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## Learning Organizations Part 1: It Starts with You

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“There are no *top ten* ... excellent learning companies, no sterling *wunder-orgs* that do everything so well that the rest of us need only benchmark and copy them. Instead, we believe that the learning organization exists primarily as a vision in our collective experience and imagination.”

— Peter M. Senge et al., **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** (1994)

Peter Senge is the author of **The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization** and **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**. Senge believes that there are five disciplines that learning organizations continuously practice. These are:

**1. Personal Mastery:** Individuals consistently realize the results that matter most deeply to them, and are committed to lifelong learning. Individuals do work because they want to.

**2. Mental Models:** Individuals and teams question their ingrained assumptions that lead to their actions.

**3. Shared Vision:** Individuals see how their personal vision fits into the shared company vision. They recognize how they have created their current reality, and therefore see how they can create their future reality.

**4. Team Learning:** Individuals in a group suspend their assumptions, and enter into genuine thinking and dialogue together.

**5. Systems Thinking:** Individuals in a group understand the interconnectedness of all things, and the impact of their decisions and actions in the long term.

Learning organizations have the capacity to generate knowledge. According to Senge, knowledge is the capacity for effective action. This knowledge is generated by people who practice personal

mastery. People who practice personal mastery continuously enhance their own capacity, as well as the capacity of the organization, for effective action.

In this next series of articles, I explore each of these disciplines, and give my perspective on learning organizations, and how people and companies might begin to generate knowledge. This article explores the first discipline: **Personal Mastery**.

“A striking number of business people tell us that of all the learning disciplines, they are most drawn to personal mastery. ... They recognize that an organization develops along with its people.”

— Peter M. Senge

Personal mastery belongs to each individual. Only you can develop your own personal mastery. However, you can help others to develop personal mastery by providing an environment that encourages and supports people to learn, experiment, fail, grow, and develop. Personal

mastery requires you to:

- Become committed to continuous learning and development
- Become committed to helping others to develop personal mastery
- Understand how people learn
- Develop your abilities to continuously learn and develop

These are fine words, but what does personal mastery really mean to us as individuals? Let me give an example of what I have heard in my workshops. More often than not, I hear people tell me that they are powerless to take effective action. “Are managers being told the same things as we’re being told in this course? If not, then nothing is going to change, and this is a waste of time.”

These people see management as the former Berlin Wall: imposing, unyielding, and uncaring. The interesting thing is that the Berlin Wall no longer exists, but it did not come down because management wanted that. It came down because the people wanted that. In organizations, people have come to believe that they have no power, when, in fact, they have enormous power. They are the people. The power does not come from the masses; it comes from within each of us. We each have the power to control our own destiny, to make our own choices, and to have an impact on others.

Personal mastery is about people taking responsibility for their own ability to make an impact, to make a

change. This means that each of us has the power to make an impact on our environment, as well as on the people within our environment. However, there is a price tag attached to this power. We are also accountable for what happens as a result of our actions. Therefore, we must use this power wisely; we must use it to build learning organizations.

“Personal mastery offers an option for people who feel they want to change their organization, but can’t accomplish much from their position. You can always move, as an individual, to develop your personal mastery.”

— Peter M. Senge

You begin the process of building learning organizations by working on yourself. Whether you are a front-line worker, a supervisor, a manager, or a president, you can take the responsibility to develop yourself to your fullest potential. Here are some tips to help you do this:

- Make a list of the qualities you admire in others that you want to develop in yourself.
- Make a list of what you value most about both work and your personal life.
- Use these lists to develop a vision of how you want to be five years from now. Be very specific about how this vision looks and feels.
- Don’t compromise your vision, no matter how difficult it may seem to attain.

You can also help others to develop a vision of how they want to be.

You do this by:

- Encouraging and supporting their visions, regardless of whether or not you believe in them. Remember, their visions belong to them, not to you.
- Treating their emotions and feelings with respect. Developing personal visions requires us to dig deep inside ourselves — something we may not be comfortable doing. As a result, several emotions and feelings may well up. You can help others by reminding them that these emotions and feelings are a natural part of the learning process.
- Allowing them to contribute to your personal vision. People always feel good when they can help others to develop and grow.

The key to personal mastery lies within you. It is entirely your choice. Only you can turn the key and start the journey. Once you start, you will find that you are not alone.

“Having made that choice, the vision will become part of you — wherever it may lead.”

— Peter M. Senge et al., **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** (1994)

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