

The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization

–Peter M. Senge,

Book Review

By
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PETER M. SENGE is the founding chairperson of the Society for Organizational Learning and a senior lecturer at MIT. He is the co-author of *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, *The Dance of Change*, and *Schools That Learn* (part of the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook series) and has lectured extensively throughout the world.

Understanding the principles of learning organizations will drive us in building effective organizational climate. The Fifth Discipline helps us in knowing how we can effectively modify the fundamental assumptions, the values, norms and some patterns of human behavior. The aim of this review is not to oppose Senge's fundamental ideas but to insist on how significant his insights are.

The book has five parts. Part I concentrates on “How our actions create our reality...and how we can change it”. Part II focus on “The Fifth Discipline: the cornerstone of the learning organization”. Part III puts across “The core disciplines: building the learning organization”, whereas the IV Part focuses on “Prototypes”. The book concludes with a logical flow of “Coda” (a conclusion).

Part I: “How our actions create our reality...and how we can change it”

The first part of the book brings out the concept of *systems thinking* which indicates that in order to commit ourselves in understanding specialized and clear-cut cause-effect mechanisms in a linear sense; we tend to ignore the dynamics of our social realities which lie in moving interconnections and interactions. We cannot see things in isolation and should have the inclination to learn how to learn in the first place. Senge has pointed out the seven learning disabilities which every learner should overcome.

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I am my position- Focusing on only one's position without feeling responsible for results of our interactions with others. *The enemy is out there*- Human beings tend to concentrate on single external cause of a problem rather than seeing how we can contribute towards solving our own problem. *The fixation on events*- Seeing only the obvious cause for each event and not being able to see the long term patterns of change below the cause. *The parable of boiled frog*- We tend to ignore slow and subtle changes that happen around us. *The delusion of learning from experience*- We learn from what we perceive, but our perceptions are too fragmented. *The myth of the management team*- Most management teams develop 'skilled incompetence' and block new understanding thereby endangering confidence of some team members.

Part II: "The Fifth Discipline: the cornerstone of the learning organization"

This part of the book focuses on the principles of Systems thinking and goes beyond the concepts laid out in Part I to exhibit the value and importance of systems thinking in practice and to prepare the reader in using systemic analysis. The essence of this discipline lies in a shift of mind: 'seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains' and 'seeing processes of change rather than snapshots'.

Part III: "The core disciplines: building the learning organization"

Systems Thinking in order to be effective needs to be supported with the following four discipline which are put forth by Peter Senge as :

Personal Mastery: This aims at continually clarifying and deepening the personal vision which can be done by motivating people towards their higher order needs. According to me it's a stage of expertise where an individual consistently excels effortlessly.

Mental Models: This indicates changing the deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, pictures or images that influence how we understand the world around us.

Shared Vision: This helps in binding people around a common identity which results in becoming a force in people's hearts. According to me, clarity of a true picture in the minds of the stakeholders commits them towards its achievement.

Team Learning: Teams and not individuals are the fundamental learning units in modern organizations.

Part IV: “Prototypes”

In this part Peter Senge discusses the problems arising in prototype organizations where his five disciplines have been tried out. This section has a lot of scope for improvement in terms of extensive coverage of expanding the various examples put forth in context of the workplace issues.

Part V: “Coda” (a conclusion)

Senge in this section wonders whether other disciplines will build up in the future and add up to the existing five mentioned by him. This may happen through the subconscious mind. Peter Senge hopes to bring in systems thinking into the culture of the every organization which aspires to bring about a change in its outlook and walk up ladder of success.

At the outset, this book is a worthy read for every professional who wishes to embark upon the journey of knowledge and consistent success. Mastery of Senge’s five disciplines no doubt will enable managers to overcome the hindrance to escalation and create heroic new futures for them and their companies. The five disciplines are drawn from science, spiritual wisdom, psychology, the cutting edge of management thought, and Senge’s own work with top corporations that employ his methods. All this gives the book a holistic and comprehensive bond. It may not be a customized solution for every individual’s unique predicament but an effective general prescription worth enjoying.