

Peter Senge 5th Discipline

Description

Peter Senge 5th Discipline is an Organizational Learning model that offers a vision of workplaces built around learning. By viewing organizations as systems with interdependent parts and by learning to understand the complex relationships between these parts, change agents can achieve significant improvements in performance. Unlike other quality improvement methods which focus more on operations, this model focuses on conceptual learning *as well as* operations. The model focuses on five disciplines, three levels of explanations, seven learning constraints, and nine system archetypes which will help practicing Systems Thinking.

Background

In the late 1950s, Jay Forrester of the MIT Sloan School of Management is credited with being the founder of system dynamics, the conceptual framework for this approach. He was a computer engineer and systems scientist. He introduced the Forrester effect describing fluctuations in supply chains, the interactions between objects in dynamic systems and is most often applied to research and consulting in organizations and other social systems. Forrester and his colleagues created a Systems Dynamic Group which used computer simulations, graphs, and diagrams to describe and predict system behavior.

In 1990, Peter Senge of the MIT Sloan School of Management authored "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization." This book brought the model into more practical use by consultants and spawned the growth many resources for use by educators and consultants. The book described how organizations can learn to be better by applying systems thinking concepts.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this model is to enable members of a team/organization to create the results they desire, to share aspirations for success, and to continually learn together. This process supports systems thinking through the integration of the five disciplines. As organizations practice the discipline of personal mastery, they experience gradual changes, examine their own mental models, become more open to, and identify new ways of thinking.

How It Works

Learning about Systems Thinking, Organizational Learning, and use of tools can occur in many ways. Designing a system's thinking intervention or using certain tools and strategies can occur once one has a working knowledge of the model. There are tools, strategies, and exercises that relate to each of the five disciplines. Examples of tools used to create a systems thinking intervention include behavior over time charts, naming the variables, causal loop diagrams, creating focusing questions, examining mental models using The Ladder of Inference, dialogue

and using the Events, Patterns, Structure model to understand organizational problems. These are just a few examples.

Core Values, Principles and Concepts

The Five Disciplines

Personal Mastery: The discipline of continuously clarifying what is important to us and continuously learning how to see current reality more clearly. Some of the principles and practices of Personal Mastery are developing a personal vision, holding creative tension between our vision and current reality, commitment to the truth, compassion, and commitment to the whole.

Mental Models: The assumptions and beliefs that are the basis of our behavior and decisions within an organization. The ability to surface and reflect on these assumptions is key to this discipline.

Shared Vision: Harnessing personal vision to the aspirations of members of a team or organization. Fostering a desire to enroll in the shared vision and to commit to the work of the organization. The opposite of shared vision is compliance to someone else's vision.

Team Learning: The discipline of team learning is built upon the practice of dialogue when trying to understand and solve problems. Dialogue involves suspending all assumptions and literally thinking about your thinking. As a result, defensiveness is reduced, and a kind of common meaning emerges within a team. The result is almost always a clearer understanding of reality.

Systems Thinking: the principles of Systems Thinking are thinking of the big picture, balancing short term and long-term perspectives, recognizing the dynamic, complex and interdependent nature of systems, considering measurable and non-measurable factors, and remembering that we are all part of the systems in which we function, and that we each influence those systems even as we are being influenced by them.

Framework

The model focuses on five disciplines, three levels of explanations, seven learning constraints and nine system archetypes which will help practicing Systems Thinking.

(Source: <https://www.mudamasters.com/en/change-management/fifth-discipline-psenge-summary>).

Three Levels of Explanation: A reactive explanation based on events, a responsive explanation based on behavior, and a generative explanation based on structural level. A System (level 3) leads to a certain behavior (level 2) which can lead to certain events (level 1). The best way to change events is, therefore, to change the system, which will lead to different behavior.

Seven Learning Constraints: Lifelong learning is important for an organization because learning results in creating. The more people in an organization learn, the more value they can create for the company.

1. **I-am-my-position syndrome.** This syndrome is described by people talking about what tasks they perform in an organization instead of what value they add to the company goal. Talking in terms of tasks only results in lack of accountability for the product or service the company delivers.
2. **The enemy is out there syndrome.** When people are task-focused, they are likely to not be able to see their own influence on the company goals, and as a result, point to others in organization as the root cause of all problems.
3. **The illusion of taking charge** describes the danger of reactive action instead of proactive action. Proactive action is defined by people daring to face the results of their own behavior and the willingness to change it to prevent problems from reoccurring in the future.
4. **The fixation on events** instead of focus on small continuous improvements. Learning and improving should be part of everybody's daily job and not just a temporary one-day event or a project. Projects, by definition, are temporary and project teams are eliminated after a certain problem is solved.
5. **The parable of the boiled frog.** A frog held in a pan in which the water temperature slowly increases will die as soon as the water eventually boils, because the frog will not notice the temperature increase. To prevent this from happening to organizations in changing environments, changes of processes should be measured and evaluated.
6. **The delusion of learning from experience** is described because people seldom really know the outcome of their actions on the long term, while we tend to believe that we can know the long-term outcome by looking at the short-term outcome.
7. **The myth of the management team** in which people truly believe that management can solve all problems. When one thinks about it, it is obviously impossible that one manager knows everything about all processes and has all capabilities needed to solve each problem.

The Nine System Archetypes or behavior patterns that deserve management's attention are a starting point for systems thinking:

1. There is always a **delay** between the execution of actions and the final (long-term) results.
2. **A pattern of limited growth** is the result of focusing on improving activities which focus on improving growth accelerating factors instead of reducing growth limiting factors.
3. **Moving the problem** instead of solving it. This is what happens when only symptoms of the problem are addressed and not the root cause. The problem can then re-occur in the same form but also in another department.
4. **Deteriorating goals** when situations get tough. Goals are set aside due to a crisis or because of any other reason. This is simply not acceptable. The vision and its goals give direction to the company, especially in these difficult times.

5. **An escalation loop** is a loop in which actors influence one another with a lose-lose situation as outcome. An example is a price-war between supermarkets, where multiple competitors eventually fight one another on being the cheapest, and none of them ends up with profit in the end. According to Senge, one should only encourage a culture in which win-win situations are created.
6. **Success to the successful** is the archetype in which resources are allocated to the most successful activity which makes the unsuccessful ones even more unsuccessful because they receive fewer resources. This is not necessarily the best policy for the long term.
7. **The politics to receive resources** (for instance, the budgeting game) is a situation where departments make up and alter numbers to receive more resources for their department instead of being able to see the scope of the entire organization and act accordingly.
8. **Solutions which do not solve** is a situation where short-term positive results lead to long-term losses. For instance, reducing preventative maintenance on machines in a factory.
9. **Growth and underinvestment** are the trap where investing does not seem necessary because all is well at the moment. Not investing today, however, might lead to a lost opportunity for growth in the future because of a lack of skills or capacity.

Application

Vocational Rehabilitation

In a 2014 study, the positive impact of developing a “learning organization” was described in four state VR agencies: Mississippi, Utah, Texas, and Maryland. The [article](#) posits that a leadership culture that fosters the development of a learning organization leads to innovation and the development of best practices.

Criticisms or Concerns

This model is extremely broad and is not readily broken down into a single type of training. That said, it is easy to put certain concepts into practice which enable teams to become more effective at identifying and solving problems. In this way, quality issues can be addressed.

Recommendation for Use In VR

The model can apply to all areas of a VR system. Each of the five “disciplines” described by Senge can be learned and practiced by VR leaders as well as by counselors and can be used to improve organizational decision making, problem analysis, communication, performance planning, and developing new knowledge about the VR system behaves.

The model can be used to enable VR teams to gain insight and understanding of the root causes of system performance problems and, therefore, to create solutions that have an increase likelihood of success. At a time when the VR system is beginning to embrace new models of service to students with disabilities, businesses, and career advancement for persons with disabilities, the benefits of the learning organization become apparent. How will these new

models and service priorities affect the operations of the VR agency? How will performance be affected? How can the VR system serve more people in diverse ways with better results? These are the kinds of questions that can be answered if VR leaders at all levels become systems thinkers.

Certification

Pegasus Communications has hosted an annual [Systems Thinking in Action Conference](#) since 2002.

The conference agenda includes the following:

- New and classic systems thinking philosophy, tools, and techniques
- Insights into how your organization performs as a living system
- Tips for preventing wasted time and money by knowing how to avoid fixes that fail
- Ways to improve results by identifying the structural weaknesses in the system
- Methods for pinpointing the real leverage points to optimize resources and results
- A framework for all stakeholders to discuss the most important questions facing your organization

The [Society for Organizational Learning](#) offers trainings and resources. The Foundations for Leadership workshop is a three-day program focused on both the personal and inherently collective aspects of leadership and is intended for leadership at different levels of an organization. The Executive Champion's Workshop is designed for senior leaders. The workshops start at \$4000.

Program content includes the following:

- Learn and practice the Five Disciplines of organizational learning.
- Understand how underlying systemic structures shape behavior and how to recognize and shift those structures.
- Explore underlying beliefs and assumptions and their impact on your capacity to lead effectively.
- Develop a vision for your organization and for yourself.
- Facilitate conversations that promote learning and collaboration.
- Experience the development of a learning community among the participants.
- Gain a new set of tools and an understanding of how to facilitate meaningful change, both for yourself, and within your community or organization.
- [MIT Sloan School](#) also offers training options as part of their Management Certification Program.

Resources

Articles

[Organizational and cultural factors that promote creative best practices in the public rehabilitation program: Findings from a four-state multiple case study](#): The state-federal vocational rehabilitation system is tasked to demonstrate accountability for employment outcomes of persons with disabilities. State VR agencies have sought to evaluate existing practices, and in areas that existing practices leave room for improvement, create the conditions for innovation to occur. The purpose of this article is to identify promising organizational and cultural factors that appear to promote best practices in the public vocational rehabilitation program. A multi-stage study utilizing the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was conducted involving four high performing state VR agencies to discover emerging and promising organizational practices leading to improvements in employment outcomes of people with disabilities. The comprehensive examination revealed specific organizational practices, culture, and structural elements that encourage and support the development of innovative, effective service delivery practices. Given the complexity of service provision and the increasing demand for successful outcomes, VR agencies must develop organizational cultures that facilitate transformational learning by employing evidence-based practices that lead to successful outcomes for agency consumers.

Books

"The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization" by Peter Senge

"The Fifth Discipline Field: Strategies for Building a Learning Organization" by Art Kleiner

Websites

[Systemic Quality Management: Improving the Quality of Doing and Thinking](#)

[Learning for a Change](#): Overview of the Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization

<https://thesystemsthinker.com/>

<https://www.solonline.org/>