

Can Schools Become Learning Organizations?

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Quality won't be found through the same old systems. Educators must challenge traditional mental models and ways of visioning and teaming if they hope to create meaningful change.

Every day, educators try harder and harder to do the right things in the best way but end up feeling that other problems are getting bigger and, fundamentally, nothing has really changed. Schools develop integrated curriculums, change the number of periods in the school day, move from a competitive grading system to portfolio assessment procedures—and still see only minimal change in the quality of student learning.

We believe that a recent book by Peter Senge provides important insight into how educators can achieve meaningful change and transform schools into “learning organizations” that renew themselves. In *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), Senge proposes that organizations must develop five capacities, called “disciplines.” Most educators are probably familiar with what Senge calls the core disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. We will address each of them, but, like Senge, we will begin with the concept of *systems thinking*. Called the Fifth Discipline, it is the cornerstone of change.

Systems Thinking

Although Senge believes all five disciplines must be addressed, he emphasizes systems thinking because it integrates the disciplines. By systems thinking, Senge is referring to a “body of knowledge and tools” that help us see underlying patterns and how they can be changed. It is these patterns that are roadblocks to change, not specific people or events.

Senge describes 11 “laws” that help define systems thinking. Among them is the idea that the cause and effect of problems aren't always close in time and space, even though we instinctively look for them to be. We must search for multiple levels of explanations in complex situations, which will lead to identification of the

patterns behind diverse problems.

Senge believes that unless a system is changed, it will continue to create the same results; despite personal differences, individuals in a given system are likely to behave in similar ways. We worry that improvements in schools based on the current quality movement will prove disappointing if implemented in the same ways with the same organizational structures.

Personal Mastery

Senge proposes that “organizations learn only through individuals who learn” (p. 139). People who exhibit the discipline of personal mastery are continually expanding their abilities to grow and to create, thus helping the organization to learn.

Personal mastery includes a strong sense of personal vision. Vision is a trite term these days, and at various times it refers to mission, purpose, goals, objectives, or a sheet of paper posted near the principal's office. Senge describes vision as a calling, not just agreeing with a good idea. Vision is a specific picture of what is important to an individual. Visions are carried internally, and they can be professional, personal, or both.

Personal mastery also includes commitment to telling the truth, especially to oneself. Senge defines truth as the ability to describe reality accurately. Many problems continue to exist because we think they are inevitable, because we don't want to rock the boat, because we think we will shoulder the blame, because it is someone else's job to worry about this issue. All of these become reasons why we choose not to tell the truth in a specific situation. Together, commitment to the truth and a strong personal vision provide a sense

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of creative tension that can power the wheels of meaningful change.

Organizations that support staff members' personal mastery do not view employees as needing to be developed so that the organization can better reach its goals. Instead, personal mastery—continuously learning and improving—is viewed as a result that is every bit as important as the overall success of the organization.

What would a school organization that supported personal mastery look like? The adults who work in such an organization would be encouraged and supported—not merely “allowed”—to pursue those things that are most important to them. Staff development programs would be equally people oriented and project oriented, and they would not approach the employee as an interchangeable part of some machine. The lifelong learning of adults would be as respected as the goal of fostering lifelong learning in students.

Mental Models

In their simplest form, mental models are subconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs that limit our thinking about how the world works. Why are schools not learning organizations? We can begin with our mental models about the nature of knowledge and our view of the role of teachers and students within those models.

If we view learning as the simple acquisition of knowledge, we also view students as passive receivers of instruction. They are vessels for teachers to fill. In fact, this mental model has profoundly affected what has happened in classrooms since the founding of our current educational system. Questioning this mental model offers the opportunity to share our assumptions about children, learning, instructional strategies, curriculums, relationships with parents, and the school calendar and schedule—even furniture and architecture.

Another common mental model found in school organizations concerns the appropriate roles of adults in different “categories.” For example, administrators lead, teachers implement, and

support staff does everything else. New definitions of leadership (from Deming, Glasser, Barth, and Sergiovanni, for example) assist us in questioning these traditional models. But if we attempt to take new definitions of leadership and plug them into the same organizational structure (the same old system), we are doomed to repeat mistakes of the past.

Senge's appeal to question our mental models offers us a tool to share a new language; talk together in new ways about our values, assumptions, and beliefs; and collaboratively create new inventions we hadn't previously considered. This discipline could become a powerful new definition of the role of staff development in schools.

Team Learning

Experts have been telling us for some time that organizational decisions are best made and carried out in small work teams. As educators, we have responded to this trend by incorporating cooperative learning experiences for our students in our curriculums. But how many of a school's daily decisions are currently made by teams? How much training and support goes into educating groups of adults to work more productively together? The typical answer to both questions is “only a fraction.”

We are accustomed to defining *learning* as an individual phenomenon. The result? Most schools include neither time, structural arrangements, cultural norms, nor language to promote team learning, and most staff development programs only support the learning of individuals. Beginning teachers are left alone to learn the ropes. Teachers are perceived as really working only when they are supervising students.

Senge believes it is time to redefine learning to include the collective learning of groups. Adopting any site-based decision-making model that is based

How to achieve quality is as much an issue as the content of specific improvement programs.

Despite personal differences, individuals are likely to behave in similar ways when they operate in a given system.

on what individuals learn and are expected to transfer to a group setting is analogous to teaching discrete basketball maneuvers to players and then expecting them to know how to win games when they're all out on the court together.

The discipline of team learning builds on the disciplines of personal mastery and shared vision. It includes the need to think insightfully about complex issues and our mental models. It balances the need to be responsive to others with that of advocating our own views. It means that groups need to learn the skills of talking together productively, honoring the diversity of individual members, and consistently becoming more effective in reaching collective goals. It requires time and support and practice. The results of team learning can spread to the various groups to which individuals belong. And it can continually tie us to each other as we confront new ways of looking at our shared vision. If adults in schools cannot work productively in teams, how can we expect the changes sought from cooperative learning activities for students to have any lasting impact?

Shared Vision

The importance of vision and of visionary leaders has been a fashionable issue in recent years. Unfortunately, the unspoken assumption that often accompanies the rhetoric is that an individual (usually a superintendent or principal) is primarily responsible for providing a vision and then ensuring through artful communication that others buy into it.

Senge suggests that true shared vision is never imposed. It emerges from people who truly care about one another and their work, who possess a strong sense of personal vision, and

who see the collective vision as one that can encompass the personal visions of all. This is a very different phenomenon from the visioning exercises currently engaged in by many organizations. The result of those activities is rampant cynicism: educators believe that their organizations either will never really serve causes they believe in, that they will have to be effective in spite of the institution, or that what they care most about will ultimately be damaged or destroyed. "This too shall pass" becomes the belief of frustrated idealists.

What can a true shared vision do for a school? Senge refers to this element as the rudder that can keep the organization on course during times of stress, and stress is epidemic in most schools today. The type of vision Senge proposes can help us align what we do with what we say we want, so we feel less pressured and can judge whether or not we are moving in desired directions. Shared vision can help transform difficult physical, mental, and emotional labor into creative acts. Shared vision, buffered by the mutual respect for personal visions, can bind educators to one another in ways we desperately need. Shared vision can become the heart of a learning organization.

The New Leader

It is a stinging experience to read about learning organizations and to realize how few schools and districts

fit the definition. Why aren't schools learning organizations? Laying Senge's template over the current structure of most schools provides both an answer to this question and a way to begin to move toward this goal.

It is critical to consider all five disciplines together in any serious search for increasing the quality of educational experiences. Lest this seem like an impossible job, though, it's important to review Senge's description of what it takes to lead a learning organization. Senge contends that the "new" leader will fulfill three roles:

- the *designer* of settings in which the five disciplines can be promoted;
- the *steward* of the shared vision; and
- the *teacher* who fosters learning for everyone.

That sounds like an educator, doesn't it? ■

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