

## ***The Fifth Discipline*, by Peter Senge, 1990**

Review by Lisa Abbott

Senge advocates the development of “learning organizations” where people “continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire.” His book describes five disciplines that organizations and leaders should strive to master in creating learning organizations:

- **Personal mastery:** continually clarifying our personal vision while striving to see reality objectively. Good leaders learn to live and work with the tension created by the distance between their goals and aspirations and the current reality.
- **Mental models:** becoming conscious of our individual and collective mindset or worldview. Good leaders learn to consider other perspectives through inquiry and reflection.
- **Building a shared vision:** the practice of continually engaging people in articulating personal visions for the future and building a common sense of purpose and vision.
- **Team learning:** learning skills of dialogue and discussion in order to generate collective learning and produce results that are greater than the contributions of individuals.
- **Systems thinking:** changing the way we think in order to see the underlying structures of things, the relationships among players and forces, and the dynamic complexity of many problems we face.

This is a remarkable book. If the reader is able to overlook the author’s fascination with jargon, it is possible to find a useful framework for thinking about ways to create organizations that promote deep and lasting learning among all members.

In recent years, many grassroots organizations have run up against the brick walls of strategies and mindsets that no longer serve them. Senge’s book helps explain why working harder in the same old ways won’t help. He makes an effective case that organizations and individuals need to undergo a profound shift of mind in order to handle the complexity of our world and increase our capacity to create a better future.

Many of the changes he describes are simple, yet profound ways of shifting the way we interact, think, learn and work collectively. Tips on improving dialogue and inquiry skills, encouraging reflection and openness, and striving to build a shared vision could be immediately useful to many grassroots leaders.

Other aspects of the book are more difficult, although perhaps even more important, to bring to life within our organizations. His chapters on “systems thinking” are not as accessible and more work is needed to make his theory relevant to the daily practice in grassroots organizations.

At the heart of the learning organization is a shift of mind – from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world...A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.” (p. 13)

Complexity can easily undermine confidence and responsibility – as in the frequent refrain, ‘It’s all too complex for me,’ ....Systems thinking is the antidote to this sense of hopelessness...(It) is a discipline for seeing the structures that underlie complex situations, and for discerning high from low leverage change.” (p. 69)

“The juxtaposition of vision (what we want) and a clear picture of reality (where we are relative to what we want) generates what we call creative tension....The essence of personal mastery is learning how to generate and sustain creative tension in our lives.” (p. 143)

“Most of us hold one or two contradictory beliefs that limit our ability to create what we really want. The more common belief is powerlessness...the other belief centers on unworthiness...We begin with a simple yet profound strategy for dealing with (this) conflict: telling the truth...Commitment to the truth...means a relentless willingness to root out the ways we limit or deceive ourselves from seeing what is, and to continually challenge our theories of why things are the way they are.” (p. 159)

“Without a language for dealing with complexity, learning is limited. If one member of a team sees a problem more systematically than others, that person’s insights will get reliably discounted – if for no other reason than the intrinsic biases toward linear views in our normal everyday language.” (p. 269)

“It may simply not be possible to convince human beings rationally to take a long-term view. People do not focus on the long-term because they *have* to, but because they *want* to.” (p. 210)

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