

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization

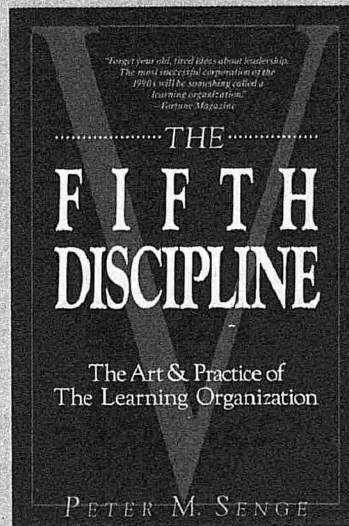
If you're tired of sound-bite-sized ideas parading as business books, you will find plenty to sink your teeth into in *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Reading Peter M. Senge's (pronounced SENG-ee with a hard G) richly textured book is a discipline in itself, but one well worth your time.

The Fifth Discipline is not a book that will stay one minute in the brain and one year on the best-seller list. It is rare to say of a book that it could prompt action for years to come, but this one could. It's crafted well enough to make you care about the five disciplines (systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning), and it provides tools for putting them into practice. It's a learning experience. Given its basic premises, it almost has to be.

"The tools and ideas presented in this book are for destroying the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces. When we give up this illusion—we can then build 'learning organizations,' 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."

That is a learning organization, as described by Senge. The principles behind it have been discussed extensively in such fields as physics, cybernetics, engineering, statistics, and psychology. But until the publication of *The Fifth Discipline*, no author had pulled them together so comprehensively and so clearly in the service of business.

One reviewer called the book "erratically brilliant." It does indeed offer insights with generous



abandon. But what Senge does best is to distill with great clarity five disciplines or sets of practices into a blueprint for building a learning organization in a real business setting. If ever a book successfully took ideas from the ivory tower and made them practical enough for the executive suite, it is this one. This is a book you could confidently recommend to your CEO.

Practice makes perfect

Senge urges that the disciplines be practiced. Otherwise, he says, nothing will be learned. Consequently the book is rich in tools and methods for practice. For instance, one chapter covers the use of computer-based microworlds as a new type of practice field for management teams. They can be used, for example, to integrate learning about complex team interactions with learning about complex business interactions.

Practice is critical, according to Senge, because learning organizations have been invented but not innovated; that is, they have not been tried out over time in real organizations so that we can gain enough knowledge to make them work consistently. To make learning organizations practicable, we need prototypes—organizations

that will work out the solutions to some key problems that stand in the way. The issues:

- How can the internal politics and game-playing that dominate traditional organizations be transcended?
- How can an organization distribute business responsibility widely and still retain coordination and control?
- How do managers create the time for learning?
- How can personal mastery and learning flourish at both work and home?
- How can we learn from experience when we cannot experience the consequences of our most important actions?
- What is the nature of the commitment and skills required to lead learning organizations?

Senge believes that learning organizations are possible because deep down we are all learners. It is our nature to learn and we love doing it. He sees a natural movement toward learning organizations in the gradual shift he observes from an instrumental view of work (in which work is a means to an end) to an intrinsic view of work (in which work is consistent with our highest aspirations). Learning organizations have to do with how we think, what we truly want, and how we interact and learn with one another.

Reviewed by Patricia A. Galagan

Ordering information

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization is published by Doubleday/Currency, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10103. You may order a copy by calling ASTD's customer support department at 703/683-8129 (order code SETF; \$18 for ASTD national members, \$20 for nonmembers; add \$2.15 for shipping).