
Looking Both Ways Through the Windows of Senge's Five Disciplines

Summary

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, edited by Peter Senge et al. provides a simple, coherent structure and a wealth of material for coaching leaders in five disciplines for building a learning organization. Each of the five disciplines is like a strategically located window that peers outward and inward, surfacing vital data for the coaching process. Building on issues leaders finds most pressing, coaches identify the relevant discipline and eventually engage the five disciplines from that point of entry. One discipline naturally opens to others, and the coherence of the process unfolds. In addition to *Fieldbook* information, tools, and exercises, coaches can easily modify or integrate complementary materials from other coaching models.

Introduction

This paper will offer an opportunity to familiarize you with the five disciplines and sample their applications for coaching leaders. A current client's story will be used as an abbreviated case study for that purpose.

In 1990 Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* hit the bookshelves and began its steady march into the hearts and minds of leaders and students of organizational behavior. The basic positive assumptions he made about learning captured my attention and imagination. He pointed out what we tend to forget that as humans we want to learn, and we want to understand why things are the way they are – in a more whole way. Much of our knowledge has

been fragmented by the assumptions and structures of formal education, its teachers and, later, supervisors and leaders of organizations. If we could find a way of keeping our experiences whole, and of aligning with our natural curiosity and desire to learn, to problem solve, to create and produce, then we could engage human energy in a much more effective manner.

Four years after the publication of his book, a follow-up collection of stories appeared called *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, edited by Senge, Kleiner, Ross, Smith, and Roberts. The *Fieldbook* chronicled applications of the five disciplines by practitioners from the field. Leaders and employees from different levels in organizations wrote of their experiences, and shared their innovations and insights so others could benefit from their efforts. Depending on our learning styles and stamina, each book contributes theoretical and applied approaches to transforming the ways we learn as individuals, teams, and organizations. In particular, the *Fieldbook's* practitioners show us many variations on how to learn in a more whole way and why it matters.

Senge's structure invites synergy even in the simple way he names the disciplines: shared vision, mental models, systems thinking, personal mastery, and team learning. Collectively, these disciplines map out the rich and comprehensive terrain of leadership coaching while assuming flexibility in the ordering and integration of how and when the disciplines are introduced and explored with your client. Your client's immediate needs will determine the relevant

discipline to engage, and from there it is easy to naturally link with the other disciplines. Coaching this way helps expand leaders' awareness of what gives learning organizations a competitive edge, motivating them to go further in the cultural transformation process. It also keeps our peripheral vision as coaches engaged so that we leverage the most learning for our clients' benefit as well as for the benefit of their organizations. Our value-added, then, takes form in those personal changes in leaders that result in organizational changes.

Leading for a Learning Organization: The Five Disciplines

From the authority vested in their roles, leaders are instrumental in facilitating the rise of a learning organization. A fundamental shift in their own assumptions and behaviors may be needed. What follows are the five disciplines as they relate to helping leaders in developing learning organizations.

- 1) Leaders cultivate a *shared vision* among people throughout the organization, as well as with stakeholders.
- 2) Leaders surface and challenge *mental models* which hinder open communication and learning in themselves and others.
- 3) Leaders foster practices, processes, and relationships that make *systems thinking* a normal approach to innovation and problem solving.
- 4) Leaders promote the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of *personal mastery*, recognizing areas of needed growth, and being disciplined about those improvements.
- 5) Leaders ensure an atmosphere where

people feel safe to express their ideas and feedback across functions and levels, to harness the deeper synergy from *team learning*.

We'll look at them one at a time.

Shared Vision

Shared vision is a discipline for bringing into alignment the vision and efforts of people organization-wide. The principle of shared vision leverages the most productive usage of capital, technology, and human capital since resources are coordinated toward the same ends. Processes, job functions, system-wide problem solving, and so forth, flow in a common direction.

In articulating a vision, leaders can proceed in various ways. "*Telling*: 'this is the vision of what the organization is going to look like two years from now...We've got to do this. It's our vision. Be excited about it, or reconsider your vision for your career here.'

Selling: 'The leader attempts to enroll people in the vision, enlisting as much commitment as possible...We have the best answer, let's see if we can get you to buy in.' *Testing*: 'The leader lays out the vision for testing, not just to find out whether the members support the vision, but how enthusiastically they will accept it, and what aspects of it matter to them.'

The results are used to refine and redesign the vision...What excites you about this vision and what doesn't?

Consulting: 'This is a preferred stage for a boss who recognizes that he or she cannot possibly have all the answers – and who wants to make the vision stronger by inviting the organization to be the boss's consultant....What vision do members recommend that we adopt?'

And *Co-Creating*: 'It's an important day in everyone's life when they begin to work for what they want to build rather than to please a boss...Let's create the future we individually and collectively want'" (Senge, 1994: 315-322).

After the vision is in place it needs to be maintained in the consciousness of people and passed along to new hires. What informal actions and formal policies draw forth and express the shared vision in such a way that people feel a sense of partnership, cohesion, and direction company-wide? What are the processes and practices that could help create community and a sense of what's important? How can regular, open and honest feedback become a valued contribution to building shared meaning and helping people to grow?

Mental Models

"Our mental models determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action" (Senge, 1990: 175). The discipline of mental models involves discerning the actual data that supports (or doesn't) the many generalizations we hold about the world. If our mental models are not based on real data, then those assumptions limit our ability to read the environment accurately.

Working on the discipline of mental models requires openness and honesty with ourselves and others. To develop better skills in this regard we need to practice the art of listening and inquiring. Taking time to hear what others are saying, instead of making judgments and taking actions based on partial information, takes patience. We want others to know what we think and feel, yet in pressing so hard for that we may lose focus and attentiveness to what

others are saying. The more we maintain openness, generate a sense of safety with others for saying whatever needs to be said, stay aware of our common vision, the more we can allow our mental models to be reshaped by the power of the information we take in.

On another level, we learn about others and ourselves through how well we integrate what we say with what we do ("walk the talk"). When there is a disconnect, the words are experienced as hypocritical, and respect for the person, or organization, erodes. Rhetoric that matches reality grows faith between leaders and staff, and supports development of a learning organization.

In the process of surfacing mental models, resistance is normal. The ways leaders deal with it will model an important message to the organization. Behind our own resistance or the resistance of others we are likely to find mental models in conflict. The careful deconstruction of those assumptions will allow dialogue and learning to continue, and lessons about safety to be reinforced. It is a slower process, but one that leads to a deeper understanding and alignment between people.

To surface our assumptions about important areas of work, we can ask these kinds of questions:

- Is the relationship between leaders and staff one of "superiors and subordinates," partners, colleagues, fellow associates, etc? Does the relationship express "power with" or "power over"?
- With whom is and should important information be shared? When should it be shared? Whose ideas are drawn

upon for considering options and making choices?

- At what point and how often are people outside of management involved directly in important processes and decisions?
- Who is and should be involved in processes for hiring?
- What formal and informal processes are used to facilitate feedback and evaluation? Are those processes used for mutual accountability, growth, and advancement?
- Who is involved with determining rewards and recognition?
- Whose ideas, opinions, and influence affect how professional development dollars are budgeted?

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is a way of seeing the connections, links, or relationships between things. Instead of seeing parts and pieces of how things happen, it allows the interdependent whole to be appreciated. It is a process for understanding the interrelationships among key components of a system, such as: hierarchical relations, process flow, attitudes and perceptions, product quality, sales, production, just in time delivery, cash flow, customer service, delivery, research and development, how decisions are made, and hundreds of other factors. This discipline draws on perceptions and experiences of people from different levels and functions in the organization, providing diverse perspectives for improving the quality of systems thinking. Using feedback loops, reinforcing loops, and balancing mechanisms helps to map out systems and the outcomes desired.

To play with employing systems thinking, you can start conversations around openers like,

- "We do x that way because ..."
- Follow up questions are ways to peel back another layer to find the sources of the situation. For example: "what are your reasons for doing it that way?" and "what works and doesn't work about doing it that way?" "can you imagine doing it in some completely different manner?" "and what value might that add?"

You can look at places where there are loops of information or repetition of efforts. You might begin to see links between what were thought previously to be unrelated variables. Operating (or missing) in the system will be ways to balance forces, regain stability, allow self-regulation, deal with resistance, self-correct, and so forth.

Systems thinking helps to uncover the living connections between things large and small. After a while, what emerges is a recognition of underlying structures to a complex situation – and that often shows up in the form of archetypes. (For a description of the archetypes, see Senge's *Fifth Discipline*, Appendix 2.) Mapping and analyzing at the systems level allow a careful tracking of factors affecting input, processes, and output that might otherwise have remained invisible or misunderstood.

Personal Mastery

When we experience personal mastery, there is a sense of effortless "flow." This results from mastering the underlying principles that bring about the results we desire, and doing the work with little

conscious effort. If feels natural.

Applying personal mastery in a holistic way means approaching one's life as a creative work, living from a creative and generative viewpoint. It involves an on-going dual process of 1) clarifying what's important (and envisioning it vividly), and 2) continually learning how to assess current reality in relation to progressing toward that vision. Through that creative tension, we see what steps, practices, and behaviors need to grow in order to approach the vision.

A tool leaders can use as a means of stimulating personal mastery awareness is a performance appraisal that takes place as an interactive dialogue. For example, the leader could ask the following questions of a direct report:

- How do you want to grow your value to the organization over the next year?
- What do you want to accomplish during the year? How do you want to grow and what do you want to accomplish over the next few years?
- What expertise do you have to help you accomplish this? What stands in your way?
- What do you need from the organization to help you grow?
- What can you do to help our team, department, and organization grow in service to our stakeholders?
- What can I do, as your supervisor, to support your effectiveness?
- What do you want me to do less of, more of?
- What danger signals should I look out for ahead of time, so I

know to come to talk to you and help?

- How do you like to get feedback? How are you comfortable giving me feedback?

Other exercises include comparing people's individual visions with the vision of the company; identifying and discussing behaviors that are personally and professionally important and vital to the success of the team; and if the organization is really serious about honesty and openness, educate all members on how the financials work and what the numbers are.

Two books I often recommend to clients to reinforce these notions are *Maverick*, by Ricardo Semler, and *Open Book Management*, by John Case. The first is a highly readable account of CEO Semler's personal transformation that necessitated a leadership transformation as well. It teaches the lessons of the five disciplines without putting it in that conceptual language.

The second is a wonderful selection of case studies of experiences of companies which have opened their financial books and taught all the employees how to understand cash flow. What results is that every employee begins to see what contributes to or takes away from efficiency, and a new mindset of entrepreneurial thinking infuses the workforce. To give the process integrity, profit-sharing plans reward ordinary workers in ways traditionally reserved as incentives for top management.

Team Learning

When team learning exists, there is a flow of information, feedback freely given and eagerly accepted and valued,

generative thinking, and innovative problem solving. Conversations are focused on topics or issues without the need for outcomes, but rather to absorb the chemistry of others' thoughts and perceptions. In deeper dialogue, people learn to ask questions that help learning instead of individuals making expert points. There is an awareness of the richness that emerges when people feel safe to say what they really think, how they really feel, what they really want for themselves and the organization. People learn how to inquire genuinely, with care, and advocate clearly with balance and data. They move the whole frame of reference and thinking from insiders and outsiders and a zero sum game to "we." Internal cooperation and collaboration, and external competition.

Senge believes this is the most difficult discipline and takes the longest to develop. It is on a qualitatively deeper level than simple team work or working in teams. It is getting to know how to create a space where people are able to relax, work hard, have fun, and creatively produce. It involves designing exercises that facilitate the skills of dialogue, active listening, and making observations. For example, ask open-ended questions like: "What should the role of leadership be in our team?" and see what surfaces. "Who should facilitate the meetings?" "What decision making processes build solidarity and develop capacity?" Another approach is to do a debrief at the end of a meeting, asking "In this meeting, what went well, and what could we have improved upon?" Becoming comfortable with feedback builds trust, care, listening skills, and integrity in how people talk with one another.

Applying the Disciplines: A Client's

Story

In the Fall of 1997, a mid-level manager, Ahmed, came to me for assistance in preparing for an upcoming performance review in one of the nation's top accounting (management consulting) firms. Over the previous year, as he developed a unique niche project that was very entrepreneurial and unconventional, Ahmed had become anxious over the partners' high expectations without supplying him adequate staffing. He felt a bit set up and began to prepare well for his defense and explanation of what he had contributed despite the hardships. He had felt undervalued, not well understood, and nervous about his opportunity to move up into the top ranks of leadership. Plus, he was reeling from direct feedback from a trusted supervisor alerting him to the negative reactions of his staff to his autocratic style.

His supervisor wanted him to be aware of the significance of this situation and how it represented behavior in conflict with the company's core values. He wondered whether or not his management style was a good fit for this company. He heard what was being said and ostensibly understood these values, yet they were contrary to those of his old firm where he was well regarded and where he managed autocratically, as did his fellow managers. He would like to stay with and move up in his present company, but thought the writing was on the wall and he had to prepare to move on if worse came to worse. He was ready, in short, to begin aggressively preparing to leave the company and market his wares elsewhere.

Initially, I had him tell me his

developmental story as a professional. He related his beliefs that a manager's role was to be authoritative and directive, subordinates were to follow those directions and generally show deference to the manager. Hierarchy and information sharing on a need to know basis governed his method with his team. Subordinates were challenged in meetings and publicly corrected or strongly critiqued if they were not performing in the way and at the level he deemed appropriate. There was a strained relationship between he and his staff that he attributed to troublemakers and malcontents. In other parts of the conversation, what riled him about one of his supervisors was that he (my client) was not given enough autonomy and consequently didn't feel trusted. He felt like he was being micro-managed.

He had carved out a unique niche for business development within his company that was initially not appreciated nor particularly understood in terms of its potential. He was clear, though, on its value and persevered, being vindicated once the numbers rolled in. Profits were significant as a direct result of his project development, management, and delivery. Because of his relative isolation from the firm's partners, he lacked solid information about his value, longed for reinforcement, and worried that other department leaders were scheming to take over his clients without including him. He didn't want to lose control, lose credit, and the promotional potential that would flow from that credit. He asked for my assistance in not only getting through the performance review in a strong position, but also for a longer term strategy for moving up to partner in the firm in the next three years. Or, if that did not seem possible, he wanted to

begin to assertively look elsewhere for high-level opportunities.

Deconstructing Ahmed's Situation

- What do you see as the issues to work on with this client?
- What data and interpersonal relationships are key?
- How might each of the five disciplines be relevant for understanding the dynamics of his situation and point him toward constructive responses?
- What are his key learning points?
- What kinds of conversations and in-depth dialogue would be useful to serve this client's needs?
- What are your ideas for designing an effective approach for working with this client?
- Do any of your ideas seem to fall outside the five disciplines?

Conclusion

As coaches we have the opportunity and responsibility to support the work of leaders in building learning organizations. Using Senge's five disciplines as a framework for coaching helps ensure the transferring of essential concepts, tools, and strategies to leaders. Over time, with diligence and persistence, these all flow through the leader to the organization's members, taking root and embedding in the culture. Outcomes that once were generated by charismatic leaders alone are now translated into an organizational structure and processes that reproduce and sustain a vital and focused creative energy. This is the legacy of leaders who commit to

integrating the five disciplines for a learning organization into their workplaces.

References

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