

## Excerpt from: **Peter Senge and the Learning Organization**

**Building shared vision.** Peter Senge starts from the position that if any one idea about leadership has inspired organizations for thousands of years, ‘it’s the capacity to hold a share picture of the future we seek to create’ (1990: 9). Such a vision has the power to be uplifting – and to encourage experimentation and innovation. Crucially, it is argued, it can also foster a sense of the long-term, something that is fundamental to the ‘fifth discipline’.

When there is a genuine vision (as opposed to the all-to-familiar ‘vision statement’), people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. But many leaders have personal visions that never get translated into shared visions that galvanize an organization... What has been lacking is a discipline for translating vision into shared vision – not a ‘cookbook’ but a set of principles and guiding practices.

The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared ‘pictures of the future’ that foster genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance. In mastering this discipline, leaders learn the counter-productiveness of trying to dictate a vision, no matter how heartfelt. (Senge 1990: 9)

Visions spread because of a reinforcing process. Increased clarity, enthusiasm and commitment rub off on others in the organization. ‘As people talk, the vision grows clearer. As it gets clearer, enthusiasm for its benefits grow’ (*ibid.*: 227). There are ‘limits to growth’ in this respect, but developing the sorts of mental models outlined above can significantly improve matters. Where organizations can transcend linear and grasp system thinking, there is the possibility of bringing vision to fruition.

**Team learning.** Such learning is viewed as ‘the process of aligning and developing the capacities of a team to create the results its members truly desire’ (Senge 1990: 236). It builds on personal mastery and shared vision – but these are not enough. People need to

be able to act together. When teams learn together, Peter Senge suggests, not only can there be good results for the organization, members will grow more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise.

The discipline of team learning starts with 'dialogue', the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'. To the Greeks *dia-logos* meant a free-flowing if meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually.... [It] also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning. (Senge 1990: 10)

The notion of **dialogue** that flows through *The Fifth Discipline* is very heavily dependent on the work of the physicist, David Bohm (where a group 'becomes open to the flow of a larger intelligence', and thought is approached largely as collective phenomenon). When dialogue is joined with systems thinking, Senge argues, there is the possibility of creating a language more suited for dealing with complexity, and of focusing on deep-seated structural issues and forces rather than being diverted by questions of personality and leadership style. Indeed, such is the emphasis on dialogue in his work that it could almost be put alongside systems thinking as a central feature of his approach.

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