

Five Learning Disciplines...

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In 1990, Peter Senge published "The Fifth Discipline" (later followed by "The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization" in 1994). His books pulled together his extensive research into what different organisations do to build learning capacity – and why some organisations use learning better than others.

Senge codified these practices into what he called 'The 5 Learning Disciplines' as well as coming up with the concept-label of 'learning organisations'.

"A learning organisation discovers how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels...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 learn together." Peter Senge

More than merely a business best-seller, The Fifth Discipline propelled Senge into the front row of management thinkers, created a language about change all kinds of companies could embrace, and offered a vision of workplaces that were humane and built around a culture of learning.

Like any ideal, the perfect 'learning organisation' is not an attainable goal, but rather a desirable and useful set of guiding ideas and principles for people and organisations to aspire towards. There's more to being a learning organisation than just amassing knowledge. Every organisation creates and uses knowledge. The challenge is that few seem to actually learn how to manage it, apply it, grow through it and use it effectively.

There's no one correct formula -- different organisations try different processes, strategies and systems to share learning, acquire knowledge and turn it into the capacity to learn for change, re-learn and continually improve. There are, however, some key elements that all learning organisations have in common. Senge sorted many of these into 5 key learning areas or themes, he called 'The Five Disciplines'.

### Five Learning Disciplines

The 5 Learning Disciplines – Shared Vision, Mental Models, Personal Mastery, Team Learning and Systems Thinking – are each made up of a set of tools and practices for building and sustaining learning leadership capability in organisations. Each Discipline consists of:

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### **Principles, propositions or concepts (Senge calls these 'guiding ideas')**

Tools or techniques that, once learned and practised, assist in making the Disciplines come to life

Practices or precepts to follow in your own leadership behaviour and approaches

According to Senge, leaders in learning organisations learn to thrive on change and constantly innovate by methodically cultivating these 5 Disciplines. They may never be fully mastered, but learning-centred leaders, teams and organisations practise them continuously.

Our approach to workplace improvement and learning-centred leadership is based firmly in the values, concepts, principles and language of learning organisations.

The 5 Leadership Learning Disciplines in brief are:

**Shared Vision:** The key vision question is 'What do we want to create together?'. Taking time early in the change process to have the conversations needed to shape a truly shared vision is crucial to build common understandings and commitments, unleash people's aspirations and hopes and unearth reservations and resistances. Leaders learn to use tools such as 'Positive Visioning', 'Concept-shifting' and 'Values Alignment' to create a shared vision, forge common meaning/focus and mutually agree what the learning targets, improvement strategies and challenge-goals should be to get there.

**Mental Models:** One key to change success is in surfacing deep-seated mental models - beliefs, values, mind-sets and assumptions that determine the way people think and act. Getting in touch with the thinking going on about change in your workplace, challenging or clarifying assumptions and encouraging people to reframe is essential. Leaders learn to use tools like the 'Ladder of Inference' and 'Reflective Inquiry' to practise making their mental models clearer for each other and challenging each others' assumptions in order to build shared understanding.

**Personal Mastery** is centrally to do with 'self-awareness' – how much we know about ourselves and the impact our behaviour has on others. Personal mastery is the human face of change – to manage change relationships sensitively, to be willing to have our own beliefs and values challenged and to ensure our change interactions and behaviours are authentic, congruent and principled. Leaders learn to use tools like 'Perceptual Positions' and 'Reframing' to enhance the quality of interaction and relationship in and outside their teams.

**Team Learning** happens when teams start 'thinking together' – sharing their experience, insights, knowledge and skills with each other about how to do things better. Teams develop reflection, inquiry and discussion skills to conduct more skillful change conversations with each other which form the

basis for creating a shared vision of change and deciding on common commitments to action. It's also about teams developing the discipline to use the action learning cycle rigorously in change-work. Leaders learn to use tools like the 'Action-Learning Cycle' and 'Dialogue' to develop critical reflection skills and conduct more robust, skillful discussions with their teams and each other.

Systems Thinking is a framework for seeing inter-relationships that underlie complex situations and interactions rather than simplistic (and mostly inaccurate) linear cause-effect chains. It enables teams to unravel the often hidden subtleties, influences, leverage points and intended/unintended consequences of change plans and programs and leads to deeper, more complete awareness of the interconnections behind changing any system. Leaders learn to use 'Systems Thinking Maps' and 'Archetypes' to map and analyse situations, events, problems and possible causes/courses of action to find better (and often not obvious) change options/solutions.

#### Working with the 5 Disciplines

Sometimes it's difficult to work out where to start work on the 5 Disciplines. Some say they just want to 'do Systems Thinking' or 'work on a Shared Vision' and leave Personal Mastery or Team Learning out of the picture. Trouble is – they can't, because as you may have realised, all the Disciplines are inter-linked.

Do I need to build a Shared Vision first with my team? But hold on – I can't really do that until we start having better conversations (Team Learning). Can I start by using Systems Thinking to map out with my team a few problems that keep repeating themselves at work? But wait – they'll need to understand assumptions and Mental Models if that's going to be worthwhile...

Because of their inter-connected nature, it doesn't matter where you start. The Disciplines are like 5 fingers of the same hand. This doesn't mean trying to work with all 5 Disciplines at the same time. There's nothing wrong with concentrating on one (and we say no more than 2 at a time) of the Disciplines first and working your way onto the others serial fashion.

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#### Sources referred to:

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