

Meridian Dialogue
1993:1:
In Response to
The Fifth Discipline
By Peter M. Senge
[Published by Century Business, 1992]

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This dialogue offers a format in which the meaning of the original author is illustrated by a set of carefully selected quotes, interspersed with sections in which David Wasdell has tried to respond, partly in critique and occasionally with some original additions or associations.

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Introduction

The series of Meridian Dialogues offers a format in which the meaning of the original author is illustrated in a set of carefully selected quotes. Interspersed are sections in which I have tried to respond, partly in commentary, partly in critique, occasionally with some original additions or associations. The text is not intended as a full summary or review of the original work, it is more a record of the points at which I was stimulated to reply in a kind of written duet.

The discipline of writing these Dialogues has forced me to grapple with the original work at a depth and with a concentration which would otherwise have been hard to mobilise. The value for me has been in the process itself and I am really uncertain whether the resulting product has any value for others.

Perhaps it may encourage the reader to peruse the original work again (or for the first time). Perhaps you can give words and voice to a third part, transforming the duet into a trio, taking the dialogue further and laying the ground for a future quartet...

David Wasdell
March 1993

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by Peter M. Senge,
Century Business, 1992

The purpose of the book is summarised in a paragraph on page 3, which also highlights the main inadequacy of the book:

'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.'

Fragmentation in perception and in the way we organise society is itself the topology of a psychodynamic process. While the roots are unconscious it may well be termed 'an illusion' but simply to destroy the illusion is to get nowhere in terms of systemic change. The roots lie much deeper than simply the reframing of perception. Fragmentation, alienation and splitting are indeed blocks to the learning community, as they are to the learning person. Both are systemic symptoms of psychodynamic processes that lie deep within the corporate and common unconscious.

Senge argues that learning organisations are possible because deep down we are all learners. The problem here of course is that in so far as deep down we are blocked in our learning, just so far do we block the capacity of our communities and organisations to learn. He appears to have somewhat of an idealistic view of the nature of humanity in which the constraints are disregarded.

"Business is the only institution that has a chance, as far as I can see, to fundamentally improve the injustice that exists in the world. But first, we will have to move through the barriers that are keeping us from being truly vision-led and capable of learning". [quoting Edward Simon, president of Herman Miller] [p.5]

Simon appears to see the potential but is much more clearly aware of the existence, though not the nature, of the barrier and defences that inhibit the development of the learning organisation.

Senge identifies five component technologies converging to elevate learning organisations. They are: **Systems Thinking**, **Personal Mastery** (Human Potential Development and Integration) 'I am most interested in the connections between personal learning and organizational learning' [p.8]. The third element is working with **Mental Models**, making overt and conscious the covert and unconscious in order to challenge and change the Mental Models which govern the enactment in an organisation. The fourth element is **Building Shared Vision** - the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create. The fifth element is **Team Learning**.

He notes that a team of committed managers with individual IQs over 120 tends to have a collective IQ of 63. He notes striking examples where the intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of the individuals in it, where teams develop extraordinary capacities for coordinated action. When teams are truly learning not only are they producing extraordinary results but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise. [p.10]. He notes the need to recognise the pattern of interaction in teams that undermine learning, patterns of defensiveness that are often ingrained. The implication here is that deconstructing the defences and integrating at a personal and interpersonal level catalyses the learning process of the organisation. I question however whether Senge understands the depth, tenacity, origin and functions of the most powerful and primitive defences which emerge in organisational behaviour. His premise is correct, his analysis too superficial. There are wells of potential here which could be tapped in order to accelerate the learning of a system into realms of which he has yet to dream.

'At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind - from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something "out there" to seeing how our actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.' [p.12]

This change of mind to which Senge refers as the heart of the systemic approach in The Fifth Discipline, focuses into the procedure for owning and recognising patterns of projection and re-introjection and changing that dynamic procedure into one in which fantasies are no longer projected onto reality and read back as distortions.

Senge offers a vignette of autobiography on page 14:

'When I entered graduate school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1970, I was already convinced that most of the problems faced by humankind concerned our inability to grasp and manage the increasingly complex systems of our world. Little has happened since to change my view.'

In 1970, with the work of J. Forrester and others, the emphasis in MIT was precisely on the application of complex systems and non-linear feedback loops to the modelling of all kinds of social reality. Humankind's inability to grasp and manage complex systems does indeed lie at the root of many problems. The causal origins of fragmented complexity in systems and the blockages to human ability to manage them do not, however, lie in the systems themselves. These are projects, realities created out of the unconscious collusional processes of large groups of people in societies. They contain within their dynamics therefore the projected unconscious of the many individuals who have given them form. It is therefore

precisely the unconscious psychodynamics of the system which render the system opaque, rather than the nature of the system in itself. Senge is deeply committed to and influenced by the work of J. Forrester at MIT in the field of system dynamics and in particular the study of counter-intuitive responses where interventions are focussed on obvious symptoms rather than underlying causes and produce short-term benefit but long-term malaise. The experience that systems thinking in itself was inadequate came out of MIT during the 1970s and led to the conviction that personal development had to go alongside systems thinking. In other words **the transformation had to be intrapersonal as well as interpersonal for effective organisational development.** ·

Senge notes the increased and rapid dysfunctionality that sets in as crisis pressure mounts in a management team. A tennis player whose game crumples under stress will never win a championship. Great champions raise their game under high pressure. However as Chris Argyris of Harvard notes:

"most management teams break down under pressure... the team may function quite well with routine issues but when they confront complex issues that may be embarrassing or threatening, the 'teamness' seems to go to pot" [p.24f.]

Senge with Argyris notes that school training appears to set up this particular function, rendering collective enquiry inherently taboo. Not rocking the boat is rewarded and performance is designed to protect people from uncertainty, ignorance or threat. The problem here is that the school system itself is seen as causative rather than symptomatic. This is a failure to apply systems thinking even to the causal systems that lie behind the difficulties that he is engaging. If we ask why it is that school systems develop this kind of approach, then we begin to get closer to the more dynamic issues that underlie the system behaviour. It is not appropriate to interpret and explain behaviour in the business system by reference to behaviour in the educational system. Both are equal and complementary forms of the underlying expression of anxiety defences, the management of threat and the blocking of effective learning because of the repression of internal distress. Any culture dedicated to the maintenance of anxiety defences will inevitably generate educational, business, political and social systems which reinforce its defences. It is no use at all in attempting to solve the problems in one area of a system by blaming the causality onto another symptomatic area of a parallel system. Each system is in fact a subsystem of the overall social dynamic with which Senge appears unable to engage. It is all very well noting:

'in story after story, leaders could not see the consequences of their own policies, even when they were warned in advance that their own survival was at stake' [p.25].

The question we have to ask is why such immensely powerful blockages exist in the human psyche that survival itself is jettisoned in order to maintain the underlying defences. Maintaining the corporate psychosis may actually be more important than surviving as a species.

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'Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs'. [p.139]

Fast-track personal learning is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for the successful learning system. The fast-track learner must also have systemic structures that enable corporate learning and high quality feedback if they are not to end up as burnt out and frustrated, over-trained and under-employed. So Bill O'Brien, President of Hanover Insurance, affirms that the manager's fundamental task is: 'providing the enabling conditions for people to lead the most enriching lives they can' [p.140].

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In the section on Personal Mastery, Senge focuses on the issue of what he calls 'structural conflict' - the juxtaposition of two contradictory beliefs that limit the ability to move in any given direction. He gives as an example the will to achieve and the belief of powerlessness or inability to achieve. Then he asked this question:

'Where then is the leverage in dealing with structural conflict? If structural conflict arises from deep underlying beliefs, then it can be changed only by changing the beliefs. But psychologists are virtually unanimous that fundamental beliefs such as powerlessness or unworthiness cannot be changed readily. They are developed early in life (remember all those "can'ts" and "don'ts" that started when you were two?) For most of us, beliefs change gradually as we accumulate new experiences - as we develop our personal mastery. But if mastery will not develop so long as we hold unempowering beliefs, and the beliefs will change only as we experience our mastery, how may we begin to alter the deeper structures of our lives?' [p.158f]

Two apparently received truths are built into this paragraph, both of which need to be called in question. Firstly, the virtually unanimous belief of psychologists that 'fundamental beliefs cannot be readily changed'. One of the problems we have is that that belief of psychologists does happen to be one of the beliefs that is very difficult to move. Secondly, is the statement that these structural conflicts are laid down 'very early in life'. We are then invited to remember the "can'ts and don'ts" that started when people were 2 years old. So 'very early in life' is actually quite late in terms of laying down the foundations of structural conflict (see D. Wasdell, 'The Roots of the Common Unconscious, URCHIN, 1990).

He has a lovely phrase on page 160: 'Structures of which we are unaware hold us prisoner'. It is like saying the unconscious dominates behaviour. So becoming conscious is a primary step in unleashing the potential held back within structural conflict. It becomes clear in the following pages that Senge does not really understand the unconscious since he equates it with the subconscious and illustrates it with reference to that kind of automatic response that we don't actually have to think about like driving a car.

As he speaks about motivation, Senge says:

'There are two fundamental sources of energy that can motivate organizations: fear and aspiration. The power of fear underlies negative visions. The power of aspiration drives positive visions. Fear can produce extraordinary changes in short periods, but aspiration endures as a continuing source of learning and growth.' [p.225]

Increasing paranoia may hoick motivation sharply upwards on a temporary basis. However it also increases the defendedness of a system and mobilises defensive reactions and resistance to change or transformation. On the other hand, increasing the positive aspirational aspects and positively lowering the levels of anxiety leads to greater flexibility, greater openness, the deconstruction of defences and the creative welcoming of newness in the future.

In the coda at the end of his book, Senge changes gear. He raises the question of a sixth discipline, something beyond the 5-dimensional space, that can take it, transform it and put it onto a completely different plane. He is not precise but he does pick up the issue of managing super-complexity in a sub-conscious mode. Some would see this as the 'right-brained mode' being able to see a multi-dimensional reality whole and model it across time. This has its links with the dynamics of integration, the emergence and harnessing of the full human potential and the concept of accelerated learning, or super-learning which focuses specifically on the conscious/subconscious interaction. Again, my sense here is that Senge has grasped the possibilities of bringing into play fairly conscious areas of human potential but has not yet grasped the existence of the defended areas and of the potential that can be liberated by their integration.

Toward the end of the 20th chapter, Senge moves beyond the intra-enterprise boundary of a particular organisation or company and begins to see the capacity of the learning organisation to play its part within the transformation of the whole:

'The value of systems thinking also goes beyond that derived by any institution. To explain, let me take a step back.

'There is a certain irony to mankind's present situation, viewed from an evolutionary perspective. The human being is exquisitely adapted to recognize and respond to threats to survival that come in the form of sudden, dramatic events. Clap your hands and people jump, calling forth some genetically encoded memory of saber-toothed tigers springing from the bush.

'Yet today the primary threats to our collective survival are slow, gradual developments arising from processes that are complex both in detail and in dynamics. The spread of nuclear arms is not an event, nor is the "greenhouse effect", the depletion of the ozone layer, malnutrition and underdevelopment in the Third World, the economic cycles that determine our quality of life, and most of the other large-scale problems in our world.

'Learning organizations themselves may be a form of leverage on the complex system of human endeavors. Building learning organizations involves developing people who learn to see as system thinkers see, who develop their own personal mastery, and who learn how to surface and restructure mental models, collaboratively. Given the influence of organizations in today's world, this may be one of the most powerful steps toward helping us "rewrite the code", altering not just what we think but our predominant ways of thinking. In this sense, learning organizations may be a tool not just for the evolution of organizations, but for the evolution of intelligence.' [p.367]

I want to endorse that insight and yet also to widen it, for the learning organisation exists as one dimension, the systemic, in a multi-dimensional space of integration. It is one meta-discipline among 5 other meta-disciplines which together form one element of a complex hyper-discipline in the evolution of global intelligence.

In the final chapter, entitled 'The Indivisible Whole', Senge gradually distils his symbolism, increases the helicopter perspective and raises the level of integration of the learning system. He tells the story of the astronaut Rusty Schweickart, who actualised one of the early ambitions of Peter Senge, who had himself always wanted to be an astronaut. There is a moving description of Rusty's struggle to find words to express his feelings in space. He recognised that with repetitive orbits his identity was with 'the whole thing', rather than with a sub-entity of the whole:

You look down there and you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you crossed again and again and again. And you don't even see 'em. At that wake-up scene - the Mideast - you know there are hundreds of people killing each other over some imaginary line that you can't see. From where you see it, the thing is a whole, and it's so beautiful. And you wish you could take one from each side in hand and say, "Look at it from this perspective. Look at that. What's important?" [p.370]

So the perspective that provides a way of seeing both sides of all boundaries is provided from the inside of a spherical shell at orbit level. If the integration of parts demands that level of perspective then the integration of the whole requires an even further distance.

'And so a little later on, your friend, again those same neighbors, the person next to you goes to the moon. And now he looks back and sees the Earth not as something big where he can see the beautiful details, but he sees the Earth as a small thing out there. And now that contrast between the bright blue and white Christmas tree ornament and that black sky, that infinite universe, really comes through.

'The size of it, the significance of it - it becomes both things, it becomes so small and fragile, and such a precious little spot in the universe, that you can block it out with your thumb, and you realize that on that small spot, that little blue and white thing is everything that means anything to you. All of history and music, and poetry and art and war and death and birth and love, tears, joy, games, all of it is on that little spot out there that you can cover with your thumb.

'And you realize that that perspective ... that you've changed, that there's something new there. That relationship is no longer what it was... Because now you're no longer inside something with a window looking out at the picture, but now you're out there and what you've got around your head is a goldfish bowl and there are no boundaries. There are no frames, there are no boundaries. [p.370]

Senge noted that Rusty discovered the first principles of systems thinking, not at a rational or intellectual level but at a level of direct experience.

'The earth is an indivisible whole, just as each of us is an indivisible whole. Nature (and that includes us) is not made up of parts within wholes. It is made up of wholes within wholes. All boundaries, national boundaries included, are fundamentally

arbitrary. We invent them and then, ironically, we find ourselves trapped within them.' [p.371]

One of the problems here is that the higher level of integration apparently unifies all sub-levels of differentiation into 'wholes' rather than sub-systems of larger systems and this is a fundamental flaw in the symbolism which Senge is using. The flaw moves on to the final level of symbolism in which the foetal unconscious of the global process emerges. He recounts the way that Rusty Schweickart encountered the 'Gaia' hypothesis which has 'deep roots in many preindustrial cultures such as American Indian cultures' and which 'struck a deep chord in me' says Rusty. He noted that 'I had experienced the earth in a way that I had no way to describe. I had experienced the aliveness of it - of it all'. The imagery of Gaia is essentially foetal/placental and the symbol transmission words are essentially those of placental attachment - roots, chords, deep preverbal resonance, aliveness within some totality.

At the end of a leadership workshop which Senge was conducting and on which Schweickart was a member somebody asked him spontaneously

'Rusty, tell us what it was like up there?' He paused for a long time and when he finally spoke, he said only one thing. "It was like seeing a baby about to be born." [p.371]

Senge concludes his work in the words:

'Something new is happening. And it has to do with it all - the whole.' [p.371]

So at the end of his coda, Senge takes us not to the conclusion, not even toward the beginnings of a conclusion, but perhaps to the conclusion of the beginning. His insight, shared with the astronaut who activated his own deep-rooted ambition, was to perceive the full-term unconscious of the global organism. Perinatal psychodynamics of the global process raise profound questions about the accuracy of the symbolism. Certainly there is global restimulation of perinatal memory. It is as if the species is on the threshold of identifying its foetal regression and corporately breaking through the fixated boundary of the birth trauma, of integrating the defences, annealing the pain, and developing new ways of being in order to survive on this tiny, fragile, global, ecosphere. Perhaps one of the questions is 'What happens to Gaia as the womb-wall ruptures? What does birth of a new world look like? Is it to be a still-birth or a neonatal death?' There is no midwife, no surgeon to perform a caesarean section or to assist with forceps. No embracing mother to welcome the neonate beyond the crisis. The images and mythology of foetal dependency and the enactment of perinatal defences may well prove fatal for Gaia and its dependent content. We have encountered the first contractions and know that the birth is to come, but whether it will be birth or death as yet we know not.