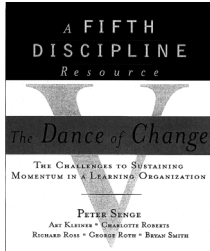




CHANGE AS CHALLENGE: TAKING STOCK OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

BY LAUREN JOHNSON



The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in a Learning Organization

by Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, George Roth, and Bryan Smith

With the publication of *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990, Peter Senge added significant momentum to the growing field of organizational learning (OL). The book presented OL as a dynamic, complex tapestry of five “learning disciplines”: shared vision, personal mastery, team learning, mental models, and systems thinking. In 1994, Senge, along with coauthors Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Bryan Smith, and Richard Ross, published *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, a “how-to” collection of strategies and tools for enhancing capacity in the five disciplines and thereby building a learning organization.

The Dance of Change, scheduled to be published by Currency Doubleday in March 1999, is the next volume in this series. The new fieldbook presents insights on and stories from the OL field gleaned from the last 15 or 20 years of its evolution. The timing of the book’s publication is perfect: As the practice of OL has matured, its three major constituencies—practitioners, capacity builders (or consultants), and theorists—have been able to step back and achieve a “macro-level” perspective on the field, particularly the challenges that have come to light over time. With many years of experience now under their belts, participants in OL

efforts have much wisdom to share.

The Ten Challenges of Change

The Dance of Change contains an array of case studies, essays, and reflections contributed by members of these three constituencies. The various readings are in turn built around the book’s thematic “backbone”: the 10 challenges that people most often encounter when they try to initiate and sustain change in organizations. Specifically, the authors identify three categories of challenges: initiating change, sustaining momentum, and redesigning and rethinking organizational infrastructures and practice.

The 10 “challenges of change” fall into these three categories as follows: During the initiation phase of change, challenge comes in the form of (1) insufficient time, (2) lack of coaching and support, (3) questioning of the relevance of the change, and (4) the perception that managers are

not “walking the talk” behind the change. In sustaining change, primary obstacles include (5) personal fear and anxiety on the part of people affected by the change, (6) difficulties inherent in assessing the impact of the change, and (7) tensions between change agents (“believers”) and people who are not participating in the change effort (“nonbelievers”). Last, in redesigning and rethinking organizational infrastructures so that they support change, people must navigate (8) issues of governance, (9) questions of how to diffuse and leverage new learning, and (10) matters of strategy and purpose (see “Ten Challenges in Organizational Learning”).

Are Change Leaders Drivers or Gardeners?

Given the daunting nature of these challenges, the question of leadership becomes crucial. In simplest terms, what kind of person is best suited to be a change leader? The essays that

[Continued on next page >](#)

TEN CHALLENGES IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The challenges of initiating change

1. “We don’t have time!”
2. “We don’t have help!”
3. “This stuff isn’t relevant!”
4. “The managers aren’t walking their talk!”

The challenges of sustaining momentum

5. “This stuff is frightening!”
6. “It’s not working!”
7. “We’ve got the answer! or “Those ‘change agents’ are acting like a cult!”

The challenges of redesigning and rethinking infrastructure and practice

8. “The head honchos won’t let us do this stuff!”
9. “We keep reinventing the wheel!”
10. “What are we here for, and where are we going?”

introduce *The Dance of Change* address this question and set the context for understanding the book's "challenge" framework. Building on the idea of organizations as living beings, Peter Senge invites change leaders to see themselves as "gardeners" rather than as "drivers" in effecting change. As he explains in a piece titled "The Leadership of Profound Change: Toward an Ecology of Leadership":

"This [leadership model] represents a radical shift from thinking of leaders as heroes at the top who 'drive change.' You drive a car. It is a machine that you control, with the aim of getting to where you want to go. The car takes you there. You do not 'drive' a plant to grow . . . Nor . . . do leaders 'drive' their organization. The organization is a human community. It is a living system, like the plant. . . . There is no one driving it. But there are many tending the garden."

In this same essay, Senge argues that anyone can be a change leader—and, indeed, that everyone *should* take a leadership role in one form or another if change is to endure in an organization. He outlines three kinds of leaders: local line leaders (people who have accountability for results and sufficient authority to undertake changes in the way work is done at their local level); internal networkers or community builders (consultants, people in training or executive development departments, and anyone else participating in "communities of practice"); and executives.

Throughout *The Dance of Change*, the selections reflect and support this understanding of leadership, and represent a broad range of voices. There are pieces from CEOs such as Phil Carroll (formerly of Shell Oil) and Iva Wilson (formerly of Philips Display Components), from frontline practitioners of organizational learning such as Dave Berdish of Ford's Visteon, and from consultants such as Marty Castleberg, who shares a story based on his experiences with Harley-Davidson. There are also a number of theorists who have contributed pieces, including Lotte Bailyn on balancing work and

life and William Isaacs on the habits of thought separating "believers" and "nonbelievers." Finally, the contributors come from all walks of life and from every kind of organization, including some from countries other than the United States. This variety hints at the potential OL has to spread internationally—and the promise it holds for organizations around the globe.

Using *The Dance of Change*

Like *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, *The Dance of Change* is intended to be a practical guide suited for all kinds of readers—and leaders. For one thing, the authors mark different passages with icons indicating what

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type of leader—executive, line, or community builder—might be most interested in those sections.

Moreover, the book does not necessarily have to be read from front to back. Rather, it lends itself to picking and choosing, browsing and "snacking" on whatever strikes the reader as most interesting at the moment. A handful of features (denoted by icons) aid the reader in navigating through the book. *Tool kit*, for example, indicates a practical device or technique. *Solo exercises* help readers grasp the book's content by encouraging them to bring forth an example from their own experience, clarify personal direction, or arrive at an "aha!" *Team exercises* present activities on which groups can work together, with the help of a facilitator or team leader. *Lexicon*

offers "a guide to the roots of the words we use, and the way we use them now." (As the authors explain, "Staking out the precise meaning of words is important in a field like management, where so much jargon is used so loosely.") *Resource* lists recommended books, articles, and so forth. *Roundtable* presents focused conversations among groups of people about certain subjects. *Guiding ideas* offer principles that the authors find meaningful as sources of insight and direction. Finally—and true to *The Fifth Discipline's* thesis that systems thinking is the cornerstone of OL—causal loop diagrams sprinkled throughout the book capture the systemic dynamics generating the behavior patterns being discussed.

Looking to the Future

The Dance of Change raises some pivotal issues for those interested in the future of OL. One particularly relevant question involves the very nature of the growth, spread, and ultimate fate of new ideas. Again, Peter Senge addresses this theme in one of the book's opening essays, "The Life Cycle of Typical Change Initiatives." After listing some of the bleak statistics regarding the life span of management theories, he compares the spread of new ideas with the "s-shaped" growth-and-plateau pattern seen everywhere in nature. Given how universal this pattern is, the burning question becomes, How can OL escape a fate that no other living organism seems able to avoid? For the authors of *The Dance of Change*, the answer will lie in understanding and managing a basic fact of life: the limits to growth that act on all living things—including ideas.

The Dance of Change gives voice to a field that is quite likely hitting its prime as the new millennium dawns. We will have to wait patiently for a subsequent fieldbook to know how OL will look as it advances to the next stages in its maturity. ■

The Dance of Change is available through Pegasus Communications.

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