

The Fifth Discipline
The art and science of the learning organization
Peter M. Senge

Reviewed by Jari Sugano

The title of Senge's book, "The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization" caught my attention. I have been interested in learning the dynamics of how to bring about organizational change. This book starts off my talking about learning disabilities and mind sets that need to be overcome in order for organizations to learn and advance.

Senge identifies five core disciplines of a learning organization:

1. Personal mastery
2. Shared vision
3. Mental models
4. Team learning
5. Systems thinking

The five disciplines are important for organizational learning and advancement. Each of the five disciplines is integrated with one another other. However, it is the fifth discipline (systems thinking) which is the foundation of the learning organization. Senge elaborates on the laws of the fifth discipline which include: 1) Today's problems come from yesterday's solution, 2) the harder you push the harder the system pushes back, 3) Things get better before they get worse, 4) The easy way out usually leads back in 5) The cure can be worse than the disease, 6) Faster is slower 7) Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space, 8) Small changes can produce big results, 9) You can have your cake and eat it too 10) Dividing an elephant does not make two smaller elephants and 11) There is no blame.

Senge writes that "systems thinking" is a way of seeing interrelationships, the ability to see circular patterns versus static "snapshots." Encouraging organizational feedback, identifying patterns which control (limit) events, seeing the whole picture, and utilizing the power of leverage are necessary components to achieving a systems approach. This concept requires us to change the way we think all together or as Senge writes, a 'shifting of the mind' is in order.

Building a learning organization starts with the five core disciplines:

1. Personal mastery: Strengthening ones values, purpose and vision
2. Building a shared vision: Developed out of personal visions, establishing a shared vision encourages individuals to work together towards a common goal.
3. Mental models: Overcoming one's working assumptions and letting go of preconceptions
4. Team learning: The ability of individuals working together to address complex scenarios in an organized and complimenting manner

5. Systems thinking: Looking for patterns and factors limiting growth, in order to find ways to collaborate, learn and advance

Senge writes that learning organizations need a unifying foundation; sometimes new foundations need to be established. Key principles for building a solid foundation include communication, openness, commitment, relationships, and personal growth opportunities. Becoming a learning organization is not an overnight task. Organizations need to adapt with changing times and strategize accordingly. Senge outlines 8 key strategies to inspire leaders of learning organizations. These strategies are: 1) Integrating learning and working, 2) Start where you are with whoever is there, 3) Become bicultural, 4) Creating practice fields, 5) Connecting with the core of the business, 6) Building learning communities, 7) Working with “the other” and 8) Building learning infrastructures.

Leaders are no longer just problem solvers. Leaders within the learning organization are learners themselves. They have a complex role as designers (developing vision, guiding ideas and acknowledging individuals), teachers (learning, motivating, inspiring, serving, etc.) and stewards (steward of the organization’s vision and of its people). Senge writes that a new generation of leaders (women, minorities, youth, etc) are on the horizon many arising from non traditional areas.

The book, “The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization” was a great management book. The concepts, principles and illustrations provided a step by step approach towards building a learning organization. However, as Senge points out organizations can not learn without individuals. He wrote, “Organizations learn through individuals who learn.” The “Fifth Discipline” involves looking at the whole system, integrating disciplines, establishing solid foundations, and developing our knowledge, competencies and abilities as new leaders.