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Learning Organizations

Peter M. Senge

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Introduction

If you have trouble motivating your troops or working with your counterparts in other functions, then you'll probably agree that traditional top-down management has outlived its usefulness. The world is too complex for one leader to figure it all out and impose his or her views on the rest of the organization. The organizations that will excel in years to come will be those that understand how to gain the commitment of employees at all levels and continually expand their capacity to learn.

In the new learning organization, your people will aim high, learn to create the results they desire, and reap the bottom-line benefits necessary to sustain success in the global marketplace. Says Arie De Geus, head of planning for Royal Dutch/Shell, "The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage." The learning organization is my view of what a corporation can and should be.

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The Problem: Six Learning Disabilities

Though we may see and think in straight lines, reality is made up of circles. Linear thinkers are always looking for a thing or person who is responsible. Systems thinkers take on greater responsibility for events, because their perspective suggests that everyone shares responsibility for problems generated by a system. The following corporate learning disabilities arise when we view the world in linear, and not systematic, ways.

- I am my position. Most people confuse their jobs with their identities ("I'm an accountant"). While they understand their daily tasks, people don't understand the purpose of the enterprises they take part in. Instead, they see themselves in a system in which they have little power and no need to take responsibility for poor results.
- The enemy is out there. Some organizations and people find an external agent to blame when problems arise, a result of looking at the world in non-systematic ways. Focused on our positions, we can't see how our actions have an effect beyond their boundaries. Focusing on an external enemy is almost always a mistake—usually "out there" and "in here" are part of the same system.
- Illusion of taking charge. Proactive managers are encouraged and admired when they tackle problems fast. But is taking action against an enemy on the "outside" really proactive? This brand of "proactiveness" is disguised reactivity. Being truly proactive means seeing how we contribute to our own problems and solving those first.
- Fixation on events. We're dominated by events: last month's sales, the new budget cuts, who got fired, product introductions, and so on. Events distract us from seeing long-term patterns of change that lie behind them, and that, of course, inhibits us from understanding these patterns. Slow, gradual processes like environmental decay, the erosion of the education system, or a decline in product quality are more destructive than sudden events.

- Delusion of learning from experience. We may learn best from experiences, but people often never experience the consequences of many of their most important decisions directly. It may take years, for instance, to see the consequences of R&D decisions.
- Myth of the management team. In most organizations, a valiant, experienced, and savvy management team stands ready to battle with problems and dilemmas. Nevertheless, teams in the business world tend to fight for turf and avoid anything that will make them look bad. To keep up the appearance of a cohesive team, they hide disagreement and come up with watered-down decisions that everyone can live with.

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The Solution: Five Disciplines

The antidote to these learning disabilities and to the high mortality rate among Fortune 500 companies is to practice the five disciplines of a learning organization: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning.

Learning organizations learn to innovate constantly by paying attention to these five "component technologies." They are never mastered, but the best organizations practice them continuously.

1. **Systems thinking.** From an early age, we're taught to break apart problems to make complex tasks and subjects easier to deal with. But *this creates a bigger problem—we lose the ability to see the consequences of our actions, and we lose a sense of connection to a larger whole.* Systems thinking helps us see patterns and learn to reinforce or change them effectively to gain and sustain a competitive advantage. Systems thinking is a framework for seeing patterns and interrelationships. It's especially important to see the world as a whole as it grows more and more complex. Complexity can overwhelm and undermine: "It's the system. I have no control." Systems thinking makes these realities more manageable; it's the antidote for feelings of helplessness. By seeing the patterns that lie behind events and details, we can actually simplify life.
2. **Personal mastery.** The discipline of personal mastery includes a series of practices and principles. Three important elements are personal vision, creative tension and commitment to truth.
 - **Personal vision.** Most people have goals and objectives, but no sense of a real vision. Maybe you'd like a nicer house or a better job, or a larger market share for one of your products. These are examples of focusing on the means, not the result. For instance, maybe you want a bigger market share to be more profitable to keep your company independent to be true to your purpose in starting it. The last goal has the most value, while the others are means to an end—means that might change over time. The ability to focus on ultimate desires is a cornerstone of personal mastery. Vision differs from purpose. Vision is a definite picture of a desired future, while purpose is more abstract. But vision without a sense of purpose is equally futile.
 - **Creative tension.** There are unavoidable gaps between one's vision and current reality. You may want to start a company but lack the capital, for instance. Gaps discourage us, but the gap is itself the source of creative energy. It provides creative tension. There are only two ways to resolve the tension between reality and the vision. Either vision pulls reality toward it, or reality pulls vision downward. Individuals and companies often choose the latter, because it's easy to "declare victory" and walk away from a problem. That releases the tension. But these are the dynamics of compromise and mediocrity. Truly creative people use the gap between what they want and what is to generate energy for change. They remain true to their vision.
 - **Commitment to truth.** A relentless willingness to uncover the ways we limit and deceive ourselves, and a willingness to challenge the ways things are characterize those with a high degree of mastery. Their quest for truth leads to a deepening awareness of the structures that underlie and generate events, and this awareness leads to the ability to change the structure to produce the results they seek.
3. **Mental models.** We understand the world and take action in it based on notions and assumptions that may reside deeply in the psyche. We may not be aware of the effect these models have on our perception and behavior, yet they have the power to move us forward or hold us back. Why do good new ideas rarely get put into practice? Often because they conflict with deep-seated internal images of how the world or the company works. These mental models limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting, much to our detriment. That's why managing mental models—discovering them, testing their validity, and improving them—can be a breakthrough concept for learning organizations. Mental models govern how we make sense of the world and how we take action in it. An easy example is the generalization "people are untrustworthy." Such a sentiment shapes how we act and how we perceive the acts of others.
4. **Shared vision.** No organization becomes great without goals, values, and missions that become shared throughout the organization. A "vision statement" or the leader's charisma is not enough. A genuine vision breeds excellence and learning because people in the organization want to pursue these goals. "What do we want to create?" The answer to that question is the vision you and your people come together to build and share. Unlike the concept of vision that's bandied about these days—the "vision" that emanates from one person or a small group and is imposed on the corporation artificially—shared visions create a commonality that gives a sense of purpose and coherence

to all the activities the organization carries out. Few forces in life and the business world are as powerful as shared vision.

Shared vision is vital for learning organizations that want to provide focus and energy for its employees. People learn best when they strive to accomplish things that matter to them. In fact, you can't have a learning organization without shared vision. The overarching goal that the vision establishes brings about not just commitment but new ways of thinking and acting. It fosters risk-taking and experimenting. It also encourages a commitment to the long-term.

5. Team learning. Have you ever been involved with a team of people who functioned together superbly? It may have been in business, school or sports. People trusted each other, complemented each other's strengths, compensated for each other's weaknesses, aimed for goals higher than anyone might have dared individually-and a result produced an extraordinary outcome. In such teams, each member is committed to continual improvement, each suspends judgment as to what's possible and so removes mental limitations, each shares a vision of greatness, and the team's collective competence is far greater than any individual's. Team members also recognize and understand the system in which they operate and how they can influence it.

These characteristics describe the essence of a learning organization. As with any team, the organization doesn't start off great, it learns to be great. Team learning is the process of aligning a team to avoid wasted energy and to create the results its members want. Team learning builds on the disciplines of shared vision and personal mastery, because talented teams are, necessarily, made up of talented individuals. Because the IQ of a team can be much higher than that of any of its members, teams are becoming the key learning unit in organizations.

The discipline of team learning involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion. In discussion (a word with the same roots as percussion and concussion) views are presented and defended and the team searches for the best view to support decisions. Participants in a discussion often want to win and see their view prevail. While dialogue and discussion can be complementary, most teams can't distinguish between them. The original meaning of the word dialogue, according to physicist David Bohm, suggests a free flow of meaning between people. Bohm contends that in dialogue a group accesses a "larger pool of common meaning" that can't be accessed by individuals alone. The purpose of dialogue, then, is to go beyond the understanding held by each team member, and to explore complex issues creatively from many points of view. After dialogue, decisions must be made and thus comes the need for discussion, where action is the focus.

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Peter M. Senge, cofounder of Innovation Associates, Inc. a consulting and training company in Framingham, MA, directs the Systems Thinking and Organizational Learning Program at MIT's Sloan School of Management. This article is from his book, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990 Doubleday) and is used with permission.

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An Overview of Organizational Learning


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The Five Disciplines of Organizational Learning as published in *The Dance of Change*.

Each of the five disciplines represents a lifelong body of study and practice for individuals and teams in organizations.

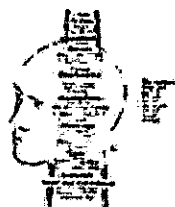
1. Personal Mastery



This discipline of aspiration involves formulating a coherent picture of the results people most desire to gain as individuals (their personal vision), alongside a realistic assessment of the current state of their lives today (their current reality). Learning to cultivate the tension between vision and reality (represented in this icon by the rubber band) can expand people's capacity to make better choices, and to achieve more of the results that they have chosen.

[Read more about Personal Mastery.](#)

2. Mental Models



This discipline of reflection and inquiry skills is focused around developing awareness of the attitudes and perceptions that influence thought and interaction. By continually reflecting upon, talking about, and reconsidering these internal pictures of the world, people can gain more capability in governing their actions and decisions. The icon here portrays one of the more powerful principles of this discipline, the "ladder of inference" depicting how people leap instantly to counterproductive conclusions and assumptions.

[Read more about Mental Models.](#)

3. Shared Vision



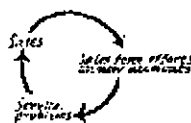
This collective discipline establishes a focus on mutual purpose. People learn to nourish a sense of commitment in a group or organization by developing shared images of the future they seek to create (symbolized by the eye), and the principles and guiding practices by which they hope to get there.

4. Team Learning



This is a discipline of group interaction. Through techniques like dialogue and skillful discussion, teams transform their collective thinking, learning to mobilize their energies and ability greater than the sum of individual members' talents. The icon symbolizes the natural alignment of a learning-oriented team as the flight of a flock of birds.

5. Systems Thinking



In this discipline, people learn to better understand interdependency and change, and thereby to deal more effectively with the forces that shape the consequences of our actions. Systems thinking is based upon a growing body of theory about the behavior of feedback and complexity—the innate tendencies of a system that lead to growth or stability over time. Tools and techniques such as systems archetypes and various types of learning labs and simulations help people see how to change systems more effectively, and how to act more in tune with the larger processes of the natural and economic world. The circle in this icon represents the fundamental building block of all systems: the circular "feedback loop" underlying all growing and limiting processes in nature.

[Read more about Systems Thinking.](#) [Read "The Language of Systems Thinking: 'Loops' and 'Links'"](#)

Senge, P. M., Charlotte Roberts, Rick Ross, George Roth, Bryan Smith, and Art Kleiner (1999). *The Dance of Change: The challenges of sustaining momentum in learning organizations*. New York, Currency/Doubleday. Page 32

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Take a tour of the concepts of Organizational Learning.
 Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry
 The Left Hand Column
 Listening and Dialogue
 Dialogue: The Emergence of Shared Meaning
 Drawing Forth Personal Vision
 The Beer Game
 Personal Transformation
 Sharing Knowledge

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An Interview with Peter Senge

Peter Senge responds to some common questions about organizational learning

Q: In your book *The Fifth Discipline* you describe five disciplines that you believe are important for creating learning organizations. What is a learning organization?

A. Like any term that gets used a lot it can quickly lose any meaning whatsoever. All the term was meant to do was point at something that we all experience but we don't give a lot of thought to: what happens when a group of people really work at their best? Most people, whether on a high school basketball team, a theater ensemble or often times in a work setting have been members of teams that have been exceptional and have accomplished things that were really remarkable maybe something most didn't even think could be accomplished. So often times people have had this experience of working as part of an extraordinary team the 'team' could be any group of people doing something together - not necessarily an official team. When I was in high school a bunch of us got really excited about our principal being named "principal of the year" in the Los Angeles city schools. He was a great guy. We banded together and created a big mail-in-card campaign that went on for about six months. He did win the award, which was neat, but it was the doing of it - the idea, aligning around it and acting - that was really exciting.

When you look at any of these kinds of situations where people say, Oh yeah, I was a part of a group who did that, and then you ask, Was the group that good when they started?" They say, "Oh no, we kind of learned how to do it as we did it. That's it. How a group of people collectively enhance their capacities to produce the outcome they really wanted to produce. That's what we want to point to with the term 'organizational learning'.

Q: What has the impact been on companies that have embraced organizational learning concepts?

A. I see impact at two levels. Since so much emphasis over the past twenty years has been on working in teams sales teams, product development teams, manufacturing units - there is a tremendous amount of know how that has accumulated over the years of how to help these kinds of working teams get much better at producing results they really want to produce. At the operational level, I would say there has been a lot of the kind of impact that you really hope for: 1) that people are dramatically more effective at accomplishing what they want and 2) they are having a lot more fun doing it. However, these teams are always occurring in the context of larger organizations and that is where it usually gets a little trickier.

A CEO of one of the first organizations I worked with who was an important advisor and mentor to me used to say repeatedly, all this stuff with systems thinking and mental models with teams and people learning how to talk together it's great stuff, really vital but, you are not paying enough attention to culture. You are not paying enough attention to the ethos of the enterprise as a whole". Of course, he was right about that. So my simple assessment of the state of the art is that with a lot of practical know how and a lot of practical results at the team level, there is still a lot of struggle, because what does it mean for an organization of 10,000, 20,000 or 100,000 to shift the ethos? I think the two have to be related, because the ethos only really comes alive in doing the work.

We are not here to create a club with a certain culture. All organizations are here to accomplish something; they have a core mission, a purpose. So the two are related, but I would say the latter is, without a doubt, the frontier.

Q: How do you measure the level of success of learning organizations?

A. I'm suggesting that at the first level, you look at what people are trying to accomplish and ask: are they much more effective at doing it? And are they having a better time at doing it? While we care about the results, it's really important to ask the second question: are they enjoying learning together? In a

time of crisis, people can do a lot in all kinds of settings, but they can't sustain it. How do you get a sustainable processes of continual growth and capacity? With a huge spike in performance, you pay the price coming back down when people are worn out, or people who don't stick around, or people who become ineffective because they are so overtaxed. The most fundamental assessment is long-term sustainable improvement in people accomplishing what they really want to accomplish. What goes hand in glove with that is that people grow. When all is said and done, you strip away all the measures and all the official stuff it is really easy. You talk to people about how they feel about their work. Are they excited? Are they passionate? I am more excited today than I was ten years ago and I think I have a better network of folks I am working with than I have ever had in my life. You always look for things like that.

Q: What are some of the practices organizations and individuals can continue or even begin in terms of transformational thinking? How do we get started? And then once we are started, how do we keep it going?

A: There's probably no one way to start. We try to lay out a variety of different tools and methods that people can work with so they can look at their situation and see where the energy wants to go. There are some settings where you have a very technical group of people, and if you start talking about vision, their eyes all roll up. So you say, "Let's try to better understand how we are working as a system here". And, they start looking at how they are working together as a system and they say, Wow, I never thought we could be rigorous in thinking about how we work together as we would be rigorous in doing our technical work". If you are a technical person, this realization makes you feel more comfortable. It actually opens you up, because rigor is a very important part of your identity, and intellectual consistency and clarity these are things that matter a lot to you.

There are other settings where people really know they have huge problems talking about tough issues. This is a very common problem in organizations of all sorts. The real meeting is never the meeting you go to the meeting, you sit there, you take your notes, and you look at the whatever and then afterwards the real meeting occurs in the hallway or in a private room. In those settings, if people are feeling that this is really effecting their ability to get stuff done, they might have a lot of energy to start to learn how to deal with mental models, and how to start to bring out the difference in views in a complex setting in a way that doesn't just offend people or make things worse. One of the many reasons people don't really talk about what is on their mind is that they're afraid things will get worse, not better, and they are often right. There are a lot of skills that are required to bring out potentially conflictual issues in a way that doesn't evoke defensiveness in others. So, where you start really depends on the setting.

I think the thing I have believed for a long time is that this sort of work needs to be highly transparent. And, what I mean by transparent, is that it is kind of home grown it has to emerge from the realities and particularities, the personalities, the circumstances that people are actually in. You can't implant it. I use to have another advisor who said managers always want to inoculate their people with something that will fix them. You can't do that this way. It has got to grow out of peoples own concerns, passions, and interests. My ideal, and this is often hard to achieve literally, is that nobody even really notices the change. They just all of a sudden start to say, "That was a real good meeting. When is our next meeting?" When was the last time you heard people say: When can we meet again? Most people hate their meetings! In most organizations, people say: "Ninety percent of my time is totally wasted in these stupid meetings". But to me this sort of shift is what you are looking for -- people saying naturally that this is a great group of people. "Every time we get together we really shed some light on really tough issues that I am wrestling with. I'm looking at what has been happening over the last six months and we are making real progress". And they don't have to talk about systems thinking and mental models. They may understand some of that stuff, but that is not where their attention is.

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