Fifth Discipline
Review by S Bose


Dr. Senge has lectured extensively throughout the world, translating the abstract ideas of systems theory into tools for better understanding of economic and organizational change. His areas of special interest focus on decentralizing the role of leadership in organizations so as to enhance the capacity of all people to work productively toward common goals. Dr. Senge's work articulates a cornerstone position of human values in the workplace; namely, that vision, purpose, reflectiveness, and systems thinking are essential if organizations are to realize their potentials. He has worked with leaders in business, education, health care and government.

Peter Senge received a B.S. in engineering from Stanford University, an M.S. in social systems modeling and Ph.D. in management from MIT. He lives with his wife and their two children in central Massachusetts.
Chapter 1 discusses the concept of "a Lever," or leverage points in a system --where the smallest efforts can make the biggest differences. It also introduces the five disciplines of the learning organization (systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision and team learning). It highlights systems thinking as the 5th discipline --the one which fuses them into a coherent body of theory and practice.

SYSTEMS THINKING. The world is not created of separate unrelated forces. However, individuals have difficulty seeing the whole pattern. Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change things effectively and with the least amount of effort --to find the leverage points in a system.

PERSONAL MASTERY. It is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. The discipline of personal mastery starts with clarifying the things that really matter to us, of living our lives in the service of our highest aspirations.

MENTAL MODELS. They are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action the discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny.

BUILDING SHARED VISION. The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared "pictures of the future" that foster genuine commitment and enrollment, rather than compliance.

TEAM LEARNING. 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." (Dialogue differs from the more common "discussion," which has its roots with "percussion" and "concussion," literally a heaving of ideas back and forth in a winner-takes-all competition.) Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. "Unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn."

METANOIA --A SHIFT OF MIND. Systems thinking needs the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery to realize its potential. Building a shared vision fosters commitment to the long-term. Mental models focus on the openness needed to unearth shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world. Team learning develops the skills of groups of people to look for the larger picture that lies beyond individual perspectives. And personal mastery fosters the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect our world.

But systems thinking makes understandable the subtlest aspect of the learning organization --the new way individuals perceive themselves and their world. At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind --from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something "out there" to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.
Chapter 2 contains a description of seven learning disabilities which are often responsible for organizational failure. It relates these disabilities to the core disciplines, and argues how the disabilities can be overcome through mastering the disciplines.

Learning disabilities are tragic in children, especially if they go undetected. They are no less tragic in Organizations. Where they also go largely undetected. The first step in curing them is to begin to identify the seven learning disabilities:

1. “I AM MY POSITION”
   Most see themselves within a “system” over which they have little or no influence. They do “their job”, put in their time, and try to cope with the forces outside their control. Consequently they tend to see their responsibilities as limited to the boundaries of their position.
   When people in organizations focus only on their position. They have little sense of responsibility for the results produced when all positions interact. Moreover when results are disappointing, it can be very difficult to know why. All you can do is assumed that “someone screwed up”.

2. “THE ENEMY IS OUT THERE”
   There is in each one of us a propensity to find someone or something outside ourselves to blame when things go wrong. The “enemy is out there” syndrome is actually a by-product of “I am my position,” and the non-systemic ways of looking at the world that it fosters. When we focus only on our position, we do not see how our own actions extend beyond the boundary of that position. When those actions have consequences that come back to hurt us, we misperceive these new problems as externally caused. Like the person being chased by this own shadow, we cannot seem to shake them.

3. THE ILLUSION OF TAKING CHARGE
   All too often “proactiveness” is reactiveness in disguise. If we simply become more aggressive fighting the “enemy out there” we are reacting – regardless of what we call it. Thru proactiveness comes from seeing how we contribute to our own problems. It is a product of our way of thinking, not our emotional state.

4. THE FIXATION ON EVENTS
   We are conditioned to see life as a series of events, and for every event, we think there is one obvious cause. Focus on events leads to “event” explanations. Such explanations may be true as far as they go, but they distract us from seeing the longer-term patterns of change that lie behind the events and from understanding the causes of those patterns. Generative learning cannot be sustained in an organization if people’s thinking is dominated by short-term events. If we focus on events the best thing we can ever do is to predict an event before it happens so that we can react optimally. But we never learn to create.

5. PARABLE OF THE BOILED FROG
   Maladaptation to gradually building threats to survival is so pervasive in systems studies of corporate failure that it has given rise to the parable of the “boiled frog”. If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water it will immediately try to scramble out. But if you place the frog in room temperature water and do not scare him, he’ll stay put. Now if the pot sits on a heat source and if you gradually turn up the temperature, something very interesting happens. As the temperature rises from 70 to 80 degree F, the frog will do nothing; in fact, he will show every sign of enjoying
himself. As the temperature gradually increases the frog will become groggier and goggier, until he is unable you climb out of the pot? Though there is nothing restraining him the frog will sit there and boil. Why? Because the frog’s internal apparatus to sensing threats is geared to sudden changes in his environment, not to slow, gradual changes.

6. THE DELUSION OF LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE
We learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions. The most critical decisions made in organizations have system wide consequences that stretch over years or decades. Decisions in R&D have first order consequences in marketing and manufacturing.

7. THE MYTH OF THE MANAGEMENT TEAM
All too often teams in business spend their time fighting for turf, avoiding anything that will make them look bad personally, and pretending that everyone is behind the team’s collective strategy—maintaining the appearance of a cohesive team. But when they confront complex issues that may be embarrassing or threatening, the “teamness” seems to go to pot.”

Argyris argues that most managers find collective enquiry inherently threatening. School trains us never to admit that we do not know the answer and most corporations reinforce the lesson by rewarding the people who excel in advocating their views, not inquiring into complex issues. Even if we feel uncertain or ignorant, we learn to protect ourselves from the pain of appearing uncertain or ignorant. The very process blocks out any new understandings which might threaten us. The consequence is what Argyris calls “skilled incompetence”—teams full of people who are incredibly proficient at keeping themselves from learning.

We live in no less perilous times today, and the same learning disabilities persist, along with their consequences. The five disciplines of the learning organization can, I believe, act as antidotes to these learning disabilities.

In chapter three, Senge uses an example—"the beer game"—to explain these claims further. By means of this example, he demonstrates how rational individuals within a system can be overwhelmed by problems of the system. These problems result from individual actions taken without regard to the overall dynamics of the system. As is the case in most organizations, to succeed in the beer game, a player must work to help the other players (or participants in the system) succeed.

Chapter 3:

The “Beer Game”

reveals that the problems originate in the basic ways of thinking and interacting, more than in peculiarities of organization structure and policy. The beer game does this by immersing us in a type of organization, which is rarely noticed but is widely prevalent: a production/distribution system, the kind responsible for producing and shipping consumer and commercial goods in all industrial countries. In this case, it is a system for producing and distributing a single brand of beer. The players at each position are completely free to make any decision that seems prudent. Their only goal is to manage their position as best they can to maximize their profits. As with many games, the “playing” of a single session of the beer game can be told as a story. There are three main characters in the story—a retailer, a wholesaler, and the marketing director of a brewery. This story is told in turn through each of the players’ eyes.
LESSONS OF THE BEER GAME

1. Structure Influence Behavior
When placed in the same system, people, however different, tend to produce similar results.
Different people in the same structure tend to produce qualitatively similar results. When there are problems, or performance fails to live up to what is intended, it is easy to find someone or something to blame. But, more often than we realize, systems cause their own crises, not external forces or individuals’ mistakes. More often than we realize, systems cause their own crises, not external forces or individuals' mistakes. In human systems, structure includes how people make decisions --the "operating policies" whereby we translate perceptions, goals, rules, and norms into actions.

The reason that structural explanations are so important is that only they address the underlying causes of behavior at a level that patterns of behavior can be changed. Structure produces behavior, and changing underlying structures can produce different patterns of behavior. In this sense, structural explanations are inherently generative. Moreover, since structure in human systems includes the "operating policies" of the decision makers in the system, redesigning our own decision making redesigns the system structure.

Interestingly, in the beer game and in many other systems, in order for you to succeed others must succeed as well. Moreover, each player must share this systems viewpoint.

2. Structure in Human System is Subtle
We tend to think of “structure” as external constraints on the individual. But, structure in complex living systems, such as the “structure” of the multiple “system” in the human body (for example, the cardiovascular and neuromuscular) means the basic interrelationships that control behavior. In human systems, structure includes how people make decisions-the “operating policies” whereby we translate perceptions, goals, rules and norms into actions.

3. Leverage Often Comes from New Ways of Thinking
In human systems, people often have potential leverage that they do not exercise because they focus only on their own decisions and ignore how their decisions affect others. In the beer game players have it in their power to eliminate the extreme instabilities that invariably occur, but they fail to do so because they do not understand how they are creating the instability in the first place.

THE LEARNING DISABILITIES AND OUR WAYS OF THINKING

- Because they “become their position”, people do not see how their actions affect the other positions.
- Consequently, when problems arise, they quickly blame each other –“the enemy” becomes the players at the other positions, or even the customers.
- When they get “proactive” and place more orders. They make matters worse.
- Because they’re over ordering builds up gradually, they don’t realize the direness of their situation until it’s too late.
- By and large, they don’t learn from their experience because the most important consequences of their actions occur elsewhere in the system, eventually coming back to create the very problems they blame on others.
The “teams” running the different positions (Usually there are two or three individuals at each position) become consumed with blaming the other players for their problems, precluding any opportunity to learn.

It relates these disabilities to the core disciplines, and argues how the disabilities can be overcome through mastering the disciplines.

**Chapter 4** begins with a qualitative discussion of 11 Laws of the Fifth Discipline:

1 - today's problems come from yesterday's "solutions"
2 - the harder you push, the harder the system pushes back
3 - behavior grows better before it grows worse
4 - the easy way out usually leads back in
5 - the cure can be worse than the disease
6 - faster is slower
7 - cause and effect are not closely related in time and space
8 - small changes can produce big results --but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious
9 - you can have your cake and eat it too --but not at once
10 - dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants
11 - there is no blame

All of which become clear once we let go of our linear, unidirectional causation way of thinking, and adopt the systemic perspective --where relationships are not always linear, and where causality may be traced through a feedback loops back to its original source and affect it, as well as be effected by it.

**Chapter 5** explains the concept of "feedback loops:"

In systems thinking, feedback is a broader concept. It means any reciprocal flow of influence. In systems thinking it is an axiom that every influence is both cause and effect. Almost nothing is ever influence in just one direction.

It teaches people to draw them, and to see distinguish "reinforcing" from "balancing" feedback ("positive" and "negative" feedback loops, respectively). The chapter also illustrates the differing patterns of behavior of reinforcing and balancing phenomena. Finally, there is a discussion about delays and how they come into play to affect the behavior of systems which contain them.

Senge argues that systems thinking is needed more than ever because of the complexity of the interactions of today's world. Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing the "structures" that underlie complex situations, and for discerning high from low leverage points.
He discerns *detail* from *dynamic* complexity --the latter are situations where cause and effect are subtle, and where the effects over time of interventions are not obvious. He argues that conventional forecasting, planning, and analysis methods are not equipped to deal with dynamic complexity.

He highlights that when the same action has dramatically different effects in the short-run and in the long-run, there is dynamic complexity. When an action has one set of consequences locally and a very different set of consequences in another part of the system, there is dynamic complexity. When obvious interventions produce non-obvious consequences, there is dynamic complexity.

The systems viewpoint is generally oriented toward the long-term view, and toward the expanded and non-obvious consequences of actions. The essence of the discipline of systems thinking lies in a shift of mind:

seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains, and

seeing processes of change (patterns) rather than snapshots (isolated events).

**Chapter 6** introduces Senge's Systems Archetypes --generic structures which embody the key to learning to see structures in our personal and organizational lives. Two archetypes are discussed in the chapter: (1) limits to growth and (2) shifting the burden. The others are explained in Appendix 2:

- balancing process with delay
- shifting the burden to the intervenor
- eroding goals
- escalation
- success to the successful
- tragedy of the commons
- fixes that fail
- growth and under-investment

When discussing each archetype, Senge illustrates the guiding structure, and the resulting behavior (or pattern) generated. He also highlights where in the system resides the leverage point(s). The discussion is enriched with practical examples.

**Chapter 7** underscores the principle of leverage, and discusses why the actions of nonsystemic thinkers often result in failure to achieve the desired objectives.

**Chapter 8** illustrates the ideas behind CHAPTERS 4, 5 & 6 with an example: the rise and decline of People Express --an illustration of the workings of the limits to growth archetype.

It is necessary to highlight one or two elements of his argument. First, while the basic tools of systems theory are fairly straightforward they can build into sophisticated models. Peter Senge
argues that one of the key problems with much that is written about, and done in the name of management, is that rather simplistic frameworks are applied to what are complex systems. We tend to focus on the parts rather than seeing the whole, and to fail to see organization as a dynamic process. Thus, the argument runs, a better appreciation of systems will lead to more appropriate action.

‘We learn best from our experience, but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions’, Peter Senge argues with regard to organizations. We tend to think that cause and effect will be relatively near to one another. Thus when faced with a problem, it is the ‘solutions’ that are close by that we focus upon. Classically we look to actions that produce improvements in a relatively short time span. However, when viewed in systems terms short-term improvements often involve very significant long-term costs. For example, cutting back on research and design can bring very quick cost savings, but can severely damage the long-term viability of an organization. Part of the problem is the nature of the feedback we receive. Some of the feedback will be reinforcing (or amplifying) – with small changes building on themselves. ‘Whatever movement occurs is amplified, producing more movement in the same direction. A small action snowballs, with more and more and still more of the same, resembling compound interest’. Thus, we may cut our advertising budgets, see the benefits in terms of cost savings, and in turn further trim spending in this area. In the short run there may be little impact on people’s demands for our goods and services, but longer term the decline in visibility may have severe penalties. An appreciation of systems will lead to recognition of the use of, and problems with, such reinforcing feedback, and also an understanding of the place of balancing (or stabilizing) feedback. A further key aspect of systems is the extent to which they inevitably involve delays – ‘interruptions in the flow of influence which make the consequences of an action occur gradually’ Peter Senge concludes:

The systems viewpoint is generally oriented toward the long-term view. That’s why delays and feedback loops are so important. In the short term, you can often ignore them; they’re inconsequential. They only come back to haunt you in the long term.

Peter Senge advocates the use of ‘systems maps’ – diagrams that show the key elements of systems and how they connect. However, people often have a problem ‘seeing’ systems, and it takes work to acquire the basic building blocks of systems theory, and to apply them to your organization. On the other hand, failure to understand system dynamics can lead us into ‘cycles of blaming and self-defense: the enemy is always out there, and someone else always causes problems’

The core disciplines

Alongside systems thinking, there stand four other ‘component technologies’ or disciplines. A ‘discipline’ is viewed by Peter Senge as a series of principles and practices that we study, master and integrate into our lives. The five disciplines can be approached at one of three levels:


Principles: guiding ideas and insights.

Essences: the state of being those with high levels of mastery in the discipline.

Each discipline provides a vital dimension. Each is necessary to the others if organizations are to ‘learn’.
**Personal mastery.** ‘Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs’ (Senge 1990: 139). Personal mastery is the discipline of ‘continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively’ (*ibid.*: 7). It goes beyond competence and skills, although it involves them. It goes beyond spiritual opening, although it involves spiritual growth (*ibid.*: 141). Mastery is seen as a special kind of proficiency. It is not about dominance, but rather about calling. Vision is vocation rather than simply just a good idea.

People with a high level of personal mastery live in a continual learning mode. They never ‘arrive’. Sometimes, language, such as the term ‘personal mastery’ creates a misleading sense of definiteness, of black and white. But personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas. And they are deeply self-confident. Paradoxical? Only for those who do not see the ‘journey is the reward’.

In writing such as this we can see the appeal of Peter Senge’s vision. It has deep echoes in the concerns of writers such as M. Scott Peck (1990) and Erich Fromm (1979). The discipline entails developing personal vision; holding creative tension (managing the gap between our vision and reality); recognizing structural tensions and constraints, and our own power (or lack of it) with regard to them; a commitment to truth; and using the sub-conscious.

**Mental models.** These are ‘deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action’. We are often not that aware of the impact of such assumptions etc. on our behaviour – and, thus, a fundamental part of our task is to develop the ability to reflect-in-on –action.

The discipline of mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on ‘learnful’ conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others.

If organizations are to develop a capacity to work with mental models then it will be necessary for people to learn new skills and develop new orientations, and for their to be institutional changes that foster such change. ‘Entrenched mental models… thwart changes that could come from systems thinking’. Moving the organization in the right direction entails working to transcend the sorts of internal politics and game playing that dominate traditional organizations. In other words it means fostering openness. It also involves seeking to distribute business responsibly far more widely while retaining coordination and control. Learning organizations are localized organizations.

**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’. 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.

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’. 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’. 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 dialogos 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.

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.

Leading the learning organization -----Peter Senge argues that learning organizations require a new view of leadership. He sees the traditional view of leaders (as special people who set the direction, make key decisions and energize the troops as deriving from a deeply individualistic and non-systemic worldview. At its centre the traditional view of leadership, ‘is based on assumptions of people’s powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders’. Against this traditional view he sets a ‘new’ view of leadership that centres on ‘subtler and more important tasks’.

In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations were people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – that is they are responsible for learning…. Learning organizations will remain a ‘good idea’… until people take a stand for building such organizations. Taking this stand is the first
leadership act, the start of *inspiring* (literally ‘to breathe life into’) the vision of the learning organization.

**Learnings from the book**

Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* is devoted to laying out the argument that we are the creators of our own reality, *i.e.*, that the solutions to the problems that we face are at our reach, that we have the power to control our destinies. Organizations are better positioned to sustain their competitive advantage in the long run if they are capable of learning, and they can learn only if the individuals within them can learn. Senge demonstrates how organizations can break free of structures that hold them prisoner and create an environment where employees can learn individually and collectively. Learning organizations are organizations 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. Today and in the future, the organizations that will truly excel will be the ones that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization. Learning organizations are fundamentally different from traditional authoritarian "controlling organizations." While all people have the capacity to learn, the structures in which they have to function are often not conducive to reflection and engagement. Furthermore, people may lack the tools and guiding ideas to make sense of the situations they face. Organizations that are continually expanding their capacity to create their future require a fundamental shift of mind among their members. When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It become quite clear that, for many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit. For Peter Senge, real learning gets to the heart of what it is to be human. We become able to re-create ourselves. This applies to both individuals and organizations. Thus, for a ‘learning organization’ it is not enough to survive. “Survival learning” or what is more often termed “adaptive learning” is important — indeed it is necessary. But for a learning organization, “adaptive learning” must be joined by “generative learning”, learning that enhances our capacity to create’ .

The dimension that distinguishes learning from more traditional organizations is the mastery of certain basic disciplines or ‘component technologies’. The five that Peter Senge identifies are said to be converging to innovate learning organizations. They are *Systems thinking, Personal mastery, Mental models, Building shared vision and Team learning*.

He adds to this recognition that people are agents, able to act upon the structures and systems of which they are a part. All the disciplines are, in this way, ‘concerned with a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future’.

A great virtue of Peter Senge’s work is the way in which he puts systems theory to work. *The Fifth Discipline* provides a good introduction to the basics and uses of such theory — and the way in which it can be brought together with other theoretical devices in order to make sense of organizational questions and issues. Systemic thinking is the conceptual cornerstone (‘The Fifth Discipline’) of his approach. It is the discipline that integrates the others, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice. Systems theory’s ability to comprehend and address the whole, and to examine the interrelationship between the parts provides, for Peter Senge, both the incentive and the means to integrate the disciplines.
Critique

Peter Senge has been ahead of his time and that his arguments are insightful and revolutionary. He goes on to say that it is a matter of regret ‘that more organizations have not taken his advice and have remained geared to the quick fix’. As we have seen there are very deep-seated reasons why this may have been the case. Beyond this, though, there are the questions of whether Senge’s vision of the learning organization and the disciplines it requires has contributed to more informed and committed action with regard to organizational life? Here we have little concrete evidence to go on. However, we can make some judgements about the possibilities of his theories and proposed practices. We could say that while there are some issues and problems with his conceptualization, at least it does carry within it some questions around what might make for human flourishing. The emphases on building a shared vision, team working, personal mastery and the development of more sophisticated mental models and the way he runs the notion of dialogue through these does have the potential of allowing workplaces to be more convivial and creative. The drawing together of the elements via the Fifth Discipline of systemic thinking, while not being to everyone’s taste, also allows us to approach a more holistic understanding of organizational life (although Peter Senge does himself stop short of asking some important questions in this respect). These are still substantial achievements – and when linked to his popularizing of the notion of the ‘learning organization’ – it is understandable why Peter Senge has been recognized as a key thinker.

"Peter Senge's advocacy of the learning organization helped begin a revolution in the workplace. And, the relevance of Senge's work is growing rather than diminishing over time. As more businesses go global, the need to overcome psychological barriers to necessary organizational change increases. "