



Building a Sustainable Business Ecosystem

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Elliot Hoffman's motto, "Cooperation = Power," has been etched in his mind ever since he was a child growing up in the Amalgamated housing cooperative in New York City, in the Bronx. These words were scrawled on the wall of the local electric power plant that Elliot passed by on his way to school. "Being a cooperative human being is just built into my DNA," he says. It was a way of life for him and his brother and sister, who were raised by a single mom on a razor-tight budget after his father's life was tragically cut short when Elliot was seven years old. "My mother always told us that our lives should never be solely about making a lot of money. Life was really about building a community and being a good human being. It was about caring for your community and others."

Elliot found his soulmate in his wife Gail. "She was raised with the same philosophy. So when we decided to go into business with sustainability and social responsibility in mind, it was a match made in heaven." Together, they founded the dessert company Just Desserts in San Francisco in 1974. By reducing waste and increasing efficiencies in water, heating, and electricity, their company saved money. "We just didn't want to waste anything. It was ingrained in us."

As CEO of the company, Elliot established himself as a pioneer in the sustainable business movement at a time when few were thinking this way. Over time, his leadership has influenced other companies in the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce as well as other business associations in California and across the country.

Elliot and Gail were deeply influenced by the environmental, civil rights, and women's movements of the 1960s; they committed themselves to "being the change" for good they'd admired in those who'd been so courageous. "While sustainability was always the goal, we also asked ourselves what kind of a workplace we wanted to create. At our company, we embraced a whole different set of values. Chief among them was joining with others to enact social change."

With his mantra of Cooperation = Power, Elliot joined the Social Ventures Network to align with like-minded people nationally who were committed to investing in a more equitable and just society. "It was all about embedding positive social impact into your business and working for social and environmental change," he says. He learned a lot about melding business with social ventures from such thought leaders as Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry's, and Matt Parsky of Trillium. Inspired by these dynamic business leaders, Elliot launched his own social venture project in the vacant one-acre lot behind Just Desserts. The Garden Project gave former prisoners an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves by growing food that fed the homeless. Over a period of nine years, Elliot hired more than 30 former prisoners for this project.

As Elliot's innovative ideas caught on, he was invited to help shape the country's first sustainable business management degree at the Presidio School of Management. "The Board really believed we could move the business world toward a more sustainable way of operating, and our students did too. We knew the environment was being destroyed, and that the climate would become a huge deal in the near term. We saw ourselves as training future sustainable leaders to lead the way not only in a business sense, but in regard to social issues. I really always believed that business could be a very positive vehicle for social change."

Always eager to engage others, Elliot and a team of business friends launched the New Voice of Business, to advocate on behalf of sustainable businesses. He led a group of influential CEOs in the San Francisco Bay area to rally together to lobby for much-needed solar legislation in California. And he combined his listening skills and visionary approach with his business savvy to frame the initiative in such a way that it would attract forward-thinking businesses. In what became the largest solar power initiative in the history of the country, Elliot helped launch a solar rebate program (California Solar Initiative - CSI) that installed 1 million solar roofs in California in seven years. Following on the heels of the CSI, Elliot helped to bring the same new voices of business to support passage of AB 32 - the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. To date, it is the only legislated regulatory global warming initiative in the United States, and Elliot takes great pride in having found a way for the new voices of business that had gone unheard for so long to finally be heard.

Emboldened with this victory, Elliot felt that a healthier way of doing business had proven itself to be something the community at large wanted. But he knew that this new coalition of sustainability-minded businesses was only the beginning. Through AB32, CEOs had just made a huge impact on the environmental health of the state of California. Now he wondered, "What kind of an impact could 400 CEOs make?"

In 2013, Elliot founded REV, an enterprise meant to guide small and midsize companies how to transition to a more just and sustainable way of operating. REV strives to accelerate the transformation of the marketplace to a new mindset of sustainability, energy efficiency, resource productivity, and climate resilience by providing education in sustainability and supporting tools for businesses, organizations, and communities. REV's Sustainability Circle Program hosts employees from businesses over a six-month period and provides them with curriculum, coaches, experts, and action plans to implement sustainable changes. "We want to destroy the myth that sustainability is a cost. If I can show companies that they can do good for the environment and keep money in their pockets through the process, then we can have businesses start picking up the slack they should have picked up decades ago, on a large scale."

To date, more than 400 companies have completed REV's Sustainability Circle Program. Corporations that go through this program substantially reduce their use of electricity, water, therms, and also reduce their CO2 footprints. The average projected savings REV has generated for businesses who opt into this program is more than \$316,000 a year. Among those who have partnered with REV to help support the program are PG&E, SDG&E, Southern California Gas, and Southern California Edison.

For young people who are interested in starting a business, Elliot encourages them to do so with a sustainable outlook both because it's what's right *and* because it's what's profitable. "If you want to attract top talent to come into your company to grow for the future, you'd better be on this path," he says. "Young people know their future is dependent upon the quality and the health of our communities, our environment and our economic engines. If your company is not doing these forward-looking things, like seeking diversity and an inclusive culture, which are all connected with sustainability, it won't attract the best and the brightest."

As he always has, Elliot believes in being vocal about what you believe in and using that voice to build shared communities. "I urge young people to find out where there are others that care about sustainability and climate in your community and play together. Get together for lunch. Just talk about this stuff. And take action. People on this journey are very happy in general to share their ideas. Participate and learn as a community. Sustainability, climate, and regeneration are three sides of a triangle that are coming together. We are in a climate emergency. It's time we start working towards solutions with all three of them in mind." And if there's one message that Elliot hopes youth will heed more than any other, it's this: COOPERATION = POWER.

*When we face a problem like global warming,
and you understand that the biggest impacts on global warming come from business and industry,
business needs to take a leading role.*

Ben Cohen & Jerry Greenfield

Call to Action: To get your business involved in the Sustainability Circles Program, check out REV Sustainability at www.revsustainability.com.

Stone Soup Leadership Institute • www.stonesoupleadership.org • www.soup4youngworld.com