

Learning Disciplines in an Organization: A Book Review of Peter Senge's "Fifth Discipline"

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Abstract

"Fifth Discipline" is a book authored by Peter Senge articulating five learning disciplines that are important in an organization. These disciplines include personal mastery, mental models, team learning, shared vision and systems thinking. Synergy of the learning disciplines exemplifies a learning organization that builds and continually learns.

As a vital component in organizational process, learning disciplines highlight systems thinking (fifth discipline) in ascertaining holistic functioning of the different elements within an organization. For them to be achieved, leaders need to be equipped with various learning tasks, perspectives and strong dedication to uphold the organizational culture without compromising individual predicaments of its members.

Keywords: learning disciplines; fifth discipline; leadership; systems thinking

"Fifth Discipline" is a book authored by Peter Senge articulating five learning disciplines that are important in an organization. These disciplines include personal mastery, mental models, team learning, shared vision and systems thinking. Synergy of the learning disciplines exemplifies a learning organization that builds and continually learns.

Some system archetypes are discussed in the book including balancing process with delays, a behavioural adjustment to feedback delays; limits to growth perceived as slowing down of growth process at some point; shifting the burden which occurs when symptoms are solved instead of root causes; shifting the burden to the intervenor which happens when an outside intervention helps solve a problem and members fail to do by themselves; eroding goals as short-term goals which are focused instead of long-term plans; escalation which occurs when people react one another that tends to have a lose-lose situation for both; success to the successful that happens when resources used tend to underuse other resources; tragedy of the commons which happens when resources are utilized based on their short-term benefits which over time diminishes returns; fixes that fail as short-run fix that have long-term need of the same fix for other problems; growth and underinvestment which explains that short-term growth tends to spur underinvestment due to some constraints.

The book emphasizes that managers should employ systems thinking by looking at things and events holistically rather than focusing on fragmented relationships. Similarly, it encourages lifelong learning where leaders can adopt in dealing with various situations. As such, it is an inspiring literature that will guide students, entrepreneurs, managers and leaders in their deep understanding of systems thinking. From beginning to end, discussions on connections of components in systems are comprehensive making the book a good reference for informative discussions on command leadership.

Some notable concepts discussed in the book include: metanoia, a shift of the mind which is a grand articulation of deep learning that moves, creates and recreates according to multifarious changes in a dynamic world; beer game experiment that expands views on how systems influence behaviour; learning organization as a process of continuous learning that improves strategical outlook while learning lessons from previous mistakes as the organization enhances productive capacities.

Among the concepts mentioned, metanoia is worth pondering. Metanoia creates a transformative action, a paradigm shift wherein a member in an organization is no longer a separate entity but one who is connected to the real world, helping one way or another in finding solutions to pressing issues while continually developing. In a highly globalized world that embraces interconnectivity, it is only fitting to note that metanoia is a realization of reflective transformation.

Some of the book's shortcomings include its vast empirical findings that seem to be overwhelmingly tiresome to follow. A question is asked as to how such 'anecdotes' actually point to the principles/concepts with exact empirical data to prove their real connection. Moreover, it seems too daring to ask how the five learning disciplines were developed without actual research findings that will claim robustness in presentation. This is not to say that the book is a work of fiction, however, it opens some research possibilities on systems thinking that will highlight empirical evidences of the learning disciplines as something worth pondering.

With too much systems thinking in the analytical discourse, individual strategies that normally occur have lost their grasp in the book. For instance, "mental models" do have some of those nuances of cognitive power that render leaders to be more self-absorbed but they may not always be non-systemic as some learning disciplines can be strengthened. The book can be more sensitive and not to be too biased against individual decisions, somehow. As carefully crafted as such non-systemic examples have been explained by Senge, the reader is pre-empted that they render falsity in the eyes of systems thinking which in reality individualism pervades but in acting on one's behalf, a sense of oneness with the group can essentially occur as in the case of social cognition and social learning.

On Learning Disciplines

The book's explanations on personal mastery as a learning discipline are vast, almost utopian with Senge exploring many aspects of learning from knowledge and skills acquisition to understanding reality and being able to make sense of changes that occur in them. Another aspect worth noting is Bill O'Brien's account that managers must give up "the old dogma of planning, organizing, and controlling", and realize sacredness of the lives of the people. The urgency of the statement stems from the reality that today's growing organizations are beset with issues such as inhumane treatment, nonchalance of leaders of workers' predicaments, among others. Thus, personal mastery should imbue the notion of continuous learning juxtaposed with inclusion of human resource management as implied by Bill O'Brien. This intends to make workers realize that they are not mere inputs of production, to make them feel accepted in the web of interrelationships because work conditions play a big role in productive efficiency. Hence, leaders are tasked to be sensitive to employee conditions apart from imbibing the traditional notion of acquiring expert skills for personal mastery. This is

articulated in neo-modernist organizational theory that places the 'human being' at the center of the organization (Mc Auley, J., Duburley, J. & Johnson, P., 2007). Furthermore, Raines (2009) argues that applying personal mastery in a holistic way means approaching life as a creative process of clarifying what is important and continually learning how to assess reality while understanding tensions as reasons for transformation. Applied in organization, the idea delivers ingenuity, creativity and wholeness of thought where leaders have depth of understanding flow. This is not to 'romanticize' leadership but to 'humanize', to have a personal vision that will guide performance in transformation.

Next, the book's discussions on mental models are described as mental constructs embedded in one's mind which influence decisions to be carefully understood so that perceptions and sense of knowing about reality are supported by what actually happens. Senge (1990) explains that mental models determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action.

Further discussions are highlighted when concepts of listening, being open and honest to others are illuminated. In some cases, resistance happens among those who see a disjunction about reality and mental construct, such a thing is normal in surfacing mental models (Raines, 2009). With some of those conflicting mental models surfacing out, what agreement is subsumed for smooth functioning of the organization? In this scenario, open communication among members is a must to understand the dynamics of reality and mental construction.

Another learning discipline echoed in the book is shared vision which embodies a collective vision from different members taking part in its conception up to its implementation. In here, emphasis on commitment to a vision that specifies taking responsibility in shared vision is top priority more than enrolment and compliance as Senge (1990) implies. Necessarily, the three factors would have to come in this order (enrolment, compliance and commitment) signifying intensity in the understanding of an organization's vision as one progresses to the other. Thus, someone who is merely enrolled in a vision may know where is the company is headed to but may not necessarily comply or take responsibility in the visionary undertaking, hence, the three must go together.

Senge's discussion on personal vision that grounds shared vision is, without doubt, very realistic because any collective vision starts from individual reflection transforming into social dimension where commonalities and collective mind pursues. Hence, it is important that what goes into the shared vision must reflect what the company truly desires to achieve in the long-run. While some personal visions get rejected, it is imperative that those approved will have positive impact.

The discipline of team learning emphasizes collaborative efforts among members of an organization in achieving goals. The book explains the importance of dialogue and discussion that could not be achieved individually. Although the statement concurs with systemic nature of team work, the book's understatement of individual effort in this section presents some inconsistencies in the overall idea of shared vision that also respects individual vision, mental models and personal mastery as individual attributes in their original form that get into team learning processes.

One important discussion in this section is the concept of defensive routines, defined as entrenched habits we use to protect ourselves from embarrassment when we expose our own thinking (Senge, 1990). True enough, not all members in an organization will always exhibit active participation in an obvious way, some tend to perform quietly or agree without much questioning. This can happen in groupthink where a general consensus is achieved by merely agreeing to avoid conflict (Librero, 2018). It must be noticed that in team learning,

everyone will not always agree and the possibility of debates will always unfold as a normal practice. Team learning is also practiced in strategic planning that involves leaders, organizational units and members pulling ideas to strategize doable plans where commitment, credibility and communication are key elements (Ahoy, 1998).

All of the aforementioned learning disciplines are embodied in systems thinking, the interrelatedness of the elements in an organization. Interaction is not linear because it is not a mere aggregation of the different functions but ascertains a higher level of outcome.

In effect, the book echoes important laws of systems thinking (5th discipline) that have practical implications in organizations. One of the most important laws is “faster is slower”. As applied in organization, when all efforts are done to accelerate growth, output tends to slow down in the long run as systems have a natural tendency to ‘cool off’ as in the case of natural systems. In aggregate production, for instance, economic expansion that pushes beyond full-employment level results in inflation which makes the economy tend to fall back to full-employment level – a slowing down process. Next, the concept of leverage is often unseen as a clear indication of non-systemic thinking due to the ephemeral changes that overwhelm managers who focus action on them instead of an underlying leverage. When we fail to see patterns, underlying importance, we tend to act hastily. However, in practical reality, underlying leverage may be difficult to observe, thus, it is imperative that leaders disseminate underlying patterns to guide members in their tasks. Also, our tendency to think short-term achievements as final results becomes problematic when we don’t see that something bad may be looming later. This is where strategic planning is important in focusing organizational targets bearing in mind that long-term goals may not be seen in current situation so that derivative plans will create alternative routes to solving future problems. Next, in working hard for the good, the system pushes back by creating more obstacles in trying to achieve something. However, working hard that makes work even harder may not always be true as some people do take inspiration from exerting effort. It is not always a painful experience especially when combined with team learning that makes hard work feel a lot easier even if it is difficult.

Finally, our sense of blaming others for own mistakes is a typical example of a learning disability because we do not take responsibility for own actions, instead we think that the enemy is out there. “I am my position” is another learning disability that accentuates nonchalance of other responsibilities bearing truth and falsity depending on the situation. In today’s big organizations, the importance of collaborative efforts is seen from strategic planning, from empowerment of workers. Another learning disability that breeds in an organization is learning as always related to one’s experience. This statement argues that other occurrences that are not experienced by a person but happen elsewhere in the system have the tendency to be taken for granted. Our tendency to undermine other experiences results to a self-indulgent practice that fails to see connection.

In view thereof, systems are overarching and underlying principles that may not be physically seen but as a process they are built-in structures felt through patterns and regularities. The learning disciplines must be practiced to achieve the “discipline” required. For instance, openness is a foremost trait that must be practiced by leaders. The traditional notion of power wielded and controlled by an authority destroys openness that should encourage involvement of the members in an organization. Sad to say this is exacerbated by political forces that have powerful influence putting members at the mercy of their leaders. With all the talk about strategies in systems thinking, one asks how come problems of political domination, self-serving actions continue to haunt organizations? Has the organizational culture achieved a paradigm shift from what it should be to a what it is without remorse?

Answers to such problems require a deep commitment to the learning disciplines drawing upon conscious and

unconscious motives of members and leaders as they go about their daily functions. Power is beneficial until it is hounded with evil intent. One can only rise above challenges when one is aligned with organizational goals that serve both the organization and the members.

On Leader's Tasks

A "leader as a designer" argues that learning organization needs to integrate the five learning disciplines in order to see how they fit together in achieving organizational goals. The design calls for considerations and priorities that a leader must decide upon so that members understand their practice. For example, as the author describes, some members have collective spirit which would make them employ shared vision and team work principles while others might opt to transcend individual expertise in leadership and management such that personal mastery and mental models will take active roles. Based on the foregoing examples, design factors are not fixed accounts, instead they adjust to leadership priorities which is normal for any human being, leader or not. The synergy principle does not necessarily mean that all principles must be of the same intensity but rather addresses highlights and priorities as the leader sees. Nevertheless, it emphasizes interconnectedness of the principles forming holistic functioning is what matters. Systems thinking, in this sense, also implies that visionary leaders must adhere to the argued design principles of choosing highlights and priorities rather than forcing upon members all principles even if others are unwilling or simply incompetent in performing said principles. This relates to effectiveness of performance that are grounded on individual strengths as they fit in organizational design.

Next, "leader as a steward" looks at leadership in a learning organization as one where his story, his vision is part of a larger story where looking beyond the senses, identifying the organization in relation to society's conditions and being able to adopt changes as they fit in such conditions are but some of the elements to be considered. Indeed, stewardship is a commitment to the 'profession' as something beyond personal gain. It transcends beyond borders outside of the self where larger connections are built and smooth functioning of those connections happen. Organizational stewardship means seeing your own role as being a caretaker, focusing on duties that you owe other people and the organization as a whole (Reader, 2017). This principle cannot be realized if a leader imbues non-systemic thinking, when all he thinks of his how short-term goals are to be realized with workers merely thought of as inputs to production processes, when organizational culture that binds work values and norms defining an organization are not internalized. Stewardship is making sense to one's purpose and transcending those purpose to higher levels.

Moving on, "leader as a teacher" is not about 'teaching' people how to achieve their vision. It is about fostering learning for everyone. One important task associated here is guiding members to apply systems thinking even if it is not an ordinary practice for many individuals in an organization. Doing this means approaching work as relevant steps integrated in the whole scheme of things which leaders must always emphasize to their workers as they tend to form connections in performing duties with others within the organization. Next, commitment to truth underscores the realization of a leader that understands changing conditions.

While it is true that teaching is an aspect of leading, teaching relies on the 'naturals' (Drucker, 1968). It is the only major occupation of man for which we have not yet developed tools that make an average person capable of competence and performance (Drucker, 1968). With such claim, it is difficult to instill teaching in the real sense of imparting and fostering learning just as easily as it would be done by someone with a natural passion for doing so. Then again, teaching is learned and practiced and it grows over time. The challenge it brings relates to how a leader conceives the concept bearing in mind that workers have to develop skills and apply them in various tasks.

Lessons from the Beer Game

The book explains indulgently the classic beer game which points ‘systemic structure’ as its main contributory factor in order delays, inventory problems amidst sharp rise in demand for the beer in a vicious cycle of mistakes. Instead, participants resort to ‘event explanations’, blaming others for all failures. What is enlightening in the book’s analysis is that human behaviour in an organization is influenced by systemic structures that we fail to see oftentimes. Our tendency to put blame on others constitute non-systemic thinking as the author elucidates. Having said, a feedback loop system could have been built in the system’s structure so that responses between retailer, wholesaler and brewery could have been more fluid providing explanation on delays and inventory pitfalls. But then again that would have ruined the intent of the game.

The interrelated factors contributing to the malady highlight learning disabilities that have significant impact in an organization. Apart from blaming others, “becoming our own position” is another self-serving principle that puts everyone else ‘out there’ and, therefore, unrelated or insignificant. Typical behaviour as it is, it isolates the person from the rest and emphasizes egocentric behaviour. In the beer game analysis, failure to consult with other participants has significantly exacerbated “becoming our own position” as articulated in self-appraisals and non-consultations between participants that magnified supply orders in trying to meet demand upsurge only to end in unwanted inventories due to a sharp decline in beer orders.

The book echoes natural tendencies of human behaviour which clearly articulates non-systems thinking. Drake (2018) explains bullwhip effect that magnifies demand the farther you are at the retail shelf leading to a domino effect in the other participants which happens due to lack of visibility, lack of communication, constraints like sizing/batches and latency of information. In big organizations, it becomes urgent that communication flow must be in place to manage important decisions. This emphasizes the importance of matrix structure which combines divisional and functional approach (Librero, 2018) in managing scarce resources for efficient performance so that bullwhip effect is considered seriously before it gets out of control. Next, the importance of collaboration and team work are important lessons of the beer game (Drake, 2018). Once again, failure to communicate between participants has exacerbated end-to-end supply chain. As important as it is, in natural world such strategy of ‘honest’ communication can be hard to maintain in a highly competitive setting.

The beer game analysis occurs in a supply-chain situation happening in a particular organization but in reality, the situation is far more complex. Dynamic structures in place with many orders from different stores can lead to supply delays even more, or communication becomes distorted with increased volumes from different retailers. In other words, keeping track of all information coming in that will dictate outgoing supplies of beer dictates an overall understanding of interrelated functions and at the same time emphasize functional structure in making sure focus leads to efficiency.

To this end, the beer game experiment accentuates an understanding of generative structures influencing members stating that improvement on behaviour can be done if underlying structures are improved as well. In conclusion, systems thinking has building blocks such as reinforcing feedback mechanism which occurs when small actions have snowballing effect that escalate through time which can be good or inimical depending on which direction is taken. Another one is the concept of balancing feedback which is a natural tendency of systems to achieve balance, a limiting process as in the case of overheated growth that ‘cools’ off at some point. Delay in the process implies that we do not act aggressively in situations to avoid opposite results. Deep understanding of feedback mechanisms signals systems thinking as activated where generative, structural processes are observed instead of being merely reactive to event explanations that are not generative. All these require a conscious will to convert one’s mind (metanoia) to understanding and applying long-term

solutions, underlying leverage of patterns in organizations so that systems thinking becomes an active agent in organizational processes.

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