

## Article 6

### Enhancing Capacity for Learning: Enabling Growth – Creating Change

#### So, What's a Learning Organization?

It has been almost a decade since Peter Senge published his landmark book, *The Fifth Discipline*, which became a runaway best seller, and popularized the term 'learning organization.' While some critics were quick to dismiss this as just another 'flavour of the month' management theory, learning organization principles and practices have proven to have solid staying power. In fact, *The Fifth Discipline* received the award for best selling Business Leadership title for 1998 from Amazon.com, the world's largest online bookstore. Each year, more than 1,000 people attend the 'Systems Thinking in Action' conference, intent on hearing the latest insights from Senge and other leading learning organization thinkers. Numerous learning organization websites provide a rich source of resources in this area.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the concept, Senge once defined a learning organization as an organization where a group of people are continually working together to develop their capacity to create the future they desire. In such an organization, people are motivated by a combination of personal and collective 'aspiration' (vision), and deal constructively with the 'truth' about their present situation (current reality). Doing so requires the mastery and application of five 'disciplines' which define the learning organization model – personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking. Each discipline rests on certain foundational theories, tools and methods, but continues to evolve through ongoing learning.

#### Trouble in Paradise

By the late-90's, it was apparent that the learning organization was one of those breakthrough ideas, destined to influence – if not totally transform – most of our organizations, whether private sector, government or non-profit. About midway through the decade, the Harvard Business Review named Senge as one of the 'new gurus' of management thinking. Clearly, 'LO' was on a roll.

So, it caught a lot of people by surprise when, at the 1997 Systems Thinking in Action conference, he started his keynote address by sharing his disappointment with the rate of success he'd seen in the sincere efforts of many individuals and organizations to apply learning organization principles and practices. He went on to challenge everyone in the audience to review our own initiatives, to acknowledge honestly both our successes and failures, and to study the latter carefully to identify the barriers that were undermining our efforts. For several of us from this organization, it was this talk that focused our attention on the issues that eventually led to the creation of the 'developmental model' of organizational health that forms the basis of this series of articles. For us, the key insight was that it was impossible to build and sustain a learning organization without having first built the foundation represented by the first three levels of the model. The past few years have been a rich – and sometimes painful – period of learning about how to do that, including meeting the challenge of applying these insights to our own organization.

#### Let's Dance: Fresh Insights for Creating Healthy, Sustainable Change

During this period, another much larger research and evaluation project was underway, under Senge's leadership and sponsored by the newly established Society for Organizational Learning (a spin-off of MIT's Sloan School of Management). For more

than a year, researchers, consultants and practitioners reviewed past and present change initiatives, and sought to identify the key determinants of success and failure. This intensive learning process culminated in March of this year with the publication of a new 'Fieldbook' in the Fifth Discipline resource series. 'The Dance of Change' is organized around two main themes – the 'growth processes of profound change', and the 'challenges of change.'

### **The Growth Processes of Profound Change**

Some key principles described in the book are:

- Nothing happens without commitment, and initial commitment is usually limited to a small group of people
- Start small, and grow steadily – be wary of giant first steps that take you places you're not ready to go
- Identity, direction and shared ownership are more powerful than motivational speeches or detailed plans
- If you're short of time and up against a wall, concentrate on fixing your crises first – use these interventions as opportunities to learn, and fix these problems for good
- Remember that overcoming barriers requires vigilance, discipline, and creativity, not just 'trying harder'

'The Dance of Change' also outlines a simple, yet powerful, three phase, self-reinforcing growth process. The first phase recognizes the importance of personal results – simply put, change will not happen if it doesn't matter to those most directly involved. The second phase acknowledges the need to attract the support of others in order to disseminate learning and build networks to support implementation. The third phase addresses the reality that, for change to be worth sustaining, it must make a difference to the organization's results.

Senge goes on to suggest that the key structural mechanism for starting and sustaining this three-phase process is the 'pilot group' – a small group of people among whom an idea can coalesce, and where theory can meet practice.

### **The 10 Challenges of Change**

In addition to elaborating the growth processes outlined above, Senge and his colleagues also identify what they call the 10 challenges of change. Grouped into three categories, these are the conditions of the environment that regulate – in some cases, completely stifle – growth. The key lesson here is that, no matter how hard you try to do the 'right things' – to push the reinforcing process of growth – you can never 'out muscle' certain powerful limiting factors. You have no choice but to focus on identifying and eliminating them. Let's take a closer look at these common barriers to organizational learning and change...

#### ***Challenges of Initiating Change***

*"We don't have time for this stuff!" People involved in a pilot group to initiate a change effort need enough control over their schedules to give their work the time that it needs.*

*"We have no help!" Members of a pilot group need enough support, coaching, and resources to be able to learn and to do their work effectively.*

*"This stuff isn't relevant." There need to be people who can make the case for change -- who can connect the development of new skills to the real work of the business.*

*"They're not walking the talk!" A critical test for any change effort: the correlation between espoused values and actual behavior.*

### **Challenges of Sustaining Momentum**

*"This stuff is . . ." Personal fear and anxiety -- concerns about vulnerability and inadequacy -- lead members of a pilot group to question a change effort.*

*"This stuff isn't working!" Change efforts run into measurement problems: Early results don't meet expectations, or traditional metrics don't calibrate to a pilot group's efforts.*

*"They're acting like a cult!" A pilot group falls prey to arrogance, dividing the company into "believers" and "nonbelievers."*

### **Challenges of System-wide Redesign and Rethinking**

*"They . . . never let us do this stuff." The pilot group wants more autonomy; "the powers that be" don't want to lose control.*

*"We keep reinventing the wheel." Instead of building on previous successes, each group finds that it has to start from scratch.*

*"Where are we going?" The larger strategy and purpose of a change effort may be obscured by day-to-day activity. Big question: Can the organization achieve a new definition of success?*

## **Accepting the Challenge**

Are you ready to dance? Perhaps the most fitting conclusion to this article is to invite you to tackle the same challenge that Peter Senge issued at that important conference two years ago. Take an honest look at your own successes and failures in the area of creating and sustaining healthy change. What helped you to move forward? What held you back? What new capabilities do you need to acquire to be more successful in the future? Who is willing to be your learning partner?

Welcome to the dance of change...

