

**The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization**, Peter M. Senge  
DM9732 – Organizational Learning and the Intentional Interim Pastor  
Martin E. Lee, April 16, 2019

This paper applies useful organizational learning concepts – the principal of leverage and team alignment to solve problems from Peter Senge’s book, “The Fifth Discipline” to the intentional interim pastor’s ministry context. It will explore how Intentional Interim Pastors can use organizational learning theory to improve knowledge coordination in local congregations to avoid fueling conflict, chaos, and concentrations of power; but rather promote collegiality, problem-solving, and possibly innovation.

Senge observes, “To grasp the meaning of ‘metanoia’ is to grasp the deeper meaning of ‘learning,’ for learning also involves a fundamental shift or movement of mind.”<sup>1</sup> The Greek term is often described in theological terms as repentance, or a change of mind. Senge links the origin of the word to learning. He explains, “Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life.”<sup>2</sup> He concludes, “This, then, is the basic meaning of a ‘learning organization’ – an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Learning Disabilities fuel Conflict, Chaos and Concentrations of power**

However, there are notable learning obstacles which Senge refers to as learning disabilities in chapter 2. He maintains, “It is no accident that most organizations learn poorly.”<sup>4</sup> He acknowledges the challenges are both technical and adaptive. “The way they are designed and managed, the way people’s jobs are defined, and, most importantly, the way we have all been taught to think and interact (not only in organizations but more broadly) create fundamental learning disabilities” explains Senge.<sup>5</sup> He lists seven learning disabilities. Of the seven, two stand out for the intentional interim pastor in his work to avoid conflict and promote team learning: the first, a fixation on events, and the second, the illusion of taking charge. These two learning disabilities of Senge emerge frequently when churches are in transition.

Senge effectively unpacks the organizational learning disability of being fixated on the event itself saying, “We are conditioned to see life as a series of events, and for every event, we think there is one obvious cause.”<sup>6</sup> He further observes, “Focusing on events leads to ‘event’ explanations.”<sup>7</sup> He concludes, “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

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<sup>1</sup> Senge, Peter, “The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization,” (Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036, 1990.),

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

understanding the causes of those patterns.”<sup>8</sup> In making this observation Senge is making the fundamental learning distinction between the technical and adaptive problem solving approaches. The technical approach is the easy fix while the adaptive learning approach seeks a fuller understanding of the event. He observes many organizations lack the stamina for this type of learning. He writes, “Generative learning cannot be sustained in an organization if people’s thinking is dominated by short-term events.” He observes there is value in technical learning however it has limits. “If we focus on events, the best we can ever do is predict an event before it happens so that we can react optimally. But we cannot learn to create” Senge surmises.<sup>9</sup>

Another popular disability Senge notes and is readily observed in ministry (especially at the district and synodical levels) is “The illusion of taking charge.” Organizations have the tendency to reward first responders, men of action, and people who know their own mind. Senge observes this may create an organizational learning disability. “Being ‘proactive’ is in vogue. Managers frequently proclaim the need for taking charge in facing difficult problems” he observes. In the congregational setting such proactive behavior can shut off discourse and discourage others involvement. Also, such take charge behavior can lead to only addressing partial concerns and creating little forward movement for the church ministry. Senge concludes, “All too often, ‘proactiveness’ is reactivity in disguise.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Understanding of The Principal of Leverage promotes Collegiality**

In chapter 7 Senge describes the power of leverage found in systems thinking. He asserts, “The bottom line of systems thinking is leverage – seeing where actions and changes in structures can lead to significant, enduring improvements.”<sup>11</sup> The leverage occurs when ‘significant’ and ‘enduring improvements’ are achieved. This is the idea behind not allowing any crises to be wasted. Leverage occurs when the most learning is gotten.

Senge further maintains, “the best results come not from large-scale efforts but from small well-focused actions.”<sup>12</sup> Too much effort is given to those matters which are of little significance in the grand scheme of things and consequently “we create our own market limits”<sup>13</sup> Senge proposes. He continues, “Our non-systemic ways of thinking are so damaging specifically because they consistently lead us to focus on low-leverage changes: we focus on symptoms where the stress is greatest.” The organization’s inclination is to focus on “low-leverage changes...on symptoms where the stress is greatest.”<sup>14</sup> “As a systems thinker” Senge advises, “you would first identify that key problem symptom, and then the symptomatic and fundamental responses to it.”<sup>15</sup> He observes two responses, a symptomatic and fundamental response.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 120.

## Team Alignment and Dialogue to Solve Problems and Innovate

In chapter 12 Senge tells Bill Russell's story of how Boston Celtics basketball team of specialists aligned their skills to perform at the highest levels winning eleven national championships in thirteen years. Senge describes "Russell's Celtics demonstrate a phenomenon we have come to call '*alignment*', when a group of people function as a whole."<sup>16</sup> He notes, "In most teams, the energies of individual members work at cross purposes."<sup>17</sup> He notes, "Individuals may work extraordinarily hard, but their efforts do not efficiently translate to team effort."<sup>18</sup> The pastor, principal, and lay-leaders may all be quite gifted but when working out of alignment the bigger challenges facing the ministry often are neglected. Through alignment however a team becomes focused, "individuals' energies harmonize" and "there is less wasted energy." This results from a "commonality of purpose, a shared vision, and understanding of how to complement one another's efforts."<sup>19</sup>

Church and school ministry teams can cultivate learning simply through increased dialogue. Senge notes the observations of the famous Physicist Werner Heisenberg. "Heisenberg then recalls a lifetime of conversations with Pauli, Einstein, Bohr, and the other great figures who uprooted and reshaped traditional physics in the first half of the century" he writes. These conversations, which Heisenberg says 'had a lasting effect on my thinking,' literally gave birth to many of the theories for which these men eventually became famous."<sup>20</sup> Organizational learning occurs when there is a casual and persistent exchange of ideas.

For Senge organizational learning dialogue is critical. It seems the power of the logos has always been a dominate learning tool. From the time the Creator spoke into the chaos and it was taught to take shape and was given order, to God's discourses with man via immediate and special revelation, including the discourse of the Holy Spirit with believers through the written Word. Senge has ventured into one of the great methods by which God intends for learning to occur in the world. Which explains when God desired to stymie man's learning he shut down dialogue.<sup>21</sup>

Senge concludes: "the staggering potential of collaborative learning – that collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent than we can possibly be individually." Does sound very much like the events in Genesis at the Tower of Babel. Dialogue is the key. David Bohm, a contemporary physicist, of Heisenberg's holds, "dialogue becomes open to the flow of a larger intelligence."<sup>22</sup> Senge suggests, "Dialogue, it turns out, is a very old idea revered by the ancient Greeks"<sup>23</sup> and the church may think of Job and his three friends. "The purpose of dialogue," Bohm suggests, "is to reveal the incoherence in our thought."<sup>24</sup> Senge asserts, "In dialogue

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 238 – 9.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 11:6-7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 241.

people become observers of their own thinking.”<sup>25</sup> Bohm says that “Most thought is collective in origin. Each individual does something with it,” but originates collectively by and large. “Language, for example, is entirely collective,” says Bohm.<sup>26</sup> “Bohm identifies three basic conditions that are necessary for dialogue: 1. All participants must ‘suspend’ their assumptions, literally to hold them ‘as if suspended before us’; 2. All participants must regard one another as colleagues; 3. There must be a ‘facilitator’ who ‘holds the context’ of dialogue.”<sup>27</sup>

## Summary

Senge observed, “W. Edwards Deming, perhaps the best-known figure worldwide in quality management and a statistician himself, often referred to statistics as ‘two percent of the work.’ The other 98 percent, Deming believed, involved basic changes in the ways people are recognized and rewarded and fundamental shifts in management...”<sup>28</sup> Again, the epiphany is discovered not in groups focusing on solving any singular event but in understanding the significances in an organization’s patterns and process. So, how will the church recognize and reward collegiality, problem-solving, and innovation by its leaders in the pursuit of such understanding?

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xi.