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Senge and Learning Organizations

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It will come as no surprise that organizations have always “learned.” They are comprised of people who are learning, and as such, the collective effect is that an organization could be said to be learning itself. This often occurs in the context of equipping people to do their jobs and developing as professionals (with an emphasis on developing in ways that serve the organizational interests). This is variously described in terms such as *training*, *adult learning*, and *human resource development* etc.

This straightforward premise generates many interesting questions: How and where do people learn? Why do they learn? How does knowledge get from the “place of learning” to where it can be put to use on-the-job? What things are learned unintentionally? What, if anything, does the structure of the organization and its management practices have to do with learning?

Caffarella et al. describe how the traditional model of organization learning (e.g. training) often failed to translate back to behavior change on the job, thus stimulating greater thought about how organizations learn (2007 p.42). To make things more complex, Jarvis states “Senge (1990:69) makes a significant point that perhaps for the first time in human history humankind now produces more knowledge than people can absorb” (2004 p. 12). Consequently, it’s increasingly important for organizations to maximize learning and also learning transfer to the job.

Peter Senge is one of the most influential thinkers and writers on the subject of learning organizations. His book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* along with a series of “Fieldbooks” that followed have done

much to help reshape the way organizations consider and ask questions about how learning can help them achieve meaningful results. In his own words, Senge describes a learning organization as one where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to work together” (Caffarella et al. p.43).

It’s useful at this point to briefly describe the five disciplines of organizational learning as illustrated by Senge in his book *The Dance of Change* (1999).

1.	Personal Mastery	In this discipline individuals seek to develop a coherent and accurate picture of their current situation, and to formulate a personal vision for where they would like to be. The gap between current reality and the envisioned state creates motivation to achieve more of the person’s desired results.
2.	Mental Models	This discipline is about cultivating a reflective intellectual posture and developing a greater understanding of the assumptions, feelings, and perceptions that influence thoughts and actions. By reflecting on these, the individual becomes more aware—and better able to notice and control their own behaviors and choices.
3.	Shared Vision	In this discipline the group/team builds a shared picture of the future. They also can determine guiding principles,

		practices, and shared commitments to synergistically work in the direction of the collective outcome that is desired.
4.	Team Learning	The activities within this discipline harness the collective power of the group working harmoniously with each other. The idea being that the complementary, supportive, and summative efforts of the group are greater than what would be achievable by the individuals independently.
5.	Systems Thinking	Systems thinking helps people develop models about the complex interactions that occur within an organization. The ways activities are systemically linked to one another tend to either promote growth, decline, or stability. Central to this discipline is the idea of feedback cycles (loops) that either reinforce the status quo (provide stability) or drive exponential effects. For example, compound interest is a type of feedback loop that produces an increasing rate of growth over time. Alternately, production inelasticity can be a limiting factor that creates stability. The inability of a production system to meet increasing demand may serve to reduce the demand back to lower levels that can be achieved.

Jarvis describes how Senge characterizes organizational bureaucracy as a type of “learning disability” (2004 p.23). In this situation an organization fails to notice it has developed procedures and rules that limit its ability to realize its own goals. The failure of an organization to ask questions and analyze its own practices serves to reinforce the very bureaucracy that limits it. That’s unproductive for any organization, but particularly negative in business where if an organization is staying the same it’s actually *losing* ground against its hungry competitors.

Jarvis notes in the 1990’s “At this stage it was recognized that the corporations, working with knowledge and changing rapidly to respond to the wider social forces, had to become learning organizations...” (2004 p.51). This explains why these ideas have taken root in management development activities across a wide variety of businesses and industries. Senge’s fieldbooks help businesses operationalize the ideas in *The Fifth Discipline* and provide structured guidance and instructions for incorporating best practices into organizational learning activities.

Caffarella et al. forward some “consistent features of a “healthy” learning organization. These include: (a) openness across boundaries, including an emphasis on environmental scanning, collaboration, and competitor benchmarking; (b) resilience or the adaptability of people or systems to respond to change; (c) knowledge/expertise creation and sharing; and (d) a culture, systems and structures that capture learning and reward innovation” (2007 p.45).

Senge’s ideas about learning organizations resulted in his being named “Strategist of the Century” by the *Journal of Business Strategy*, as one of the 24 men and women who have “had the greatest impact on the way we conduct business

today.” Also in 1997 “the *Harvard Business Review* identified his book as one of the seminal management books of the past 75 years” (Smith, 2001).

Although he has enjoyed wide acclaim, Senge hasn’t gone without criticism. Fielding (2001) noted several concerns about Senge’s advocacy of the learning organization. Among them were:

- A lack of clear distinction between organization and community, and how they are interrelated.
- A disappointing (to Fielding) humanist bias inherent in the discussion and a lack of utility in the practical world of productivity and profit.
- A utopian view and “inadequate understanding of the pervasiveness of power in organizational life or any realistic strategy for incorporating it into the theory and practice of the learning organization.”
- “Overreliance on the power of dialogue”

Despite their possible flaws, Senge’s disciplines can provide real insight into some of the “hidden” dilemmas that plague organizations and businesses. Absent this level of introspection and inquiry, he notes the tendency of organizations to quickly implement ill-advised solutions to poorly understood problems. Often the resulting failure creates a feedback loop of its own, which has the unfortunate consequence of magnifying the problem rather than solving it. The harder the organization tries the fix the problem, the worse it becomes.

I believe Senge’s strategies and tools for learning organizations will continue to be influential long after many of the current crop of popular organizational development strategies have long since fallen out of fashion.

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