Creating Quality Communities

Peter M. Senge

Introduction

We are losing ourselves as fields of dreams. To regain our balance, we must create alternative ways of working and living together.

Along with total quality management and process reengineering, "organizational learning" has become a buzzword. But there is no such thing as a "learning organization." Like every linguistic creation, this phrase is a double-edged sword that can be empowering or tranquilizing.

When I speak of a learning organization, I'm articulating a view that involves us-the observers-as much as the observed in a common system. We are taking a stand for a vision, for creating an organization we would like to work within and which can thrive in a world of increasing interdependency and change. It is not what the vision is, but what the vision does that matters.

Five Principles

Five operating principles are emerging. These principles are neither rigid nor all encompassing.

1.   The learning organization embodies new capabilities.

A learning organization must be grounded in a culture based on transcendent human values of love, wonder, humility, and compassion; a set of practices for generative conversation and coordinated action; and a capacity to see and work with the flow of life as a system.

In learning organizations, cultural norms defy our business tradition. Acceptance of others as legitimate beings (love) replaces the traditional will toward homogeneity. The ever-surprising manifestations of the world show up as opportunities to grow, as opposed to frustrating breakdowns for which somebody must take the blame (wonder). People understand that life is not condensable, that any model is an operational simplification always ready for improvement (humility). And when they encounter behaviors that they neither understand nor condone, people appreciate that such actions arise from viewpoints and forces that are, in some sense, as valid as the viewpoints and forces that influence their own behaviors (compassion).

Learning organizations are spaces for generative conversations and concerted action. In them, language functions as a device for connection, invention, and coordination. People can talk from their hearts and connect with one another in the spirit of dialogue. Their dialogue weaves a common fabric and connects them at a deep level of being. When people talk and listen to each other this way, they create a field of alignment that produces tremendous power to invent new realities in conversation, and to bring about these new realities in action.

One reason the myth of the great leader is so appealing is that it absolves us of responsibility for developing leadership capabilities more broadly. In learning organizations, the burden is shifted: a perceived need for leadership (symptom) can be met by developing leadership capacities throughout the organization (fundamental solution) not just by relying on a hero leader (symptomatic solution). Success in finding a hero leader reinforces a belief in the group's powerlessness, thus making the fundamental solution more difficult.

In learning organizations, people are always inquiring into the systemic consequences of their actions, rather than just focusing on local consequences. They understand the interdependencies underlying complex issues and act with perceptiveness and leverage. They are patient in seeking deeper understanding rather than striking out to "fix" problem symptoms — because they know that most fixes are temporary at best, and often result in more severe problems later.

Learning organizations are both more generative and more adaptive than traditional organizations. Because of their commitment, openness, and ability to deal with complexity, people find security not in stability but in the dynamic equilibrium between holding on and letting go of beliefs, assumptions, and

certainties. What they know takes a second place to what they can learn, and simplistic answers are always less important than penetrating questions.

2. Learning organizations are built by communities of servant leaders.

Leadership takes on new meanings in learning organizations. The leaders are those building the new organization and its capabilities. They walk ahead, regardless of their position or hierarchical authority. Such leadership is inevitably collective.

Our conventional notions of leadership are embedded in myths of heros — great individuals severed from their communities who make their way through individual will, determination, and cleverness. While there may be much to admire in such persons, our attachment to individualistic notions of leadership may block the emergence of the leadership of teams, and, ultimately, organizations and societies that can lead themselves. While we wait for the great leader who will save the day, we surrender the confidence and power needed to make progress toward learning organizations.

As the myth of the hero leader fades, a new myth of teams and communities that can lead themselves is emerging. But the emergence of collective leadership does not mean that there are no "leadership positions" like CEO or president in learning organizations. Management hierarchies are often functional.

The clash of collective leadership and hierarchical leadership poses a core dilemma for learning organizations. This dilemma can't be reconciled given traditional notions of hierarchal leaders as the people "in control" or "in charge." For this implies that those "below" are not in control. A hierarchical value system then arises that, as Analog Devices CEO Ray Stata puts it, "holds the person higher up the hierarchy as somehow a more important being."

Alternatively, the dilemma can become a source of energy and imagination through the idea of "servant leadership," people who lead because they chose to serve, both to serve one another and to serve a higher purpose. Servant leadership offers a unique mix of idealism and pragmatism. At one level, the concept is an ideal, appealing to deeply held beliefs in the dignity and self-worth of all people and the democratic principle that a leader's power flows from those led. But it is also highly practical. It has been proven in military campaigns that the only leader whom soldiers will reliably follow when their lives are on the line is the leader who is both competent and who soldiers believe is committed to their well-being.

3. Learning arises through performance and practice.

It was common in Native American cultures to set aside sacred spaces for learning. So too today, learning is too important to leave to chance. It will not be adequate to offer training and hope that people will apply new insights and methods. Nor will help from consultants be sufficient to bring about the fundamental shifts in thinking and interacting and the new capabilities needed to sustain those shifts. It will be necessary to redesign work if progressive ideas are to find their way into the mainstream of management practice.

A guiding idea for redesigning work will be virtual learning spaces or "managerial practice fields." The learning that occurs in sports teams and the performing arts is embedded in continuous movement between a practice field and a performance field. It is impossible to imagine a chamber music ensemble or a theater troupe learning without rehearsal, just as it is impossible to imagine a championship basketball team that never practices. Yet, that is exactly what happens in most organizations. People only perform. They rarely get to practice, especially together.

Several design principles come together in creating effective practice fields:

A. the learner learns what the learner wants to learn;

B. the people who need to learn are the people who have the power to take action;

C. learning often occurs best through "play," through interactions in a practice field where it is safe to experiment and reflect;

D. learning often requires altering the flow of time — slowing down the action to enable reflection on tacit assumptions and counterproductive ways of interacting, or speeding up time to reveal how current decisions can create unanticipated problems in the long term;

E. learning often requires compressing space so that the learner can see the effects of his or her actions in other parts of a larger system (computer simulations may be needed);

F. this practice field must look like the action domain of the learners; and,

G. the learning space must be shamelessly integrated into the work space for an ongoing cycle of reflection, experimentation, and action.

4. Process and content are inseparable.

Because our culture is so caught up in separation, we have been led, according to David Bohm, "to seek some fantasy of action that would end the fragmentation in the content (of our thought) while leaving the fragmentation in the actual process of thinking untouched." So, for example, executives seek to improve fragmented policies and strategies without addressing the fragmented and competitive relationship among the managers who formulated the strategies and policies. Consultants propose new process-oriented designs without addressing the modes of thinking and interacting that cause us to focus on things rather than processes in the first place. Management educators treat either "technical" issues like operations, marketing, or finance, or behavioral issues like culture, decision making, or change.

The separation between the issues we are interested in and the processes we might use to learn about them may be the primary obstacle to potential breakthroughs. For example, in one field project, the team addressed the company culture of punishment for bad news. But, rather than blaming the "culture" or "management," the members of the group explored their own reactions to hearing about problems, especially from subordinates. They began to surface their fears about mistakes and their automatic reactions and defensive responses, like heightened competitiveness or a tendency to cover up the problems. Gradually, they reached some deep insight into their "culture of punishment" and their own role in sustaining it.

5. Learning is dangerous. Learning occurs between a fear and a need.

On the one hand, we feel the need to change if we are to accomplish our goals. On the other hand, we feel the anxiety of facing the unknown and unfamiliar. To learn significant things, we must suspend some basic notions about our worlds and ourselves. That is a frightening proposition for the ego.

Conventional learning is transactional. There is a learner who has a certain way of operating and a certain knowledge. If this knowledge proves to be incomplete or ineffective, the learner may drop part of it, change some of it, or add some new ideas to it. This may be an accurate description of how we learn to find better bargains or make better investments, but it fails to get to the heart of the learning involved when we question deep beliefs and mental models.

The problem with this view is that the self is not separate from the ideas and assumptions that form it. Our mental models are not like pieces of clothing that we can put on or take off. They are basic constitutive structures of our personality. Most of the time, we are our mental models.

The learning required in becoming a learning organization is "transformational learning." Static notions of who we are must be checked at the door. In transformational learning, there are no problems "out there" to be solved independent of how we think and act in articulating these problems. Such learning is not ultimately about tools and techniques. It is about who we are. We often prefer to fail again and again rather than let go of some core belief or master assessment.

This explains the paradox of learning. Even when we claim we want to learn, we normally mean that we want to acquire some new tool or understanding. When we see that to learn, we must be willing to look foolish, to let another teach us, learning doesn't always look so good anymore. It is little coincidence that virtually all spiritual disciplines, regardless of culture or religious setting, are practiced in communities. Only with the support, insight, and fellowship of a community can we face the dangers of learning meaningful things.

Developing Leadership Communities

Once we realize that building learning organizations is grounded in developing leadership communities, a core question remains: "How do such communities form, grow, and become influential?" Ford's Vic Leo suggests a three-stage architecture of engagement: 1) finding those predisposed to this work, 2) core community-building activities, and 3) practical experimentation and testing.

1. **Predisposition**. It's easy to waste time trying to make changes with people who do not want, or are not ready for, such changes. For example, when people reflect on how they become involved in systemic thinking and organizational learning, they discover that they are drawn to the "systems perspective" by academic training or life experiences. They are skeptical of conventional strategies for improvement-reorganizations, training, management programs, speeches from "on high." Predisposition is important, especially in the early stages of building momentum when there are few practical results to point to. Those not predisposed to systems thinking should not be excluded, but they may play less important roles at the outset. If they are not included, because they raise difficult questions or disagree with certain ideas, what starts as a learning community can degenerate into a cult.

2. **Community-building activities**. How those predisposed begin to know each other and to work together involves a cycle of community-building activities and practical experimentation. The former must be intense enough and open-ended enough to foster trusting personal relationships and to lay a foundation of knowledge and skills. The latter must offer realistic starting steps in applying new knowledge and skills to important issues.

   For example, at the Learning Center, we explore the tools, methods, and personal dimensions of systems thinking, often resulting in a "piercing experience," where the systems perspective begins to take on a deeper meaning and the nature of the journey ahead becomes clearer. In this journey, there are no "teachers" with correct answers, only guides with different areas of expertise and experience that may help along the way. Each of us gives up our own certainty and recognizes our interdependency within the larger community of practitioners. The honest, humble, and purposeful "I don't know" grounds our vision for learning organizations.

3. **Practical experimentation and testing**. What nurtures the unfolding community is active experimentation where people wrestle with crucial strategic and operational issues. In our work, we undertake learning projects that focus on key issues, because of the motivation for learning and because of the potential for significant improvement in business results.

   Currently, two "practice field" projects are underway: dialogue projects and learning laboratory projects. Dialogue projects focus directly on the deeper patterns of communication that underlie whatever issues are being confronted by a management team. Learning laboratory projects focus on areas such as new product development, management accounting and control systems, and services management.

   For example, a team at Ford, responsible for creating the next generation Lincoln Continental, is also creating a New Car Development Learning Laboratory. The project has two objectives: to improve the effectiveness of the team in its current project and to develop better theory and tools that will lead to broader systemic thinking in product development at Ford. Early returns show unprecedented levels of internal coordination.

   The learning laboratories and dialogue projects all follow the operating principles. What started as a "practice field" has led to penetrating insights into critical business issues. The practice fields are becoming integrated into everyday company activities. When we started the pilot projects, we had a vision of transforming organizations through learning processes focused on significant business problems. We saw practice fields as a place where teams could meet to reflect on structures, identify counterproductive behaviors, experiment with alternative strategies, and design solutions for actual work settings. The core of the projects were "management flight simulators," computer simulations based on systems thinking. The simulators would enable managers to "compress time

and space" to better understand the long-term consequences of their decisions and to reflect on their assumptions.

We find that when people have a practice field where they can relate to each other safely and playfully, where they can openly explore difficult issues, they begin to see their learning community as a new way of managing.

As a society, what is our relationship to mistakes?

In a Learning Organization, what is the relationship to mistakes?

Provide examples of practicing, experimentation?

Given our fascination with fragmentation, how do we manage a problem occurring in a single department?

How *might* we manage such a problem?