

Remembering a sustainability pioneer: Tom McLaughlin

 By [Hugh Tyrrell](#)

3 Jun 2019

The recent passing of Tom McLaughlin, who first led the Woolworths Good Business Journey has been a shock to all who came to know his warmth and wisdom.



Tom McLaughlin

I first met Tom when we were fellow board members of the Fairest Cape Association, some 25 years ago. He was then packaging manager of Woolworths and asked me to write articles for their Green Balance internal staff newsletter. Tom wanted to help staff understand the broader environmental issues that were arising as well as those relevant to retailing.

I did this for a year or so, then suggested to Tom that we organise a workshop at Woolies head office and called it 'Towards Sustainable Retailing'. The plan was to create a space for those in the company who had strong green leanings to get together and form a voluntary environmental committee. Which was what happened.

From then on, Tom convened regular meetings of the committee and we brought in speakers on a range of topics including battery hens and bovine flu, as well as packaging and recycling.

At around that time, Tom, Peter Willis, myself and others helped to found the South African branch of The Natural Step (TNS), an international sustainability training programme that was well suited to engage with business and

corporates.

As environmental awareness was growing in the marketplace and amongst Woolworths staff, Peter was brought in to help train management in sustainability principles. Peter excelled in this, later going on to head the Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership in SA. At Woolworths, sustainability consciousness and practice started gaining firm ground.

Upper management began to see that there was positive alignment between sustainability and the Woolworths' corporate objectives. The voluntary committee was replaced by a formal Sustainability Forum. Simon Susman, then chairman and CEO of the company gave it strong backing as well. The foundation had been laid for the Woolworths Good Business Journey which Tom pioneered and was later handed over to Justin Smith – and now Feroz Koor and others - who continue the good work that Tom was instrumental in starting.

Since those early days, Woolworths has gone on to become one of the South Africa's leading models of business sustainability, winning many top international awards for its achievements and setting the bar for companies here and worldwide.

Humble though he was, Tom's contribution is not to be underestimated. His gentle approach opened many doors and hearts to the importance of sustainability in business. Yet it has been underscored by a resolute determination to keep to first principles of sustainability, showing how companies can be a force for environmental and social good while also thriving as a business.

ABOUT HUGH TYRRELL

Hugh Tyrrell designs science-based communication campaigns that influence behaviour for environmental good. These combine social psychology, communications, media and marketing with environmental sustainability. He is director of GreenEdge, an independent communications consultancy to business, non-profit and government clients.

■ Remembering a sustainability pioneer: Tom McLaughlin - 3 Jun 2019

■ Combining communications and social science to foster sustainable behaviour - 13 Aug 2018

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>