is not an easy process, narrowing the efforts is said to increase the adoption through the advantages of size and scale (Zollo et al., 2013). Collaborative learning is expressed through a combination of stakeholder and normative re-educative literature to be defined through relationships, and the contributions of ideas to construct knowledge by interacting with others (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Mitchell et al., 1997; Gapp and Fisher, 2007; Hörisch et al., 2014).

Normative Stakeholder Collaboration

Butterfield et al. (2004) explains normative stakeholder theory as the moral responsibility of managers in consideration of their stakeholders that is adopted to characterize collaboration. Normative stakeholder theorists argue that collaboration is linked to moral obligations with underpinnings of strategic saliency of power, legitimacy, and urgency in the stakeholder relationship (Mitchell et al., 1997; Butterfield et al., 2004). Founded on principles including Aristotelian ethics of ‘common good’ and

‘fair play’ (Laplume et al., 2008), the normative stance provides stakeholder theory with a strong value base (Donaldson and Preston, 1995).

Normative stakeholder theory adds to the sense making in organizations and supports the morals, values, and beliefs in guiding issues of right or wrong (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). Collaborating with organizations that hold similar morals, values, and beliefs creates a long-term position. A normative perspective is exemplified by Waddock’s (2011) view of the Gaia principle where Earth is a self-regulating living system that business, society, and the environment are all a part of (Lockwood, 1956). Arguing for a long-term view through systems thinking, the principle of Gaia brings holistic views into incorporating stakeholders and reflective learning (Lozano, 2011;Waddock, 2011). The normative lens holds the view that social norms value long-term consideration for the health of the ecological system as all living creatures interact with and are dependent upon for survival (Senge et al., 2008;Stern, 2010;Waddock, 2011). Conversely, the non-normative stance could be considered that society does not value the ecosystems of Earth, and therefore taking a long-term perspective to care for the natural environment is not needed. The logic assumed is based on the normative stakeholder perspective that each individual has a concern for business, society, and the environment that connects them, their family and work groups along with the greater society to ensure longevity.

Waddock’s (2011) premise that we are all stakeholders of Earth’s interactive ecosystem reinforces the principle that society and business are part of the long-term equation to sustain and improve life. Looking to nature for long lasting examples of sustainable management is a logical step as the natural environment in some shape or form has existed and will remain with or without human interaction. The non-human stakeholders are inherently linked to business management with the use of natural

resources to produce, grow, and prosper. Starik and Kanashiro (2013) highlight the research gap in this connection of non-human stakeholders to sustainable management with a call for new concepts. Hörisch et al. (2014) build on this gap through concept development to draw upon the similarities, dissimilarities, and challenges of sustainability management and stakeholder theory. The consistent and constant theme is the neglect in connecting what humans do in business and how this is part of the Earth's ecosystem – Gaia (Lovelock, 2006; Hörisch et al., 2014). Although it is not new to include nature as a stakeholder in stakeholder theory (Waddock, 2011; Hörisch et al., 2014) the saliency of power and legitimacy of this relationship has been largely overlooked, whilst the urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997) increases as Earth faces catastrophic predictions as to how much more degradation can be sustained.

There is a disparate amount of research focused on large corporations (Laplume et al., 2008) that emphasizes the need for stakeholder research on smaller organizations. Extant literature on collaboration and sustainability in the management and organizational fields exists yet is predominantly from an environmental perspective (Sharma and Kearins, 2011). In contrast, collaboration relative to SMP, within and across SMEs remains under researched. Understanding how organizations discover, refine, evolve, and learn to be sustainable is needed (Zollo et al., 2013). To advance knowledge in SMEs demonstrating SMP, studying the normative stakeholder collaboration of exemplars can provide benchmarks, increase understanding, form models and create visions for others to follow.

Continual Normative Re-educative Learning

Within the SME context, internal and external stakeholder relationships are found to be less formal and with a stronger trust base that is represented by intuition and individual engagement (Jenkins, 2006). With current modes of general business

practices argued to be unsustainable, learning to do business differently is needed for the future generations' ability to 'express their spirit' (Senge et al., 2008). Associated with wholeness of character through continual and on-going learning, the power to learn, and the ability to source meaning from positive or negative situations was established by Dewey (1903). For the individual, intra-organizational and inter-organizational levels, continual learning is necessary to manage businesses differently and implement SMP (Siebenhuner and Arnold, 2007). Learning to engage in SMP realigns society and business objectives, which have been identified as the new frontier for organizations to establish long-term competitive advantages (Porter and Kramer, 2011), that Senge (2006) argues comes from the ability to learn more effectively and efficiently than competitors.

Mirvis (1996) champions the importance of learning within organizations as "information is the life blood of an organization and learning governs its circulation and value." This research adopts Gapp and Fisher's (2007) normative re-educative model (GFM) as the lens for continual learning. The GFM builds on frequent cycles of Deming's (1994) *plan-do-study-act* (PDSA) concept as an internal learning process. PDSA interacts and is overlaid onto Argyris and Schön's (1974; 1978) *theory of action* with further reflection and internal learning. Viewing learning through Gapp and Fisher's (2007) established model assists in understanding the reflective process of learning by experience and re-education, leading to normative behaviours for continual improvement and subsequent collaboration and benefits (Gapp and Fisher, 2007; Stewart and Gapp, 2014). Building momentum for continual and collaborative learning is a transformational process that the GFM (Figure 1) speaks to through the maintenance of on-going reflection and feedback.

Figure 1: Gapp and Fisher's (2007) normative re-educative model based on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978) and Deming (1994).

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The GFM (2007) model provides layers of learning that is not necessarily sequential, nevertheless promotes re-education through reflection, feedback, and reprocessing ideas or innovation that is then generalized into normative actions. Harmonizing the gap in what a person or organization espouses and what they actually do is challenging. To overcome these challenges requires learning and reflection (Senge, 2006). Based on Argyris and Schön's (1974, 1978) *theory-in-action* model, the GFM indicates at each level how learning and reflection cycles through PDSA (Deming, 1994) and depending on the situation this may be required several times (Gapp & Fisher, 2007). The promotion and encouragement of innovation through a continual and collaborative learning environment leads to deeper understanding and knowledge. With this in mind the study of SMEs demonstrating good practice generates a pathway through exemplars thereby increasing potential for adoption of SMP.

Literature advancing the understanding of SMP and continuous learning in the SME context is limited. Santos (2011) highlights the need to support and learn about best practice. Von Weltzien Hoivik (2011) applies action learning through the implementation of an accredited framework while Santos (2011) further notes the dominance of informal and unstructured characteristics of SMEs practicing SMP. Fenwick (2011) supports social responsibility concepts through practice emerging from conflicts and challenges in contrast to engaging in the acquisition of new knowledge. Gadenne et al. (2009) researched the environmental dimension and impacts on SME operations to suggest there is a need for learning to create awareness and shift thinking to understand the benefits of SMP. Lewis et al. (2014) explores the environmental dimension with collaborative relationships of SMEs positioned as a point of opportunity in overcoming the challenges to environmental initiatives. Theoretically, the feminist view of collaboration in SMEs is studied by Spence (2016; 2014) to help understand the ethics of care in considering the nuances of the SME. Jenkins (2009) discusses how SMEs are keen to learn and collaborate but does not provide a strategy to foster this innovative environment leading to SMP. This research narrows the focus to collaborative and continual learning; overall the literature highlights the need for further general development and understanding of SMP in the SME sector (Jenkins, 2009; Von Weltzien Hoivik, 2011; Spence, 2014; 2016). To advance academic and practical understanding there is an urgency to address and explore this phenomenon with the pending question: How can SMEs benefit from collaboration through a continual learning approach to sustainable management?

Methodology

Optimising the research design for the most appropriate and effective way to answer the research question is depicted in Figure 2 (see capitalised bold italics). A

qualitative interpretive case study provided the framework to crystallize methods through an integrated and dendritic data collection and analysis process based on synthesising semi-structured interviews, observations, and images (Ellingson, 2009). Crystallization combined with Yin's (2011) case study methods supported the research design in discovering and exploring everyday accounts of participants' reality (Ellingson, 2009). Taking this abductive approach gained fruitful data through appropriate and relevant methods to add value and depth in the social construction of collaboration in building SMP.

Figure 2: Options and pathway for methodological research design

Focused on collaborative learning, a referral or snowballing technique across 10 SMEs based in a suburban area of southeast Queensland, Australia led to 23 interviews and observations including images and generating 217 pages of text (178,220 words). These organizations covered retail, trade, manufacturing, not-for-profits, and a government department with managers and employee participants, aged from mid-

twenties to mid-fifties. The involvement of the participants was voluntary, with pseudonyms provided for research confidentiality. Apart from the government department, each of these organizations can be described as small- to medium-sized businesses with more than five and less than 250 employees (Australian Government, 2012). Use of a government department was initially outside the scope of the research though after initial field visits the interaction of Organization E became apparent as a facilitator in the collaborative process for problem solving. The snowballing method may be perceived as providing an over representation of participants with positive approaches to SMP. Since the intent was to gain an understanding of how collaboration benefits the adoption of SMP, exemplars of SMP actions and behaviours were sought, making this method appropriate. Methodologically, crystallization was framed around Yin's (2011) five phases (compile, disassemble, reassemble, interpret, and conclude) of data collection and analysis (Richardson, 2000; Ellingson, 2011). Crystallization offers the strengths of flexibility to enhance traditional research design, refuting the either/or dichotomy and improving the visual representation through more than one method (Ellingson, 2009). Underpinning crystallization through Yin's (2011) qualitative case study phases established the rigor in the research design of this exploratory study.

Compiling

A staged approach with interviews complimented by secondary sources of evidence including reflective summaries and images of the field visits provided depth and reflexiveness in the analysis process (Yin, 2011) Subsequent to the transcription of interviews, data was disassembled and took a dendritic nature with manual coding and reflection of the observations followed by each stage and allowed for reflection and constant comparison of the data at the individual and organizational levels (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Ellingson, 2009). Interview data was coded into categories drawn from

the meaning and context that emerged from the data. Trustworthiness and credibility were constructed through a chain of evidence with multiple methods, the constant comparison of staged data collection, and analysis throughout the deconstruction and reconstruction process of coding. Crystallization of data collection and analysis through snowballing incorporated a government department, multiple levels of collection (interviews and multiple observation modes), analysis (constant comparison), and representations of this research gained rich and meaningful data whilst being able to reflect and adapt to the situation (Ellingson, 2011; Yin, 2011). Throughout this process the data was iteratively compared and reviewed across individuals and organizations resulting in three levels of coding with *collaboration* emerging as a primary code. Participating organizations were labelled A through J with the participants given pseudonyms by numbers such as the second participant from organization B is identified as B2.

Disassembling and Reassembling

The participants' comments gained through the interviews demonstrated taking the general overview to the granular view. This began with the primary code of 'collaboration' and the underlying concepts of *journey*, *passion*, *communication*, *reputation*, *challenge*, *opportunity*, *credibility*, and *vision* emerging. Within the theme of 'collaboration', normative re-educative learning is often realized as acting organically with 'collaboration', acquiring new understanding and learning that leads to 'collaboration' through a transformative process. Collaboration thematically held stories about each participant's 'journey' and 'passion' to achieve 'collaboration' of SMP, along with issues of 'credibility'.

Many participants spoke of collaborating with other businesses to find solutions. A1 had influenced many with his proactive behaviour towards 'collaboration'. A1's

stories and ‘journey’ were talked about by several organizations. Organization A has the aim to be Australia’s first zero waste retailer and has worked hard to find solutions through normative and re-educative learning processes. Over two years, the challenges of recycling a vast range of E-waste products were realized through continual and collaborative learning of who and how may be able to help. An organization to reverse engineer the majority of the products was easily located, yet with several pallets collected each month, the transport logistics were costly. Several suppliers were contacted and through a joint effort with all suppliers contributing small amounts a closed loop approach resolved the costly logistical issue to become a point of difference. The E-waste of televisions also proved to be a hurdle with no immediate course of action available. The on-going PDSA incorporated into Organization A was implicit with the reference to ideas “bubbling away” and when they do, the study or act phases faced challenges as in the narratives on the recycling issues of E-waste. After two years of pursuing a solution, A1 was pleased to reveal in the final interview, that the recycling of televisions was being realized through new methods and technology of recycling providers. Although this solution was not immediate, the E-waste process took the normative discovery phase into the re-educative produce phase over time.

Expanded polystyrene (EPS) was another story of success through continual learning and collaboration. Several years ago, Organization A discovered that 75% of their waste came from the light but voluminous foam packaging used to protect most boxed products. Through Organization E, A1 was introduced to C1 who had initiated recycling of EPS. This connection resolved the initial problem, yet similar to the E-waste the transportation of the EPS proved to be a challenge due to its bulk versus weight. Organizations C, E, and A pooled their resources to develop an in-house compactor of the EPS. This compactor is now used in several white goods stores taking

the concept through several cycles of the GFM and resulting in the normative practice of compacting and recycling over 12 tons of EPS in one store per year. A1 has achieved accreditation through Queensland's EcoBiz and was awarded the 2010 Queensland Premier's ClimateSmart Sustainability in Business Leadership. On his 'journey', A1 has taken a 'collaborative' approach in both helping others and seeking help. Learning and collaboration to pursue solutions was demonstrated by A1's comment on the connections achieved through the EcoBiz status: "So they played the connector there. And organization D came to us through organization E (government department) as well, I think. So the tick (EcoBiz) relationship came through the support centre." Achieving this status provided 'credibility' in two tangible ways. First, the accreditation itself provided a standard supplied by a 'government' organization. Second, organization E, as a third party delivered quantifiable statistics of waste reduction and savings in terms of water, power, and waste.

Passion for SMP was identified in all participants with the exception of organization G that was the only organization located outside the geographical proximity (three hour drive away) to the other participants. The participants located in closer proximity would meet in person both formally and informally where discussions and support were facilitated. Organization G had and is still participating in the recycling of EPS yet when talking to organization G's participants, the inventing and discovering normative phases were not explicit. In contrast, B2 showed enthusiasm and passion when talking about her new role as the sustainability officer. This involved an individual and organizational learning curve including B2 gaining a tertiary certificate in business sustainability:

B2: Yeah so... I have gotten quite passionate about the sustainability thing.

Working here you can't not be passionate about everything B1... B1 is just

an incredible person to work for and with his charities and his beliefs and the way he runs the company.

B1 gives to several charities domestically and internationally through both financial and personal time. As part of his passion for SMP, B2 works with A1 on community-based projects helping other businesses to implement SMP. *Communication* as a concept is about connecting, reflecting and working together transparently to build trust and collaboration. D1 reflected on how connecting with others who had SMP as part of their core values attracted synergistic relations for mutual benefits (discovering and inventing).

D1: I find that when you talk to other people involved in these businesses if you're into recycling... they are passionate about recycling. They seem to be people that then become very generous in the knowledge that their share..."

D1, B1, and E1 had collaborated to fulfil several sustainable projects. One such project of recycling steel roofs from B1's business had to be reviewed due to political changes that depleted funding. H1 provided further collaboration with labour and training for the removal of the steel roofs and D1's organization recycles the steel. B1 has the benefit of knowing the unwanted steel is being removed without cost to himself and given a second life. This scenario reflects the overlay of PDSA in the GFM model with ideas coming to fruition, yet due to external impacts, a continual normative re-educative process was applied to ensure adaptability and SMP. The normative re-educative approach was managed by seeking SMP alternatives and options for the external and internal challenges in the SME business.

Reputation included a level of credibility that was detected in tangible and intangible ways. Tangible reputation was gained through the integrity of accreditation and intangibly in the sense of opportunities, attraction and retention of customers,

suppliers, and staff. Organization E provided EcoBiz accreditation and competency for SMP. Organization A was one of the first businesses to achieve this and became an exemplar for the state run organization. Organizations B, C, and I also achieved this endorsement that they felt gave a credible benefit to promote and build a SMP reputation. Gaining a positive reputation through accreditation provides credibility. The reputation concept held stories of attraction and retention in employment through the collaborative learning focused on SMP. Analogous to D1's comments, the attraction of adopting SMP practices has built a reputation that employees have recognized. A4 stated, "I saw what A1 was doing and it was a good opportunity yeah...." When there was a change of ownership in his employment A4 approached A1 for a position. Similarly, A5 and A2 followed A1 from their previous employment.

Lack of time, information, and resources are demonstrable *challenges* for SMEs (Vasilenko and Arbačiauskas, 2012). The challenge of SMP was demonstrated in many forms yet often followed by the scope for opportunity. Even for the exemplars, it was a challenge to maintain the momentum of collaboration and learning for SMP. A1 talked of the leaders, leaners, and laggards in reference to who he collaborated with in the local community. Leaders are on board, leaners are the ones with potential, and the laggards are the non-believers that A1 explained were not a good fit to embrace SMP:

A1: We're actually not interested in the laggards because there's probably ten per cent of those businesses that are complaining and doing this and not really being proactive about anything. We are not putting any energy into that. We'll put our energy into the leaders for the leaners.

Challenges through communication also presented *opportunity*, at times due to the reputation. Many narratives characterized the link of challenge to opportunity. J1 is an electrical contractor who is keen to help people cut down on energy consumption. He

explained the conundrum when customers wanted to install solar systems and the motivation was to use more power invariably for air conditioning purposes. Taking the normative re-educative approach, J1 saw himself as “opening people’s eyes up to the world” through ideas and SMP. Whilst also realizing that it “is probably a bit of a challenge...”, the opportunity provided good insight into how an iterative approach can help generate new knowledge to develop appropriate strategies for solutions providing evidence of the normative transformation with re-educative SMP. J1 saw himself as an energy educator by providing information to stakeholders on the ways and means of reducing power consumption.

Credibility came with reputation and overlapped in the stories about EcoBiz, Premier’s awards, and the benefits gained through community and government recognition. The ‘collaboration’ theme can be summarized as organizations sharing the ‘journey’ to find solutions and the opportunity to overcome ‘challenges’ generally accompanied by ‘passion’. This often meant the ‘communication’ of ‘vision’ and working with government departments resulting in a positive ‘reputation’. Reflecting on the initial days of EPS recycling, C1 showed resilience and desire to find solutions, which highlighted the benefits of SMEs inherently having less bureaucracy as the local and state government could not resolve the EPS issue that had become a landfill problem:

C1: Nobody had bothered to do anything about [it] and so I said, okay, I’ll do a free trial. I’m happy to do that because I knew I could see it was an opportunity there possibly. I guess doing a free trial we put in simple frames and bags and got them to start separating it you get government meddling in commercial activities the net result is exactly what we saw... disaster.

The final concept of *vision*, underpinned all concepts. Without the ability to have the foresight with aims and goals of what can be achieved it is difficult to embrace SMP principles. Vision encompasses the long-term approaches of SMP with short-term wins accumulating to the overall goal of SMP. Possessing a long-term and holistic vision closes the conceptual loop in taking the view of SMP as a journey versus a destination. Despite B2's social entrepreneurial spirit, he talked of A1's enthusiasm as a driver: "He's the one who's got the passion and the vision of it all. And then as his passion and vision has pulled a lot of other business people into it as well... me included." In the same statement, B2 went onto position his own reasoning and motivation "Plus, you know, for me and my family and my kids, I figured that too, there's got to be a different way of—if every business does a little bit we'll have a lot better world I think."

The normative stakeholders who hold like-minded values and beliefs collaborated with passion about sharing their ideas, experience, and inspiration. SMP implies that there are core values leading to humanistic beliefs about wanting to make the world a better place through the aspects of society, environment, voluntariness, and stakeholders. Encouraging a collaborative learning environment transpired into prompting individual, group, and organizational benefits that flowed on to the wider community reflecting an ecosystem (Waddock, 2011). Seeking alternatives and problem solving through collaborative learning negated the fear of doing something wrong, and participating in normative re-educative organizational development. Engagement with SMP established into practical based learning, understanding, and with the correlation of values and beliefs (Rooney and Mckenna, 2005; Del Baldo, 2012) that are needed to operate effectively in the small business world. When participant A was incapable of overcoming some of the recycling challenges he was able to reach out to other's within

his network who he knew would extend time, energy and effort to help find solutions. These actions and behaviours of the participants are indicative of normative stakeholders who aim to live a holistic life with business and society interacting and integrating through the interests of different stakeholders. Construction of deeper and iterative learning for organization development comes from the support of normative stakeholders as evidenced in this research with the collaboration of participants.

Interpreting

This research observed exemplary and innovative actions of the normative stakeholders. The recycling, training and development, recognition, and support was based on voluntary collaboration of sharing SMP ideas to gain solutions. The innovations resulting from the collaborative learning of participants through their common goal of SMP concurs with Gray and Wood's (1991) argument that collaborative business relationships enable resolution of organizational and wider societal issues. Whilst the urgency of adopting SMP was not discernible, the saliency of power and legitimacy (Mitchell et al., 1997) was evident in the credibility and reputation that organization E, the government department, provided. Creation of policy and governance for SMP in SMEs evidenced the value of credibility that instils internal and external confidence for the SME. Promotion and encouragement of collaboration through a continual learning environment led to deeper understanding and knowledge that transpired into the generalization of actions and behaviours. SMEs supporting the collaboration of SMP overcame challenges and barriers to facilitate internal and external innovations that fostered organizational development.

Time and financial resources are demonstrable challenges for SMEs (Inyang, 2013; Jenkins, 2009). Specific issues such as the lack of best-practice exemplars and a scarcity of information sources are substantial obstacles in seeking out SMP (Vasilenko

and Arbačiauskas, 2012). Collaboration needs trust and common ground (Vangen and Huxham, 2012) and this was achieved through a collaborative group of stakeholders who embraced SMP. The participants were mostly aware of each other and have been referred to as normative stakeholders with common SMP values, yet the benefits of their actions and behaviours went further than the immediate grouping.

The business case for SMP is usually from an individualistic business perspective and motivated by wanting to improve one's own business (Senge et al., 2008; Porter and Kramer, 2011). When individuals come together to share ideas and knowledge, then SMP acts as a catalyst and provides inspiration. SMP has the underlying values that attract people who want to do more and 'do things differently'. When business individuals are attracted by SMP, the motivation goes beyond improving the financial bottom-line. The normative stakeholder collaboration of participants evolved as an interesting and meaningful representation on the strategic, operational, and individual levels. Informal alliances were formed and established over time through the building of relationships.

To help understand these relationships and how they interacted and linked to create beneficial outcomes, the natural environment provided the metaphor of a tree. Organization A, led by A1, proved to be the core or as depicted in Figure 3, the trunk of a collaborative ecosystem. The rain and sunshine replicate the funding and relational support provided by Organization E. As a result of the resources and relational support (rain and sunshine) supplied by Organization E, nutrients are released that feed through the roots into the abilities of the participants, primarily through A1 and Organization A. Subsequently, the SMEs collaborated and explored learning opportunities to further grow and continue with SMP. In turn, this developed and strengthened the SMP exemplar of Organization A through growth and innovation. This growth of business,

knowledge, understanding, and building on reflection, filtered and fed to other organizations through the continual learning and collaborative relationships that were observed in this research.

Figure 3: Collaborative ecosystem

The natural flow of the relationships is akin to the planting of a tree. Just as an idea is seeded, like the tree, it takes nurturing, nourishing, and considerable input for growth and effectiveness. This growth process does not come from a sole source, but from the combining of resources through the development of collaborative relationships. Many of these resources were of an intangible nature with ideas and connections coming from employees, informal networks and shared ideas to help

resolve the challenges. Through his passion, sharing of knowledge and experience, along with wanting to make a difference. A1 has engaged other organizations through a palpable desire and drive that draws others in to engage with sustainability. The successes of organization A under the leadership of A1 provide a vision of possibilities and opportunities. Elimination of toxic landfill as in the exemplars of E-waste and EPS recycling led to win/win scenarios for all participants through organizational development of business practices, collaboration of like-minded SME practitioners and making a difference through SMP.

As happens in the natural environment, nourishment and growth occurs at different rates, and sometimes not at all. Organization G, based in a regional area and socially aware of their community, benefitted from the development of an EPS compactor that A1 in conjunction with C1 and Organization E collaborated resource-wise to make happen. As a geographically disposed participant their support and collaboration was limited, which was reflected in their lack of awareness and unwillingness to discuss SMP. Although organization E provided many means to take ideas into actions through their fiscal and practical support, they were also the conduits for fostering relationships. A1 acted as an empowering force within his sphere through tangible evidence of SMP, demonstrating the relevance of action on transformation rather than words. Each participating organization had a constructive link to Organization A.

Relationships grow from connecting with stakeholders through a mutual understanding and moral obligation for what is fair and reasonable when functioning as a business (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). The normative view stemming from the Gaia principle (Lovelock, 2006; Lozano, 2011; Waddock, 2011) embraces Earth as a stakeholder. From this lens there is an interaction that involved the need to take care of

the whole ecological system for the benefit of the common good. Figure 3 takes this to the micro level of SMEs collaborating to seek opportunities through SMP. The metaphor of a tree represents the collaboration ecosystem. Metaphors are used widely to communicate an idea or concept. Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) refer to the broad use of the term 'culture' to describe the shared underlying values, norms, and assumptions within an organization. This builds on Morgan et al.'s (1997) work where metaphors reconceptualize and inspire change in people's assumptions. The visual representation of a metaphor disseminated a vision to promote learning and change (Milne et al., 2006).

This research has seen the benefits of organizations finding solutions through connecting and interacting with each other. The evidence supports the positive collaboration through mutual learning, improved returns, increased efficiencies, enhanced normative stakeholder relationships, and included the collective benefits of improved problem-solving and change implementation touted in previous research on larger organizations (Butterfield et al., 2004; Sharma and Kearins, 2011; Aragón-Correa et al., 2013). Whilst extensive evidence within this context supports the collaborative organizational development benefits of SMP gained through a continual learning approach there are substantial limitations and opportunities acknowledged.

Limitations and prospects

The geopolitical limitations of studying SMEs in Australia are multifaceted. During this study policies were changing rapidly as Australian state and federal governments oscillated through power and the subsequent policy vacuum. SMEs do not have the fiscal or size buffers of their larger counterparts that means collaboration with other SMEs provides a forum to share, consolidate and learn from each other. Despite this the instincts of survival create a competitive playing field with collaboration requiring trust that stems from relationship building. The collaboration and imbedding

of SMP in the participants of this study was observed over a two year period with a history going back 10 years. With SMEs the long-term vision can be problematic as the need to survive is a permeating factor. The exemplars of good practice in this study stress the benefits that can come from a collaborative approach.

The collaborative versus dictatorial context of this study showed that the integration and interaction of SMEs working together simulates an ecosystem. Practically, the benefits include the ability to support and work with others to overcome barriers and problem solve; when governments or other environmental changes occur the collaborative relationships provide a level of stability and a fertile ground for effective development in aspects of organizational and potential policy development. The emotional support of SMEs when working together generates a broader base in knowledge, resources and capabilities that builds prospects for innovation as seen in the SMP evolution observed in this research.

Although Australia reflects many Anglo western nations such as Canada and United Kingdom, the Asian proximity makes for a unique view. Logistically, the encumbrances of time zones, language and history mean Australian SMEs offer a distinct point of difference. Exploring SMEs outside the mainstream of Europe and North America delivers a global perspective for comparison and contrast that broadens SME and SMP research. Academically this research extends and advances organizational development through the application of the GFM model for normative re-educative continual learning and improvement. In terms of SMP and SME, the collaborative ecosystem represents a model that amalgamates organizational development theory with socially responsible frames of reference. As an interpretive case study, learning through possibility, potential and past experiences have evidenced

ways to collaborate, learn and develop through continual learning that overcome many challenges for long-term benefits.

Conclusion

This research highlighted SMP actions through meaning in terms of collaborative learning across a group of SMEs. Academic research has been minimal in understanding collaboration and learning from the normative re-educative stance required for SMP within the SME context. The participating SMEs qualified the challenges and potential knowledge by materially collaborating with tangible resources to resolve issues and maintain momentum in SMP initiatives. When the participants shared ideas and knowledge, this stemmed from a conviction of wanting to make a difference. Recycling, networking, and collaborative learning manifested in the opportunities and benefits for SMEs through a continual learning approach to SMP.

Theoretically, there has been a two-fold contribution. Firstly, the GFM model has been expanded on to provide a lens for normative re-educative learning in the context of SMEs and more specifically the collaboration of SMEs. Secondly, the conceptual Collaboration Ecosystem model evolved from the reconstruction of the data and incorporated discussion. The interaction and collaboration was shown metaphorically to create a visual and visionary representation, that led to learning and promoting change (Milne et al., 2006) as has been widely used in organizations (Morgan et al., 1997; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). From seed to sprouting and growing, the tree concept demonstrated the organizational development achieved through collaboration in action. As in the Gaia principle, learning and collaboration provided the nutrients to feed through to cultivate and multiply innovation and the SMP of the participants (Waddock, 2011). The connection of human actions in business and how this is part of the Earth's ecosystem has been demonstrated (Lovelock,

2006;Hörisch et al., 2014) by exploring theoretically and practically how SMEs benefit from collaboration through a continual learning approach to SMP. This built and strengthened the organizational development of SMP with growth in business, knowledge, understanding, and collaboration. Creating and discussing this visual representation provides SMP and SME research opportunity to expand the capacity into other geographical areas.

This research is distinctive in that it has explored the practical and academic aspects of collaboration that came from mutual learning in the SME context. Consistent with research (Butterfield et al., 2004;Sharma and Kiran, 2013) on larger organizations, this current study revealed the benefits of collaboration. The transformation to SMP was verified mostly from small but workable initiatives. With SMEs generally managed by the owner, the intrinsic lack of bureaucracy was effective in the development of collaboration through normative stakeholder relationships. Aristotle's adage that the "whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Thomson and Tredennick, 1976) exemplified the diversity of skills and ideas needed to gain SMP that was seen through the collaborative learning of the participating SMEs. With many SMEs feeling isolated and unable to make a difference (Spence, 2014), building support through formal and informal collaboration has been shown to be a driver in the reshaping to adopt SMP. In addition to these external benefits, there were positive indications that collaborative relationships promote the generalization of SMP within the SME.

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