

# E N D P A P E R

## Sustaining Leadership

by Robit T. Aggarwala '00

**Sustainability, an alumnus and planning expert argues, isn't a fad and it isn't a revolution. Like the Internet, it's a long-term agent of change that requires companies and cities to make honest assessments about their futures.**

These days, sustainability is as inescapable an idea as the Internet was a few years ago. As with e-business then, it's often unclear exactly what it means to be sustainable: Carbon neutral, to protect the climate? Zero waste, to save the environment? Focused on a triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental goals?

In fact, sustainability is both simple and profound. It means to be prepared for likely external changes, free from self-defeating practices—and honest with yourself about both. Whether it's climate change, fluctuating energy prices, expiring patents or a target market that's dying out, a business simply is not sustainable if it faces changing realities in its future that it has not planned for.

Neither is a city. Two years ago, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg began an in-depth look at New York City's future. As vibrant and safe as ever, our city will grow by a million people by 2030. That growth will bring both benefits and challenges, including a need for 265,000 new homes, transit lines at capacity, rising energy costs and the very real threat that climate change poses to a city with 500 miles of coastline.

And so we looked at what the city would need to do to head off these threats. The result was a set of 127 separate initiatives we call PlaNYC. Among them: increasing density in some neighborhoods, investing \$50 billion in transit, piloting congestion pricing in Manhattan, planting a million trees and retrofitting the 950,000 buildings in this city to be more energy efficient.

These initiatives aren't easy and they aren't cheap. But, taken together, they will make New York a truly sustainable city. And they have real payoffs. Better mass transit will ensure that Manhattan can grow as a business center. Trees

raise property values and help control flooding. Hybrid taxis won't only reduce air pollution; they also will save \$10,000 a year in fuel costs—each. Firms that undertake energy-saving retrofits will save money, and lowering overall demand will reduce the prices that all New Yorkers pay for electricity.

It took courage for Mayor Bloomberg to advocate the initiatives in PlaNYC, and carrying them out won't be easy either. But that's what sustainability requires. It means taking a long, hard look at the facts and facing up to the implications of what you find—not under the circumstances you hope for, but those that are likely. And it means acting on those implications fearlessly.

The Internet didn't introduce new concepts as much as it forced businesses to rethink fundamentals like customer service, channels and information. Likewise, sustainability is a bundle of old concepts that have taken on a new urgency, requiring a new focus on changing factor costs, long-term trends and the consequences of climate change and risk.

The Internet created new demands and made some business models obsolete; sustainability will do the same. Some companies slapped on a veneer of e-business and avoided actual change. Most of these didn't last long, but those firms that adapted to the Internet thoughtfully and bravely did well. Today's companies—like today's cities—will thrive in the same way if they act with courage and deliberation to meet the challenges of sustainability head-on.

*Robit T. Aggarwala '00 is director of long-term planning and sustainability for the city of New York. PlaNYC, New York's sustainability plan, is available at [www.nyc.gov/planyc2030](http://www.nyc.gov/planyc2030).*

