

# The Fifth Discipline

An Executive Book Summary

By Miles MacFarlane

## Executive Summary

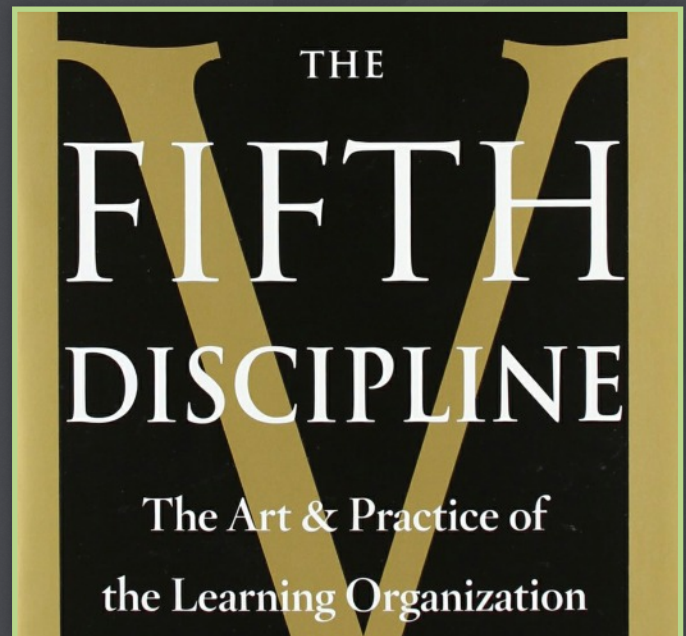
Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* describes how sustainably competitive organizations comprehend the interconnectedness of people, ideas, and their operating context, can identify and treat causal, rather than the symptomatic barriers to learning, and can nurture ongoing reflective practice and open communication throughout the organization.

Called "Systems Thinking", Senge describes the practices through a series of understandings, or "laws" focused on seeing wholes rather than parts. He describes how feedback loops can obscure big-picture structures with small-picture details. Senge illuminates four core disciplines which, when integrated into a cohesive whole using systems thinking, contribute to effective organizational learning.

Finally, he proposes several strategies for building learning organizations building capacity in individuals to the benefit of both themselves and the organization.

Senge's work promotes a vision of organizations as dynamic systems that can grow, respond, and lead change

because individuals are learning and contributing to a body of knowledge and wisdom in response to the needs of the organization. *The Fifth Discipline* describes how to understand and manage the ecosystem's elements on a way that creates effective learning organizations. ◀



## Barriers to Organizational Learning

Tearing apart issues into their component pieces is a common strategy for addressing complex challenges. The problem, Senge suggests, is that we end up looking at, and fixing parts without necessarily appreciating the effect on the whole. Such segmented thinking inclines people to treating symptoms rather than the underlying issues.

In the book, Senge identifies some of the challenges and barriers to becoming an effective learning organization. When personal associations focus on a position rather than a purpose, contributions to the organization are constrained within the positional definitions, knowledge

and skills that could benefit the enterprise may be hidden away.

Looking to lay blame rather than find controllable sources of a problem diverts attention away from identifying internal changes that will reduce the problem in the first place.

When short-term experiences are mistaken for long-term patterns, and slowly-emerging patterns are overlooked, the organization will not adapt.

Finally, believing that the small group of managers has all the wisdom and answers belies the fact that collectively, the rest of the organization also has considerable skill and wisdom. ◀



# Four Core Disciplines

## Building the Learning Organization

Senge identifies four necessary practices and build both individual and that pressures for growth are balanced by or disciplines that, when integrated, organizational capacity. Personal mastery pressures of inertia helps clarify the forces contribute to an effective learning can be promoted but not forced; it is best at play when pursuing goals. Such clarity organization. shared by example and upheld as an lets us embrace discomfort and challenge.

**Personal Mastery:** Ongoing processes of honest personal reflection and inquiry serve to bring reality into sharper focus and where we want to be. Understanding **Mental Models:** Awareness our own biases and assumptions contributes to more honest and (Continued on page 3)

## The Fifth Discipline: Systems Thinking

The Fifth of the disciplines is **Systems Thinking:** are likely to produce hard-pressed resistance. Solutions appreciating that individuals, policies, organizations, rarely come easy; it is tempting to perceive short term decisions, relationships, etc, are interconnected elements in a larger context. gains for longer term change but the effects of an intervention are seldom proximal in time or space to the interventions. Small, carefully targeted, methodical interventions can have a cumulative positive effect when analysis is honest and respectful.

Systems thinking also recognizes that the four core disciplines are integrated and essential parts of a larger approach to organizational learning. While each discipline can be identified and developed in isolation, it is only when they are practiced as a whole that they contribute to an organization's ability to learn and evolve. Senge describes several systems archetypes (see page 4 of this executive summary) that identify common scenarios in organizations.

There are several challenges and common experiences to systems thinking explored in the book. For example, creating new problems due to "solutions" that are poorly designed, or targeted at the wrong thing. Interventions that are hard-pressed into action

**Systems thinking is a ...  
framework for seeing  
interrelationships rather  
than things, for seeing  
patterns of change rather  
than static "snapshots."**

- Peter Senge  
*The Fifth Discipline*, p.68

includes a way to triage problem scenarios, strategies for intervening, and an illustrative short story for each archetype. ◀



Personal Mastery



Team Learning



Mental Models



Shared Visions

Four Core Disciplines



# “Organizations

that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization.”

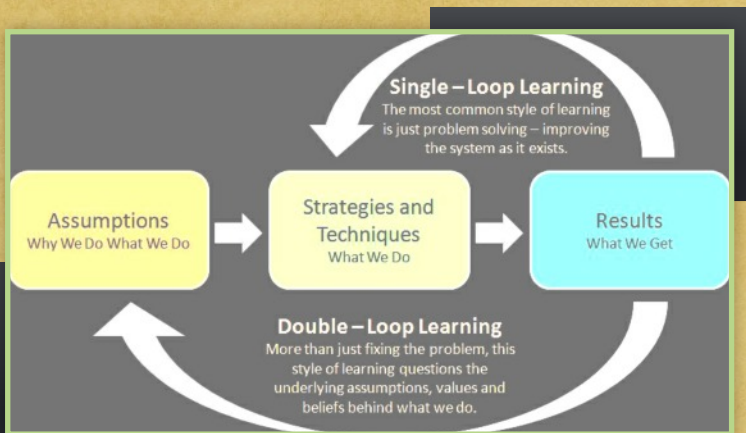
- Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, p.3

## Building the Learning Organization (con’t)

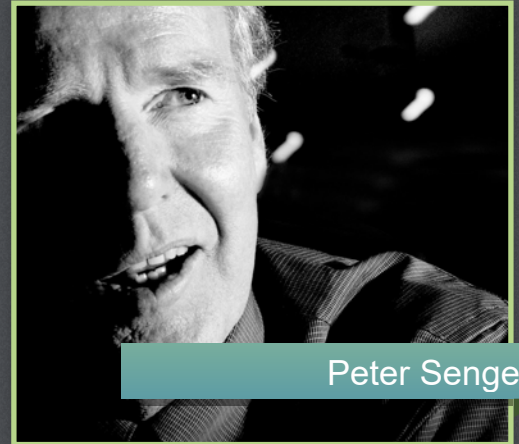
accurate reflections and identification of underlying issues. They can be hard to identify because they are the lens through which we see and interpret the world. Openness to alternative interpretations, different perspectives of the present and possible futures broaden the scope of understanding. Such practices promote ongoing reflection on our personal and organizational mental models,

**Shared Vision:** Having a common understanding of a desired future is a powerful motivator for individuals in an organization promoting a shared identity and a target for effort and energy. Organizational visions that build and capitalize on individual visions elicit from employees a higher degree of deep and meaningful investment in meeting organizational goals.

**Team Learning:** As a focused group, individuals learn more quickly and effectively than they would on their own. Leveraging the wisdom of the group is a powerful way to grow capacity within the organization as well as in the individual members. As personal interests are directed toward organizational goals, the group’s energy gains strength. Dialogue: open sharing and exploration of ideas (in contrast to proposing and defending a position) makes thinking visible helping expose assumptions, clarify challenges, and understand issues while growing understanding and skills. ◀



Loop diagram accounting for assumptions in decision-making.



Peter Senge

is a Senior Lecturer at MIT’s Sloan School of Management and founding member of the Society for Organizational Learning. He holds a B.S. in engineering, an M.S. in social systems modeling, and a Ph.D. in management from MIT.  
(Photo credit: Huffington Post)

### Influences

Throughout *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge refers to Chris Argyris who, with Chris Schön in the 1970s, proposed a model for systems thinking and organizational learning. They put forward that existing authoritarian and hierarchical organizational models were prone to taking simplistic solutions to complex problems often due to a misalignment of practiced and espoused values (Argyris, 1976, 1995).

They acknowledge that while some problems can be addressed with a single loop of reasoning (one problem for one solution), they submit that most problems exist in a larger context, not the least of which is the policy and value environment.

Argyris and Schön proposed “double loop learning” a more holistic and iterative approach to decision making and problem solving. This, they suggested, would create knowledge, build capacity, and afford members a greater sense of agency within the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Double loop learning is a prominent feature in *The Fifth Discipline*.

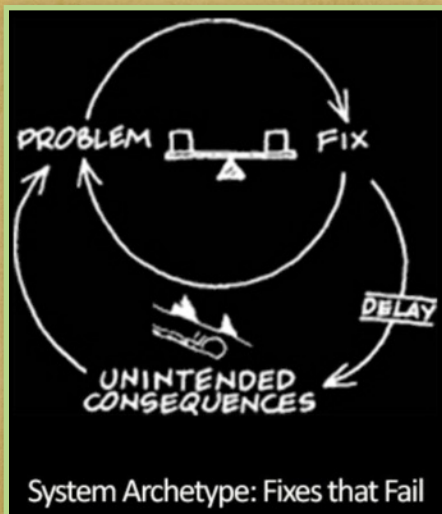
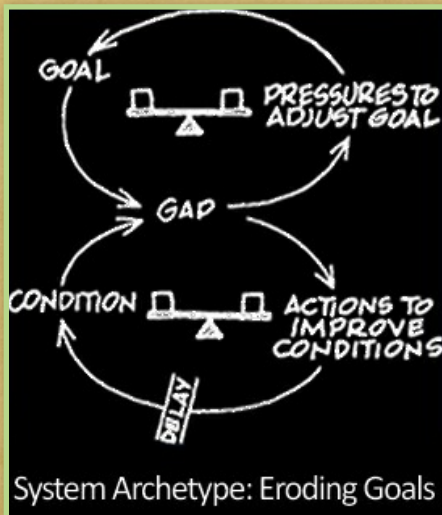
- Argyris, C. (1976). Single-loop and double-loop models in research on decision making. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21(3), 363–375.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1978). Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective. Reiss.
- Argyris, C. (1995). Action science and organizational learning. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 10(6), 20–26.



## On the speed of learning:

"...most of the time, things do not turn out as we expect. But the potential value of unexpected developments is rarely tapped. Instead, when things turn out contrary to our expectations, we go immediately into problem-solving mode and react, or just try harder—without taking the time to see whether this unexpected development is telling us something important about our assumptions.

p.288



**“Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs.”**

- Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, p.129



Scan this QR code to find The Fifth Discipline on Amazon

# System Archetypes

Practical application of systems thinking requires an understanding of the context and interactions at play in the scenario. Senge uses loop diagrams to illustrate these common organizational behaviour patterns offering a framework for understanding, and strategies for addressing them.

1. **Balancing processes with delay** - accounting for gaps between actions and results will moderate interventions for more controlled responses.

2. **Limits to growth** - anticipating and planning for potential internal and external barriers and challenges can mitigate or even eliminate the hazard.

3. **Shifting the burden** - treating symptoms often creates a problem elsewhere and ignores the underlying issue. Take care to identify root causes and monitor interventions for desired effect.

4. **Eroding goals** - faced with challenges it is tempting to lower expectations. Adjusting to current capabilities negates the need for growth. Do not abandon the vision when it is needed most. (See diagram on the left)

5. **Escalation** - can occur when competing interests battle for position. While creative tension and diversity of opinion can be value, escalation can

be damaging when actions are no longer aligned with achieving organizational goals.

6. **Success to the successful** - giving the best jobs and resources to the highest performers creates a self-reinforcing loop and little capacity is grown in areas where it is needed.

7. **Tragedy of the commons** - parts of an organization can sometimes operate without consideration of the effect on the whole. Shared understandings of all roles and their interactions mitigate this problem.

8. **Fixes that fail** - a quick response to a challenge may only be a temporary patch that does little to fix the underlying problem. This is especially prone to defensive position taking by advocates of the solution. (See diagram on the left).

9. **Growth and under-investment** - complacency or over-estimating organizational health can stunt growth or lead to a loss of momentum. A habit of performance analysis, organizational information flows, and external indicators help keep the organization self-aware. ◀

For further reading:

Braun, W. (2002). The System Archetypes. In The Systems Modeling Workbook (pp. 1–26). Retrieved from <https://kumu.io/stw/systems-kele#systems-archetypes>



“... systems thinking is a sensibility -  
for the subtle interconnectedness  
that gives living systems their  
unique character.”

- Peter Senge  
*The Fifth Discipline*, p. 69



## Critical Evaluation

A quarter century after its writing, Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* remains one of the most important and widely cited books on organizational learning and systems thinking. Drawing disparate ideas from management and decision making research before him, Senge weaves together an eminently readable text that points to a north star while illuminating the pitfalls on the path ahead.

Rather than a clear set of management practices, Senge offers a way to view organization which has made his work applicable to any situation where people have to interact in order to achieve both shared and disparate goals.

As one of the most recognized and influential management books, Senge himself feels as though little has changed though people are more aware than they once were about organizational complexity (Senge, Schneider, & Wallace, 2014). Reading *The Fifth Discipline*, one feels as though much of it is obvious, or “common sense” having, no doubt, experienced some of the system archetypes outlined in the

book. Systems thinking is rightly put forth as a discipline, a skill that is willed to consciousness and practiced, rather like diet and exercise are a matter of discipline. Knowing is not doing, and knowledge is little without discipline.

The principles in *The Fifth Discipline* appear to transcend cultural differences; the book has appeared on best seller lists throughout the world. Focusing on relationships and interconnectedness, the book was an early voice in promoting collaborative approaches to learning and the growth of learning communities. That the book is still top of mind when thinking about must-read management material speaks to the desire among people and organization to adopt the principles. This is one of those books that, no matter how often you read it, the reader will come away with new, deeper understandings of their own workplace. ◀

Senge, P., Schneider, F., & Wallace, D. (2014). Peter Senge on the 25th Anniversary of *The Fifth Discipline*. *Reflections*, 14(3), 1–13.

## Discussion Questions

- How realistic is it to have a systems view that considers such a broad range of influencing factors? Is it more reasonable to address specific controllable issues rather than trying to wrangle an entire system?
- Are the principles in *The Fifth Discipline* applicable to any enterprise? Would a stable and well-functioning organization benefit as much as one in crisis?
- How might an organization sustain its learning approach when staff turn-over is high?
- To what extent should an organization invest in an employee's individual interests and learning? How much influence should an organization exert over the employee's learning focus?
- Consider industries that rely on stable, predictable outcomes, like the fast food industry. How important to the organization is it for the frontline employees to exercise systems thinking and participate in a learning culture?
- Is it unrealistic to expect that individuals will check their assumptions and expose biases to the larger group when exploring issues? Can a true picture of any situation ever be realized?

# content & structure



## Theory and Application in Five Sections

**T**he *Fifth Discipline* is organized into five sections. Most chapters include a description and explanation of the concept, examples of the principle or discipline in action, identification of potential pitfalls, and strategies for implementation.

**Part I - “How our actions create our reality ... and how we can change it”** describes the capacity we have to address the real issues and grow into a learning organization

**Part II - “The fifth discipline - the cornerstone of the learning organization”** describes the influences on systems thinking and how to use it to best effect.

**Part III - “The core disciplines: Building the learning organization”** is a detailed exploration of personal mastery, mental models, team learning, and shared visions.

**Part IV - “Reflections from practice”** explores big questions about the fifth discipline, particularly organizational reforms that will accommodate systems thinking.

**Part V - “Coda”** explores the influence of current practice on future realities, offers visual representations of the barriers to learning, and an exploration of the practices, principles, and essence of each of the five disciplines.



## Disciplines: 5

1. Personal Mastery
2. Mental Models
3. Building Shared Vision
4. Team Learning
5. Systems Thinking

## Levels of the Learning

### Disciplines: 3

1. Practices: what you do
2. Principles: guiding ideas and insights
3. Essences: the state of being of those with high levels of mastery in the discipline

## Strategies for Building Learning Organizations: 8

1. Integrating learning and working
2. Starting where you are with whoever is there
3. Becoming bi-cultural
4. Creating practice fields
5. Connecting with the core of the business
6. Building learning communities
7. Working with "The Other"
8. Developing learning infrastructures

## Leadership Roles in Learning Organizations : 3

1. Leader as designer
2. Leader as teacher
3. Leader as steward

## Learning Disabilities: 7

1. I am my position
2. The enemy is out there
3. The illusion of taking charge
4. The fixation on events
5. The parable of the boiled frog
6. The delusion of learning from experience
7. The myth of the management team



THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE  
BY THE NUMBERS

## Laws of System Thinking: 11

1. Today's problems come from yesterday's "solutions"
2. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back
3. Behaviour grows better before it grows worse
4. The easy way out usually leads back in
5. The cure can be worse than the disease
6. Faster is slower
7. Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space
8. Small changes can produce big results - but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious
9. You can have your cake and eat it too - but not at once
10. Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two elephants
11. There is no blame

## Guidelines for Enrolment and Commitment: 3

1. Be enrolled yourself
2. Be on the level (honest)
3. Let the other person choose

## System Archetypes: 9

1. Balancing processes with delay
2. Limits to growth
3. Shifting the burden
4. Eroding goals
5. Escalation
6. Success to the successful
7. Tragedy of the commons
8. Fixes that fail
9. Growth and under-investment

# The Fifth Discipline by the numbers



Miles R. MacFarlane

Queen's University  
803 Organizational Leadership

miles.macfarlane@queensu.ca  
[www.milestomes.com](http://www.milestomes.com)