

Voices of Sustainability: Season 1, Episode #1

Phillip Schlies

TRT: 17:18

Intro

Hello and welcome, I'm Phillip Schlies and you are listening to the Voices of Sustainability Podcast. Join us as we delve into the various strategies and challenges faced by the government, businesses, and non-profits, all striving to balance economic growth with environmental and social responsibility.

This season from the University of South Carolina, our reporters are all business majors at the Darla Moore School of Business with a concentration in sustainability. They'll be talking with various organizations to highlight how they're working to improve the world we live in and conserve our natural resources.

To explore the topic of sustainability, the episodes will explore how each person being interviewed defines sustainability, how the success of sustainability initiatives are measured in their organization, the motivations to be sustainable, and how to have a positive impact in your career. The conversations also provide insights into topics such as, circular economy and recycling, innovation and technology in sustainability, as well as regulation and policy that are influencing this space.

On today's episode, our reporter Kris Sheridan will be speaking with the executive director of the Carolina Recycling Association, Mary McClellan. Mary brings over 22 years of experience in the recycling industry, from local government roles to overseeing Material Recovery Facilities. They will discuss an integral theme of sustainability, the triple bottom line, which shows how environmental, economic, and social goals are interconnected in the pursuit of true sustainability. Let's get into it

Script

Kris (Bridge)

My name is Kris Sheridan and I'm here with Mary McClellan. And today we're going to be talking about sustainability. Now let's hear from Mary about what sustainability means to her.

Mary

To me, sustainability is about the triple bottom line, the concept that we need to strive to meet environmental, economic and social goals together and that they're intertwined. So, the thought that we can reach an economic goal without consideration for the environment is not possible in

the long run. I truly know that they're intertwined. And in your activities, there's a cost, either now or down the road, to the environment. When we don't consider environmental concerns in our businesses and activities in our personal lives, then we simply kick the can down the road to future generations. That's what sustainability is about to me, it's about truth, it's about truly examining our behaviors and our activities, and not just what sounds good or what looks good, but truth, and always changing and ever growing.

Kris (Bridge)

So, Mary, I know that you've worked in the environmental field for a while, can I ask what made you decide to pursue this field? Was there something specific that sparked your interest in sustainability?

Mary

I was brought up with an environmental stewardship attitude from my parents. I remember going to recycling centers with my mom and dropping off all of our magazines and newspapers and containers. So, this was always a part of my upbringing. But I think I began considering going into the field when I was in high school, and was learning AP environmental science, and really began to delve deeper into a lot of topics, including climate change, and overpopulation, natural resources, and the limitations we have there. And it really sparked an interest in getting into the environmental field.

Kris (Bridge)

That's great, can you talk a little bit about what motivates you to continue to pursue sustainability within the Carolina recycling Association? You mentioned that sustainability has always been a part of your life, but what, if anything, motivates you on a day-to-day basis?

Mary

Well, I think it's our people. I have never encountered a group of such passionate people in so many different roles that are just so dedicated to fulfilling the mission of CRA, which is advancing recycling and waste reduction in the Carolinas. I've never seen a group so passionate about these things, it truly gives me the wind beneath my wings to just be around folks who are like minded, and it really keeps you going even in the face of challenges in the industry. I work for our members and our industry as a whole. Someone has to do it. And I feel like, in a way, I want it to be me because I want it to be right. And I want it to be as good as possible. And I'm certainly not perfect. And I probably could do a lot better. But I want to make sure that we're doing everything we can.

Kris (Bridge)

That's a great perspective. Now, you mentioned challenges in the industry. What are some challenges that you face, or that members of the Carolina Recycling Association face, in regard to sustainability initiatives?

Mary

Well, I think that right now, and the last few years, the big challenge has been a lot of misinformation that has been put out there by respected organizations about recycling and its impact and effectiveness. That has been very damaging to the public's perception of recycling, across the board, across the country. So I think that in an effort to reduce plastic consumption, which is something that we very much believe in as an organization, it has translated to a message that plastic is not recycled, and that has been snowballed into an idea that is circulating that nothing is recycled. That could not be farther from the truth. This idea that recycling is a ruse, that the government is trying to make you pay more for recycling and then throwing it in the garbage is frankly absolutely false. The only situation where a hauler would throw recyclables in the garbage would be that it was so contaminated that it really couldn't be processed in a plant. If you're not super familiar with recyclables processing, contamination is not only problematic because it gets the other recyclables dirty, it actually inhibits the ability of the machinery in a recycling plant to run properly, because it doesn't behave in a consistent way with the other materials. For example, a plastic bag, it covers up and wraps around the parts of the equipment that need to do their job. And it makes them unable to do their job. So that's the only reason that recyclables that are being collected separately could be put in a landfill. But the vast majority are getting delivered to markets. There's been a statistic that's been shared a lot, about only 9% of plastic gets recycled. Actually, out of the recyclable plastic, we're recycling somewhere in the 33% range. Now, that statistic about the 30%, that's based on the public's participation in recycling. Almost 100% of the recyclables you put in your container at your house or at your school, end up recycled. There's very little loss in recycling processing of any materials. Communicating that message is really important to us. So the idea that folks would think that recycling isn't real, is again, completely false. And we need people to recycle more than they're recycling, not less, we just need it to be the right things. So I think that's the big challenge that we're facing right now. And we don't need to vilify recycling, in order to prevent waste, which is what I think a lot of these other groups are basically doing. We need that message to tighten up. We need those messages to stop, because it's really hurting us.

Kris (Bridge)

It must be hard dealing with all those misconceptions. Is a lot of the work that you do, then, working to educate people?

Mary

Definitely. We are an association, so we're membership based. So, we have a lot of organizations that are members. And we're in a role of bringing the latest and greatest education to the leaders of these organizations so that they can have the tools they need to run their programs and have the knowledge they need to communicate with their constituents. And we do some communication with the public as well, but primarily, it goes through those members that have been involved with the association.

Kris (Bridge)

Do you ever get to do any hands-on work? Or do your duties mainly consist of that educational aspect?

Mary

I love to do hands on work. I don't get to do it as much. Running the association is quite a lot of work, administratively speaking. We kind of wear a lot of hats. We're our own finance department, we're our own HR department, we're our own legal compliance department. So that takes the majority of my time. But I do love to do outreach. And I love to think conceptually about the organization and how we may need to grow or change. We're actually going through a strategic planning process right now that will culminate at our board retreat in May. I love being able to think about the organization and how we can advance and what kind of programs we're offering. And we also work really closely with the state agencies to make sure we're on the same page. So, we work closely with North Carolina's DEQ -Department of Environmental Quality. And we work very closely with the South Carolina DHEC group, and the South Carolina commerce group. And it's very important not to duplicate effort.

Kris (Bridge)

That's a good point. I bet it's nice being able to form those partnerships, as long as you're able to manage duties, and as you said, avoid duplicating efforts. How does the Carolina recycling Association measure the impact and the effectiveness of its sustainability initiatives?

Mary

I think our biggest measure that we would use is engagement in our activities, in our association, our membership levels. And we also do a survey of our constituents annually about what topics they want us to cover, and how they find their conference experience. So I think that's our biggest measure, as an association, our main role is to convene people in the industry. So that's how we would measure that. And then as a whole, if you're looking at it from the state's perspective, I think you would look at it in terms of recycling, program participation, waste diversion. And I think that our programs are a part of reaching those broader goals at the state level. We have to keep in mind that there's things that our association can do that people at the state agencies cannot do. And that includes things like having political type events where we're pushing for a certain policy where a state agency really isn't allowed to push for policies. In that sense, we're really providing education, but nevertheless, we're in a position to be able to do that whereas, you know, others are not.

Kris (Bridge)

So, one of your measures of success is in your membership levels, do you have a goal number of members that you aim for, or certain groups of members that you would like the association to consist of?

Mary

We definitely have membership growth goals. A big part of the strategic planning activity that we're going through now is figuring out ways to increase membership and involvement. We definitely lost members after the pandemic, probably 10% of our membership, and it's coming back slowly but surely. So our goals after the pandemic have really changed in a way of trying to recover more so than necessarily having new development growths. We also want to have a balanced membership. So we have members from local government, business, college and university individuals and nonprofits. So we also look at which of those sectors we need to improve in, in the membership.

Kris (Bridge)

I think that's really cool that you get to work with so many different types of people. Another question I have, is having worked in the recycling industry for over 20 years, how have you seen the industry evolve over time?

Mary

In the beginning of my time in the industry, it was almost like the golden years, in a way. Most recycling programs were receiving a revenue for their materials from the processors. So it was seen and sold to a lot of communities, as the revenue generator for the community. Truly, the cost of hauling solid waste is the same whether you're hauling garbage or recycling, that's where the bulk of the cost is. Nowadays, it's probably in the neighborhood of \$100+ an hour to operate a truck and a driver. It's expensive, but recycling was never going to pay for itself. There was a point when I worked for the town of Kernersville, that we were getting paid \$50 a ton for recyclables. That was the bubble. And it shortly then burst, in about 2008 when the economy crashed. And it never got back to what it was after that. Over all these years, you begin to see that selling recycling programs as some type of revenue generator or miracle money saver was perhaps not the wisest choice. Because now, and in the last many years, these programs aren't generating the same level of revenue. And in fact, most programs are having to pay for their recyclable processing, in some cases, more than they paid for landfill processing. That doesn't make it less important or less valuable. It just makes it harder to sell recycling programs to communities. What I've learned in those last 22 years, is that we need to look at recycling, as a utility, like you would the provision of electric services, of water services, and of landfill services, like those other services. If we don't provide recycling services to communities, there will be consequences.

Kris (Bridge)

That makes a lot of sense. I have one last question for you. If you were going to give one piece of advice to students looking to have an impact in their career, what would it be?

Mary

The one piece of advice I would give is: come to whatever position or job you're interested in with an attitude of serving and not thinking about yourself but thinking about the bigger issue that you're trying to address. And understand that good things will come if you approach what

you're doing with the right attitude. And I always say that if you can get involved in an internship, that is going to open doors for you. So as students, get an internship, even if it is emptying garbage cans on earth day , or if it's sweeping up litter after an event or if it's answering the phones in your waste reduction office, whatever it is, you're gonna learn from it and grow from it. And you're gonna make connections. That is more valuable than anything else, as you're going into your career. I think, you know, people say keep it professional, but I say keep it personal.

Kris (Bridge)

Thank you. That's great advice. It's been so great talking to you today and getting to hear your perspective. I really appreciate your time. To wrap up this podcast, I would like to leave you with one of Mary's analogies.

Mary

Say, you're in a boat and there's a hole in the boat and waters coming in. You've got a bucket and you're scooping out the water, but the boat is still sinking. I'm saying to you, “you're really not scooping that water out fast enough. You need to scoop faster.” In that scenario, I'm complaining about the one thing that's actually helping, and I'm not helping, right, so let us not lambast recycling for not being the end-all, be-all solution of solutions for our waste problem, but recognize it as part of the solution of a very large problem. And it is one of the only parts that is working.

Outro

I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Mary and learning more about the Carolina Recycling Association, and the recycling industry as a whole. While the industry is not perfect, it is a great solution that we have to our waste problem. Every individual can make a difference just by doing his or her part in recycling the right materials in the right place. However, that's all the time we have today. Tune in next episode to hear our guest from Redwood Materials talk about another sustainable recycling method, a closed-loop system. Thank you for listening and we will see you next time.

Tag

The Voices of Sustainability Podcast is produced by the Darla Moore School of Business, and production was overseen by Dr. Laura Smith from the USC School of Journalism. This program was also made in partnership with Sustain SC. And last but not least, funding was provided by the Alfred N. and Lynn Manos Page endowment for sustainability in business. Thank you.