



To lead others to change, executives must first change themselves.

Executives and the Discipline of Personal Mastery

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Peter Senge was a humble messenger. When he published The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization in 1990 he said the ideas in the book were not his, that many of them were a century old. Dr. Senge insisted that he was merely a recording secretary.

Nevertheless, the modest professor from MIT struck a deep chord with American business. There is agreement today that Senge was onto something, that the learning organization isn't just another pretty phrase, and that organizations composed of people who aren't actively learning together probably won't be around long enough to fret about it.

All of this has been received as profound truth. But it seems to us it should go without saying, because whatever the alternative is to a "learning organization," it can't have a very flattering name. Still, such is the present economic condition of the land that something about the subject needed saying, Dr. Senge said it, and we're glad he did.

In the movie "Scent of a Woman" there is a scene that subtly—to us poignantly—reflects on this aspect of our times. The colonel and his young aide are getting out of a cab in front of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, pinnacle, declares the colonel, of all things civilized. Looming over the elegant tableau is the Pan Am building. The proud name still blazes in the night, but alas it's only the tombstone of a once-great company.

Learn or die. That is the message. We all know the grim statistics on the life expectancy of U.S. corporations—few survive past the age of 40. It's like an actuarial table from the Dark Ages, and a sad commentary on the status of learning in the nation's workplace.

Even so, half a decade after Peter Senge added the learning organization to America's business vocabulary, and while many business leaders are working hard at making elements of the learning organization a reality, nowhere that we know has an entire learning organization gotten off the ground. Why?

Before giving you our theory, let us review a couple of definitions. First, what is a learning organization? Senge called it one "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire..." etc.

In our less eloquent way, we think of the learning organization as a place where people sit up, pay attention, talk freely about what they learn. They do this because operational phenomena—values, systems, policies, procedures—invite them to, reward them for it. On the other hand, the low-life-expectancy sort of organization expects employees to, in effect, sit down, shut up and hang on 'til the ride is over. The real difference between the two is that in the learning organization individual and

collective learning amount to a business within a business. The fruits of this learning enterprise—the Gross Learning Product, if you will—lets the organization continuously anticipate and adjust to changes in the environment. And without the help of gazillion dollar re-engineering efforts, either.

Senge identified personal mastery as one of the five disciplines of the learning organization. We think of it as the cornerstone. You can't reach out and touch an organization because it is a ghostly thing, an invisible repository of will and competence; organizations exist in the thin ether of our actions and values. But there is nothing abstract about the people who make them up. They dream, worry, attend meetings, call on customers, phone home. You can weigh them, poll them during elections, clock them at the mile. They're real. It makes sense that when an organization learns, the locus of that learning is the individual, and groups of individuals. That's why we consider personal mastery the key.

We think personal mastery is another way of saying learning, but we must be clear about the kind of learning we mean. It's not just the accumulation of technical and functional information we're referring to, but its wise and beneficial use. This is a monumental qualification, of course, because it introduces the issues of self-knowledge and personal values.

Here, we believe, is where you will find the answer to the riddle of the learning organization, and the reason the learning organization as a whole, functioning entity is still on the drawing board.

When he was an old man, one of the great civic leaders of the 20th century, an attorney named Ben Kizer, observed that, "The last thing we learn about ourselves is our effect." That's what we're talking about. Personal mastery entails honing our effectiveness in the world through brave self-observation. It also involves creating a high tension energy field in one's life by facing the truth of current reality and boldly envisioning something different, a future of one's own choosing. The creative tension between these two poles is where the juice of mastery comes from.

Sages down through the ages have lined up to testify to the virtues of the examined life and to lament what an unwieldy thing is a mind left untended. Consider the observations of three.

"Those who know much about others may be smart, but those who understand themselves are even wiser"—Lao Tsu.

"You could drop a leaflet or a Hubbard squash on the head of any person in any land and you would almost certainly hit a brain that was whirling in small, conventional circles. There is something about the human mind that keeps it well within the confines of the parish, and only one outlook in a million is nonparochial"—E.B. White.

"We have met the enemy and he is us"—Pogo.

We happen to believe that the "something" E.B. White was talking about actually amounts to a biological imperative faced by humanity, and that the imperative is as inescapable in the organization as elsewhere. Here's why.

Medical research reveals that within the first six months of life the human brain doubles in neural capacity, doubling again by age four. No other creature on the planet experiences comparable brain expansion. The body has about a hundred billion nerve cells, and every time the brain thinks a thought, a

record of the transaction is preserved in the archives of muscle, blood, bone and organ. Experience shapes us. Events compose our lives.

Throughout childhood, the human brain is a frenzied construction site where neural structures are assembled in response to stimulus. During this time, countless circuits in the brain are rushed to completion. In the course of construction some connections are bolstered into massive conduits of habit. Others are systematically diminished, sometimes even dismantled.

This is not metaphysical speculation, but part of the best current explanation science has to offer about what makes us tick. It is this process that lays the foundation for what Dr. Robert B. Livingston, a leading brain researcher and former medical school faculty member at Stanford, Yale, Harvard, and UCLA, calls the human “world view.” Each of us has one, says Dr. Livingston, that is the highly subjective image of reality presented to us by our senses, senses created by the interplay of heredity and the impressionistic sculpture of our life experience. But that’s not all.

Livingston reports that the intensive brain development of early childhood is followed by an amazing event. During a single three-week period of adolescence, power to the construction site of the brain is drastically cut back. The brain’s metabolism falls to half its previous rate, and we are “biologically wired,” as Livingston says, with the conclusions, attitudes, suspicions, biases, inklings and anxieties of our most impressionistic years. This occurs to every individual, and it so profoundly impacts the way we lead our lives it might actually be the single most important event in all of human history. We say this because it locks us into a way of being that will govern us more forcefully, and more ruthlessly, than any tyrant unless we learn to intervene.

Livingston concludes that this “biological wiring,” this deceptive “knowing” about the world—our pig-headedness if you prefer—could threaten humanity more than any other factor. The reason, he explains, is because it can lead to dysfunctionally rigid ways of perceiving and interacting with the world around us. It can cause brilliant companies like Pan Am to become extinct, fuel holy wars, result in economic systems that jeopardize ecosystems, incline us to misuse technology in the waging of wars that weapons can win but people can’t. The only hope, Livingston has concluded at the end of a long and distinguished career, is for humanity to learn a lesson about itself that has eluded our species so far.

The lesson? We believe personal mastery is as good a name for it as any. Liberating ourselves from the conditioned, automatic responses to life that endlessly loop us into the same frustrations is one of the hardest things anyone can ever attempt. Accepting the need for this is not an admission of inadequacy, but a recognition of what it means to be human. And what it means to be human is to understand that we possess a psyche on which the world has long been at work before we get much of a shot at responding to the world. Dealing with this reality is always worth the effort, because even the smallest successes are immediately rewarded with proportionally greater personal freedom. This, in turn, leads to greater creativity, productivity, satisfaction, joy, expanded life possibilities.

Besides, though the task is difficult, people regularly accomplish even tougher goals. Changing one’s world view, says Livingston, is actually easier than overcoming chemical dependency on booze or drugs, and people lick those deadly habits all the time. One person inside an organization—say a CEO—on the trail of personal mastery would be good news for that organization. (We think of ripples spreading from a pebble dropped in a pond.) Two people would be even better. And the implications of ten people struggling with the ways of personal mastery starts to get exciting because of the dynamics of critical mass.

We hold this truth to be self-evident: The cumulative rate at which individuals within the organization change themselves in the virtuous ways of personal mastery defines the rate at which the organization itself can change. How could it be otherwise?

The real question is, how do you practice personal mastery? The answer is that the biological and psychological force of habit is so great that you must have a discipline. You need what amounts to a technology for harnessing the incomprehensible power of an organ—your brain—that equals the switching capacity of the entire U.S. telephone network and that can store 100 trillion bits of information, power that dwarfs the largest computer. This is challenge enough at the personal level. In the organization, the challenge is compounded, not just by numbers, but for the simple reason that no one can choose the pursuit of personal mastery for us; we must choose it for ourselves. Personal mastery, make no mistake, is *very* personal, revolving as it does around the unique mechanisms of the mind.

Nevertheless, we are convinced that this is a dragon from which corporate America dare no longer flee. Let us frame the challenge this way.

1. Because of the rapidity of technological change and global competition, becoming a learning organization is now the real ante of doing business.
2. The pursuit of personal mastery by individuals is the essence of the learning organization.
3. Unfortunately, the practice of personal mastery by a company's employees remains a taboo subject for management. A manager who addresses an employee: "Excuse me, but I think you need to improve your personal mastery" will likely be as welcome as a religious pamphleteer at the doorstep on Saturday morning. As Peter Drucker once said, managers have no business messing with their employees' minds.

In a sense, however, we must disagree with Professor Drucker. While we believe that church and state should be separate and that companies shouldn't stick their noses into the private lives of employees, we don't think you can actually separate work from the person. The general manager of the Four Seasons Olympic Hotel in Seattle once corroborated this view when he explained to us why his company screens new-hires with exquisite care. "We can teach people what to do," he said, "but not what to be."

The notion that we have a work life and a personal life is something we consider to be a dangerous illusion. We have one mind, one body, one spirit, and we take them with us wherever we go—wherever you go, there you are. And messing with each other's minds is a lot of what we do. It may even constitute the majority of human affairs. Every time a manager says, "Thank you" or "You did it wrong again" to an employee, the manager is messing with the employee's mind. Every bonus paid, every new team assembled, every reorganization effort is an exercise in messing with minds. Our advice: do it responsibly.

How? By practicing personal mastery yourself. Your practice will be more forceful than any sermon you could ever preach on the subject. And happily, the discipline of it will almost inevitably confine you to constructive, ethical interaction with others.

The personal mastery technology we propose in our book, *Profit From Experience: How to make the most of your learning and your life* (Bard & Stephen, Austin, Texas), rests on four adaptive skills: 1) Raising consciousness; 2) Imagining; 3) Framing & re-framing; 4) Integrating new perspectives. Here's the explanation we offer:

“Raising consciousness means, not just thinking, but thinking *about* thinking, noticing—and managing—the workings of your mind so your mind won’t run away with your life like a startled horse.

“When you *imagine*, you create a mental picture—the most vivid image you can—of an outcome you desire. Does it work? You bet it does, and you do it all the time. If you’re typical, however, most of the imagining you do goes by another name. Worry. This most common form of imagining leads not to something you want but to something you don’t, and it works depressingly well.

“Framing and reframing form the very foundation of the human experience. They are the essence of personal freedom. They are about interpreting the world, making meaning, assigning significance to the events of life. When two thousand years ago the Greek Stoic Epictetus noted that it is not the events of life that matter but our opinion of them, he was talking about framing and reframing. You don’t have to think of anything in any particular way. You can think of green as white if you wish. But some ways of thinking about things are more helpful than others. Learning to frame and reframe means learning to see things in the most helpful light, that’s all.

“When Robert Livingston refers to changing one’s world view he is describing what happens when you integrate new perspectives. What we see depends on where we stand. And where we stand—that is, the view of the world our senses present to us—is profoundly influenced by the biases of our family of origin and the hand fate dealt us. Thank heaven we’re not stuck with just one world view. We can get a new one anytime merely by learning to integrate the perspectives of others. In this sense, the points of view of other people rank among life’s most priceless gifts.”

If this is beginning to sound esoteric, be assured it isn’t. In fact, the irony of personal mastery is that it rests on practices that are deceptively mundane. In our book, we lay out a 21 day series of essays and exercises that methodically engage the reader in raising consciousness, imagining, framing and reframing, and integrating new perspectives. We have received enough feedback in workshops and executive coaching sessions where we have presented these methods to know that their effectiveness is virtually guaranteed to those who earnestly apply them. But in thinking about personal mastery and its application in the organization, two paradoxes have become clear to us.

The first is that the actual steps to personal mastery are so straight forward that it’s tempting to think about them but not actually take them. This is like expecting to flatten your stomach by reading about sit-ups.

The second paradox is that maybe personal mastery can’t be taught—at least not like computer skills. It can only be modeled. As we conceive it, what those practicing personal mastery do is, notice their mental models and change them as needed—not easy. They dream in living color about the results they want, which takes passion. Based on good will and high purpose, they assign not knee-jerk reactions, but the most constructive interpretation to the events of their lives. And they respect and incorporate the useful ideas of others—genuine curiosity and humility are the keys.

It probably is not possible for someone to engage in these activities without impacting events around them, and without creating powerful and effective relationships with others. But any words someone pursuing personal mastery could speak about these things would necessarily be pale next to the things themselves. The story of Pinocchio comes to mind, in which it was the master’s love, and the behavior of love, that brought the puppet to life. Could it be that way with personal mastery, too? In other words,

only to the extent we are willing to step into these notions and give them the form of life do they hold potential to shape our own destinies and those of the organizations we form.

To the typical CEO, to the typical manager, inside your typical organization, we suspect all this is a matter of considerable importance today. So many companies now are trying to change themselves from the outside-in, by re-engineering new organizational forms into existence in the hope that structure alone equals performance. We doubt that it does, believing instead that the catalyst missing from such efforts is the inside-out change offered by personal mastery. We doubt that the best team players can be made by teaching the external strategies of teamwork alone. To be constructive members of a team, people must examine their attitudes about collaborating with others, resolving conflict, coping with mistakes (their own and others'), dealing with anger and fear, etc. That comes from the never-ending pursuit of personal mastery.

We have one final speculation to offer about the promise of personal mastery in the workplace. When the leaders of an organization sincerely embrace personal mastery themselves, they will automatically begin shifting the parent/child relationship between management and workforce to adult/adult relationships. While the former is still the dominant organizational paradigm, it's the latter that holds the power to drive truly empowered workers and an organization that really is capable of continuous learning and fluid response to a dynamic marketplace. Think about it.

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