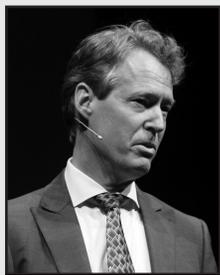




# The Sustainability Professional

On the Record with Alan AtKisson  
CEO and President

The AtKisson Group, Stockholm, Sweden



**Close Up:**  
**Alan AtKisson**

**Years in Current Job:** 19

**Birthplace:** Mexico, MO

**Education:** Interdisciplinary studies in science, philosophy, and culture, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA and Oxford University (England); Henry Luce Scholar 1981

**Career highlights:** Co-founder of the Sustainable Seattle initiative. Developer of the ISIS Method and Accelerator tools, used by practitioners around the world. Founder of AtKisson Group (consultancy) and the ISIS Academy (professional training and development). Author of *Believing Cassandra: How to be an optimist in a pessimist's world* (1999, revised 2010 and released by Earthscan) and *The Sustainability Transformation* (original title: *The ISIS Agreement*), just released in paperback by Earthscan.

**Favorite book:** *The Limits to Growth*, by Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jorgen Randers, Universe Books, 3rd edition (2004)

**Favorite song:** "Open," by Bruce Cockburn

*Eban Goodstein, Director of the Bard Center for Environmental Policy at Bard College (Annandale-on-Hudson, New York), and his class of master's students, interview sustainability consultant and author Alan AtKisson on his view of what makes a change agent successful and why things are "getting worse and worse and better and better faster and faster."*

**Bard College Students: Your book *The Sustainability Transformation* is an instruction manual for sustainability change agents. What is a change agent?**

**Alan AtKisson:** Well, the phrase, "change agent" came into academic language thanks to the pioneering work of Everett Rogers, who was the originator of the Diffusion of Innovations theory.<sup>1</sup> We use the term to describe someone in a social system who works to promote and anchor—that's a word we use often in Swedish—an innovation or a new idea.

Rogers' work is not so well known outside of communications theory, but if you work with sustainability, it is absolutely critical stuff to understand because almost all sustainable development work is change work. It is about trying to effect systemic interventions and put new ideas into key places—changing policies, technologies, and mindsets. That makes it pretty important to understand something about how change occurs, and particularly how new ideas get successfully embedded into systems.

Then, if you add the sustainability dimension to that, it is pretty important to understand how to make changes that will provide multiple benefits in a system—for example, by saving energy, reducing carbon dioxide, saving money, and making life better for someone all at the same time.

A change agent is someone who is working on all of that, and who is trying to develop strategic approaches, to identify the specific kinds of new ideas to use with those approaches, and to get those ideas embedded in systems.

That's a complex answer, but you can sum it up in a phrase: A change agent is somebody who makes change happen.

**Bard College Students: Who is a model for you of a successful change agent, and why? Also, what did he or she help make more sustainable and how?**

**Alan AtKisson:** That is a great question. I devote much of the last chapter of *The Sustainability Transformation* to describing some of my heroes in that regard, although many of them are also great friends and colleagues. I am thinking of people like Junko Edahiro in Japan, who started the organization Japan for Sustainability, and has done a fantastic job of both bringing sustainability ideas from other countries into Japan—including right to the prime minister's office—as well as bringing environmental and sustainability ideas into English teaching processes, so that people are learning about English and the environment at the same time. Ms. Edahiro also sends information out of Japan, so that ideas that are useful and popular there can gain some traction in other places.

I think also of Dick and Jeanne Roy in Portland, Oregon, a couple who have been a phenomenal force for change in that community, helping to bring sustainability ideas into lots of companies and government offices.

But someone who is not in that book, and who is a really great example of a change agent, is my friend Chirapol Sintunawa. He's a university professor in Thailand, but he also started a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and training center. Chirapol is absolutely brilliant at taking complicated ideas about systems and sustainability and translating them into media campaigns, certification programs, and training workshops. For example, he was the brains behind a program called the Green Leaf Program, which got hotels to start doing sustainability and competing for how many "leaves" they could get, not just how many "stars" they had. To be a five-leaf hotel, you have to do a lot more than change your light bulbs and save energy. You have to compost all your food scraps from your restaurants on-site and turn that into soil, and use that soil to grow your own organic vegetables that you then serve in your restaurant. Five-star hotels are doing that now. Chirapol

figured out how to make something very chic and very green at the same time.

Chirapol sums up what I think are some of the key success factors for change agents—they know how to take very important and complicated ideas and make them digestible and approachable. They give people an easy doorway into accepting the ideas, or trying them, or testing them, or feeling them out. It should also be clear from this example that the concept of being a sustainability change agent is totally cross-cultural; it is not something you can only see in one profession or in certain countries. You see it all over the world.

Also, the sustainability change agent's job is not just about making something more sustainable; it's about making it more sustainable *faster*. Change agents speed up the process of adoption and implementation so that concrete results start to occur faster than they would ordinarily have done.

**Bard College Students: In your work, change agents are not traditional organizational leaders, a category that you associate more with the term transformers. Are change agents leaders?**

**Alan AtKisson:** Change agents are sometimes leaders, absolutely—but they do not have to be. The role of the change agent is about the ideas and the change and not about the person. Some of the most effective change agents I know are not people whom you would look at and say, “leader.” You might look at them and say “writer” or “quiet behind-the-scenes advisor” or “inspiring facilitator.”

But there are of course leaders who are also change agents. I think of Ray Anderson, for example, the founder of InterfaceFLOR. Ray is absolutely a leader, the strongest kind. But he is also an extremely effective change agent, particularly in the community of other corporate CEOs and leaders, where he did a really great job of articulating the imperatives and benefits of sustainability and convincing others to consider it more seriously.

I will also note that transformers do not have to be leaders. They often are, but I have known transformers who were more like spiders in the social web—the person that others seek out to find out what was hot and what was not, even if they had no formal leadership role in their organization. So transformers are opinion leaders, definitely, but not necessarily formal leaders.

A lot of people feel that they have to be “draw-attention-to-themselves” leaders if they are going to make change. That is one strategy, but you do not have to do that. You can also be the kind of person who is

just very effective at introducing people to new ideas, and persuading them to adopt them.

**Bard College Students: If you were running a change agent boot camp, per se, what is the one skill that you think many change agents are lacking, and an aspiring change agent can work to develop?**

**Alan AtKisson:** Funny you should ask, since we do run boot camps for change agents, which we call Master Classes, through our ISIS Academy program. There are a couple of skills that people who aspire to be better change agents usually need to strengthen.

One is in the area of political savvy. A lot of people working in sustainability come into the field from very idealistic origins, and they tend to be a little naïve about the rough stuff that happens in organizational life. They can be taken by surprise when somebody throws sharp elbows or goes behind their back in a power play, and they sometimes need a little bit of toughening up—not in terms of them learning to play rough, but in terms of being able to recognize and deal with some of the tougher tactics that go on in change processes.

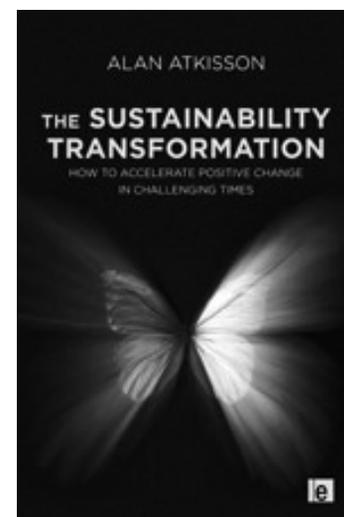
Another key skill is communication. A lot of people believe they are change agents when they are actually, in my language, innovators: They are passionate about their ideas. They really want to make change. But they are not great communicators. The marketing people would say that they tend to stress the features over the benefits. In simpler terms, they just get carried away and do not think strategically about what messages, in what sequence, will be most effective in promoting new ideas. They usually have trouble listening as well, and in reading group dynamics. These are core skills for change agents.

**Bard College Students: Building more off of your experience of change agents, how has the work of sustainability change agents evolved over the last two decades?**

**Alan AtKisson:** Two decades ago, change agents were facing a huge uphill battle just to get sustainability noticed and taken seriously. So the earliest work that I was involved in, with my friends and colleagues in the volunteer initiative Sustainable Seattle, involved trying to get city leaders, governmental leaders and, to a lesser degree, business leaders to sit up and take notice.

Twenty years later, the situation is really very different. One, change agents are able to focus on promoting specific change initiatives, rather than sustainability in general. They get to work on the acceleration of specific innovations in business, policy,

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**The Sustainability Transformation: How to Accelerate Positive Change in Challenging Times**

By Alan AtKisson  
Published by Earthscan,  
part of the Taylor & Francis Group  
November, 2010



Bard College students

Top left to right: Cody Mellott, Brent Miller, Heather Davis, Robyn Glenney, Erycka Montoya, and Timothy Banach

Bottom left to right: Jake Claro, Vanessa Arcara, Tugpon Tudenggongbu, Amy Hieter, and Prapti Bhandary

In prioritization, a good rule of thumb is to look at two factors: One is level of risk, and the other is the ease of implementation.

or organizational processes, with immediate impacts on issues like carbon dioxide, worker health and safety, or access to water and energy resources for the world's poorest people. It is very concrete.

The other thing that is very different is the increasing level of sustainability ambition and vision. Ideas that would have seemed ridiculously visionary and “pie in the sky” 20 years ago—like climate neutrality—are now routine, and business leaders talk about the restoration of degraded natural systems rather than merely reduced impact.

I am also noticing a much faster uptake time. Years ago, I learned to be patient: New ideas that I planted with a client one year would usually not sprout for at least a year. These days, I'll notice an idea dropped into a conversation with a client—even one that seemed pretty radical at first to that client—come back to me in an e-mail just a few weeks later. That's maybe the most astonishing change.

Overall, it is just much more fun doing this work these days, whereas 20 years ago, you often felt like you were beating your head against the wall. You were thankful when you could find a few other people who understood what you were doing, people you could commiserate with from time to time. You'd make new strategies together for how to beat your head against the wall a bit more effectively. It's just a totally different experience today. People are so much more open to sustainability.

**Bard College Students: Given this new openness, when change agents are hired now as sustainability coordinators, do they face particular challenges,**

**and do you have any advice for building strong sustainability initiatives within organizations?**

**Alan AtKisson:** The key challenge that sustainability change agents face when they get hired professionally into these jobs is the incredible mismatch between the resources that they usually have at their disposal and the magnitude of their responsibility or task. Even in the best situations, whether we are talking about a city or a company, the vast majority of the resources and energy is naturally focused on the core business of that enterprise. And most of that core business is still headed in the wrong direction.

For example, if you are the sustainability coordinator for Company X, which is making widgets, most of that company's people and budget are concerned with widget production and sales—not with carbon dioxide reduction or extending the rights of workers and supply chains. And usually all those people and all the financial levers are pushing the organization in the opposite direction. That has always been a huge challenge when it comes to making change for sustainability, and it remains a huge challenge. It still happens that sustainability coordinators are set up to fail: They are given a big job, with limited resources, and when nothing significant occurs, people in the organization say, Look, sustainability does not work. That's why change agents have to get very clever about strategy and find leverage points that will amplify their impact, or help redirect the flow of people and resources in more sustainable directions.

Another challenge is prioritization. Today's change agents may have 15 big challenges they really have to take on, but they do not have the budget and the person-power to take on all 15. That's hard: Do I take on climate change first, or what about the exposure to these really bad chemicals that are in the supply chain? What about cradle-to-cradle design? Or maybe workers' rights? It's tough to prioritize and sequence the work when everything seems to be critically important.

**Bard College Students: Do you have any advice about how to prioritize against these challenges, or is it case-specific?**

**Alan AtKisson:** One can make a few generalizations. But one of the reasons that consultants exist is because each case is complex and specific. You often need an external perspective to see all the links and angles and help you define and prioritize your sequence of strategic actions. I was just visiting a company in Germany, helping them to do exactly that, among other things.

In prioritization, a good rule of thumb is to look at two factors: One is level of risk, and the other is the ease of implementation. If you have an issue in the

organization that is high risk, and it is actually not so hard to implement actions to address that risk, that is often going to emerge as priority one. That is a pretty simple calculation.

Here's an example. I was meeting recently with a company that is trying to build a reputation around its climate profile, and yet they are still just hooked up to the normal electricity grid. Meanwhile, literally next door, there was a biogas installation, and for a very small initial investment they could hook up to biogas and essentially make their whole installation carbon neutral. They just had not taken the time to think about it yet. Once we did the math, we realized that they were going to get that initial investment back in two years, and there was no reason not to do it immediately.

These days, organizations and communities of all kinds face increasing risk issues from sustainability, so that makes it easier for change agents to get extra resources from leaders, or boards of directors, or voters, to deal with these things. Risk, which is increasingly framed more positively as resilience, has become a very powerful lever for making the case for prioritization.

Beyond that, I would say that prioritization becomes pretty much a case-by-case problem because the level-of-risk and ease-of-implementation profiles are so specific enterprise by enterprise or community by community. In New Orleans, the risk profile was very much about flooding, coastal erosion, and poverty, whereas in northern Queensland the risks—although they include big hurricanes—are really more about cultural survival and the economic and social aspirations of aboriginal communities. Very few generalizations are possible in that context.

**Bard College Students:** In your book you describe the “Seven Secret Powers of Change Agents.” Given the resource limitations and others that you were just describing, which one or two of those seven secret powers has been the most useful to you in your work?

**Alan AtKisson:** I use all of them, a lot. But the one that I have used most often, most explicitly and most transparently, is number two—the power of volunteering. When you say that you are not getting paid for something, and you do not want to get paid for something, people sometimes look at you as though you were a little nuts. But in any case, they cannot look at you and think, How does he stand to profit from this? So there have been numerous times where in order to advance a particular idea or organization, I have made an explicit point, both strategically and ethically, of volunteering. Once I am paid, I am in a different relationship to the organization and I have

a different sort of base on which to stand when I go to speak about issues related to that organization. I really want to underscore that I believe some level of volunteerism is both ethically important for people doing sustainability work, as well as being very powerful strategically.

The other “secret power” I’ll mention is number five, the power of creativity. People familiar with my work know that I sometimes sing as part of a speech or workshop. But I want to be quick to say that when I put creativity on this list of secret powers, I did not mean that you have to stand up and sing or write a poem about sustainability. What I mean is that by bringing the creative impulse into the work, you can encourage people to be more innovative, even more brave.

For example, with a particular group process, you might use a little recorded music in the background of some exercise you are doing. Or you might invite groups to compose a little rhyme that sums up their findings—just to break the bubble of formality. You have to be thoughtful about this, and not do it in ways that scare people or make them feel like they have wandered out of the professional seminar and into the arts and crafts class. You do have to be very thoughtful about when and where you do this. But it can be enormously effective. When people are invited to go a little further than they would ordinarily go, and play with ideas or behaviors that are pretty far outside of their normal routines, then that makes ideas that once appeared wildly innovative start to look more and more reasonable and mainstream. A little creativity in a planning or training process is really powerful. Do not be afraid of it.

**Bard College Students:** One aspect of your approach has been to work with communities to develop their own sustainability indicators, using your “Compass of Sustainability.” Have communities adopted the Compass, updating it every few years to assess progress toward sustainability? Are there particular measures that communities all tend to adopt as critical for measuring progress?

**Alan AtKisson:** I will take the second part of that question first. One thing that has happened with community sustainability in recent years is that it has stopped being innovative and become normal operating procedure. With that has come a lot of standardization. You have these programs like ICLEI’s STAR Community Index, which helps to guide communities in selecting indicators. So we’re doing less with Compass at the community level these days, even though we started there because of the growing popularity of these more standardized approaches.

There have been numerous times where in order to advance a particular idea or organization, I have made an explicit point, both strategically and ethically, of volunteering. Once I am paid, I am in a different relationship to the organization.

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I'm always a little worried about standardized approaches because every community is different. But there are some common threads: Climate, energy, and transport-related issues are always big for communities. Democratic participation and civil society, equity, and fairness measures are, or should be, routinely present. We used to have to push hard for those measures in years past, and Compass really helped in that regard. But these days, this is less of a battle.

But Compass is spreading in other sectors, and our business as consultants has been changing over the last few years. These days we work a lot more with the corporate sector, with large institutions, and with schools and universities. Organizations are finding Compass very useful not just for developing indicators or managing stakeholders, but as a management platform and learning tool. This is especially true for companies.

But schools, for example, use Compass to do everything, from reconsidering energy choices, to deciding what to serve for lunch, to learning about the surrounding community from a sustainable development perspective. Once we got an e-mail from a teacher whose students were using Compass, on their own initiative, to analyze literature from different centuries in order to understand the changes that had happened over time in people's relationship to nature, economy, society, and well-being.

Lastly, when we first started 20 years ago, indicators were one of the only things we could get people to do, and they remain a great starting point for doing sustainability work. It was harder then to get organizations and cities to actually frame strategy and take action. But all that has changed. So Compass as a framework and indicators as tools are now integrated into the much more comprehensive strategic process we call ISIS: Indicators, Systems, Innovation, and Strategy.

**Bard College Students: In thinking about resource constraints at the community level, are there special challenges in working in low-income communities or developing countries where economic survival can make sustainability investments particularly difficult? How about cases when sustainable practices conflict with traditional social norms?**

**Alan AtKisson:** When we worked with cities like New Orleans, which I write about extensively in *The Sustainability Transformation*, absolutely these issues were on the table. One of the reasons there was such a catastrophic loss of life in connection with Hurricane Katrina was the extraordinary poverty in that region. And even before

Katrina, that poverty had strong impacts on thinking about what the priorities were for sustainability.

The challenges are many in that kind of a situation. Not only do you have intensely competing priorities for investment and change, but also, when people are busy surviving, they do not have a lot of extra energy to think about long-term transformation processes. And yet, that's exactly what society needs to invest in.

Now there is a really interesting parallel here with what happens in corporate practice. There was a very interesting and important article in *Harvard Business Review* from 2009 called "Why Sustainability Is Now the Key Driver of Innovation."<sup>2</sup> Companies really are seeing that to be the case: Sustainability provides this kind of opportunity to focus change processes, even in a time of great challenge, and turn that into a concrete competitive advantage.

The parallel is that in developing countries and other low-income areas, sustainability innovations and solutions are also becoming the best strategy for poverty reduction. Let me give an example. One of our affiliates, ESPERE, a cooperative consulting company, has an office in Senegal, where they have developed a program for poor women in Senegalese villages who have to walk hours every day just to gather enough wood to boil water and cook food. Then the smoke from their inefficient stoves is a health issue, and the whole system keeps them in a grinding poverty cycle.

One of the systemic innovations that can dramatically improve their lives is a more efficient stove. So my friends at ESPERE are bringing these into Senegal. It is still a traditional wood stove, but it is much more efficient, by a factor of ten. This reduces dramatically how much wood the people have to gather. It also reduces how much smoke they are inhaling. It reduces carbon emissions and particulates in the air. It has all kinds of positive benefits and gives people more opportunity to spend their time doing things that they can sell on the market or improving their economic well-being in other ways, while helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and deforestation. It is marvelous.

But the story gets better. They are doing that program by using a combination of microlending to the women to buy the stoves, with an initial capital fund for the microfinance that comes out of microcarbon offsets. These micro-offsets are paid by individual employees of companies in France, who want to make a direct contribution to sustainable development. It's a wonderful idea that brings together poverty reduction, women's economic empowerment, improved health, and climate change mitigation. And this is just one example among hundreds of truly systemic, sustainability innovations.

So, yes, there are special challenges connected with poverty and sustainability. But the news today is that those challenges are being met by some very intelligent design of policy, technology, and programmatic intervention. That means that you can very often—I won't say always, but often—find a design for a sustainability initiative that no longer has to compete with other initiatives and priorities, but which can provide all of those benefits that people need in one package. That is a really enormous step forward, and we are witnessing it right now.

**Bard College Students: In the year 2050, do you envision a higher or lower percentage of the world traveling in personal vehicles than the average American is doing today, and why?**

**Alan AtKisson:** I don't know if you are going to like this answer, but if by "envision" you mean forecast, I actually would be surprised if most people in the world are not traveling many more miles and kilometers by 2050 than they are today. I think demand for mobility is just going to keep going up. The limiting factor on that will be technology, and it will be things like where the roads can go—if we are still traveling on roads by then. Who knows?

But in any case, it does not take an expert trend analyst to see what is happening in China and India: Nearly everyone wants to get in a vehicle and be able to go somewhere. This is something people really seem to want: the freedom to move.

If they are not doing that, then the reason is going to be a crash in the energy sources available to them, and some disruption in the technological innovation processes of the world such that substitutions for fossil-based technologies do not arrive in time and do not multiply fast enough to meet that demand. This would also probably involve a rather dark scenario of global conflict and wars over resources.

But I am optimistic, and I do notice that cars are changing super-fast right now. The year 2050 is a long ways away; it is close to 40 years away. And if we have not figured out how people born in a relatively poor village in western China might actually have the pleasure of seeing the beauties of the rainforests of Borneo in a very highly controlled ecotourism environment—if we have not achieved things like that for many millions or billions of people, then we really will have failed in the sustainability transformation that we are trying to make.

I think that there will be a lot more localization, in areas like water and energy. That will prove to be a resilience strategy and for all kinds of reasons. But people like to move, and I think that sustainable mobility is one of the key things that the engineers of the world have to work really hard on. We have

to find ways for people to meet that need, to scratch that itch to go see new things and experience new places, without destroying the earth.

**Bard College Students: The year 2008 was a high-water mark for U.S. climate hawks working for national and international policy change. Since then, the struggling economy, lower public engagement, and the major shifts in the composition of the U.S. Congress have derailed ambitious sustainability policy. How do you personally stay optimistic for transformative social change, and have you noticed any shift in the levels of engagement of your audiences, increased fatalism, and if so, how have you dealt with that?**

**Alan AtKisson:** Well, I am very conscious of the fact that I am speaking to a group of folks working in the U.S. context. And one way to really kill your optimism in this business is to count votes in the U.S. Senate on climate change and other sustainability issues. In their book *Den Stora Förnekelsen (The Great Denial)*, my friends Johan Rockström and Anders Wijkman describe very clearly the domino effect of what happens, or rather doesn't happen, when the U.S. Senate stands in the way of these global agreements. So you really can get quite despondent about that.

One thing to bear in mind is that the U.S. Senate is not the only place that matters. The California Senate matters. The French government matters. The Indonesian Parliament matters. The Korean government, which is doing amazing things on green growth, matters an awful lot right now. So do China and the U.K., which have been making enormous policy changes.

I had the very interesting experience of working in Egypt for a good piece of the last year prior to the revolution. Even there, with all those remarkable challenges, there were some really exciting things starting to happen in economic development strategy related to sustainability, climate, food security, and other issues.

So the short answer is to look both beyond the U.S. borders, and at the subnational level of states and cities. If you look there, you'll see transformation under way.

**Bard College Students: You quote Tom Atlee as saying, "Things are getting worse and worse and better and better faster and faster."<sup>3</sup> Now, that seems to capture the flavor of our time, but what does it really mean? Is there a race**

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**between better and worse, or should we expect both trends to continue, and can things continue to get better and better if they keep getting worse and worse?**

**Alan AtKisson:** First, thanks for picking one of my favorite quotes. Let's start with a system dynamics concept, one that I learned from Dennis Meadows, one of the co-authors of *Limits to Growth*. That concept is called "worse before better." What that means is there are times where in order to get to the desired outcome, the policy shift you have to make—technological, rule-based, or any kind of change—will often generate results that seem worse in the short run. Now, this is also classic business school stuff. If you have a two-year payback time on an investment, during that two years it looks like you just have an extra cost. But then the investment is paid back, and suddenly you are making money. But you have to endure a kind of perceived downturn in order to get that upturn.

Tom Atlee's quote reminds me about that: Some things are getting worse faster and faster, and some things are going to feel worse in the short run, as prices rise and certain resources become scarcer. Some species are going to disappear, no matter what we do in the short run, because of the runaway speed of global change.

But at the same time, the sustainability transformation truly is under way. Sustainability ideas that have been sitting on the shelf since the 1960s and '70s are

suddenly mainstream; new ideas are getting adopted at a very rapid pace. It is really a remarkable time. For someone who is over 50, and has been working on these issues for more than two decades, I remain very worried about the issues we're all fighting for, the "worse and worse" part. But I personally am surprised, delighted, and astonished at how fast the world is also getting "better and better, faster and faster."

They just opened a new roller coaster here in Stockholm, in this incredibly crowded amusement park. There was no way they could have possibly built a wooden roller coaster in the midst of all these other rides they already have, on this incredibly tiny patch of land near the middle of the city. When asked by a news reporter, "How did you do that?" they said, "Well, we don't really know. We just made the impossible possible."

That's how I feel about sustainability right now. So hang onto your hats because we are on an impossible roller coaster ride, but it is going to take us to the possible.

## References

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3. Tom Atlee is founder, codirector, and research director of the nonprofit Co-Intelligence Institute.



Alan AtKisson speaking at the Royal Theater in Stockholm, Sweden