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Green Business

Real environmental change needs strong leadership

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"All politics is local."

This is an oft-quoted phrase from former U.S. House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill. Another phrase I sometimes hear is, "All business is personal."

Business leaders are now shaping the environmental agenda, and personal motivation and relationships are more important than ever. Those with the courage to step out in front will shape the environmental playing field for years to come.

Here's another telling quote: "When the book on alternative energy is written, Cape Wind will be the case study that illustrates how the tide turned toward acceptance of wind energy in the United States."

That is how Jim Gordon, CEO of Cape Wind Associates, was introduced at a recent conference. What followed was a keynote speech that laid out the elements of what it takes to be an environmental leader, even if his vision of seeing himself arm in arm with Ted Kennedy extolling the virtues of wind farms on the Cape didn't exactly pan out.

Among the major takeaways from Gordon's speech:

1. Understand the current situation/look ahead: Cape Wind was a "battle for first movement advantage." By being first out of the gate, Cape Wind could establish itself as the market leader. Gordon understood the market trends — that all new energy capacity that had come on line had been natural gas.

That situation created the opportunity for a different energy source to play a role in diversifying Massachusetts' energy demands.

2. Harness your personal passion: Gordon was inspired to enter the energy field after waiting in long gas lines on Brighton Avenue in Boston. Personal conviction can be a strong motivation for leadership that connects others to the changes you envision.

3. Be persistent: Cape Wind was demonized as the project that would ruin Cape Cod's tourism and economy. There will always be opposition to change. Be prepared to weather the storm, financially and psychologically.

4. Move the needle and articulate benefits: The Cape Wind project was not about making incremental change. To alter the status quo, a project needs to offer significant environmental benefits and the potential to make a big difference. Cape Wind promised to reduce air pollution on the Cape, which often has poor air quality. It aimed to reduce global warming impacts, the nation's No. 1 environmental priority. And it sought to lower electricity rates in Massachusetts, which has one of the highest electricity rates in the country.

5. Seek strategic advantage: The interest in a federal tax credit for alternative energy was a signal that private capital could be more easily raised for a wind energy project.

The political environment seemed ripe for major investment in alternative technologies.

There are tremendous opportunities for entrepreneurs to be environmental leaders and define the concept of sustainability. Mark Buckley, Staples Inc.'s vice president of environmental affairs, walked this path when he established the country's first retail computer take-back pilot project in 2004, leading to the company's nationwide computer recycling program in 2007.

Carl Minchew, director of color technology for Benjamin Moore paints, took this same route when he established the nation's first paint manufacturer take-back program in 2000, which has led to the paint industry's pledge to operate a nationwide paint reuse and recycling program.

And Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface Carpets, has set out to reduce his company's carbon footprint by analyzing every step along the product lifecycle.

There is an increasing number of environmental leaders, all of whom will be viewed in posterity as pioneers of sustainability.

What type of personal legacy do you want to leave?

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