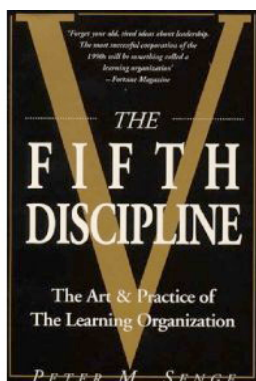




# The Fifth Discipline

The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization



The Fifth Discipline is one of those books that transports the reader into a world where what happens below the surface of organisational life becomes clear and accessible. It is a seminal book for anyone interested in [Systems Thinking](#) as it is applied to organisations.

Author Peter Senge introduces us to the idea that beneath the apparent chaos of our every day existence there lie a small number of [patterns](#) that seem to recur irrespective of the people involved or the particulars of the situation. Through the guise of 'The Beer Game' he shows how people working together form social 'systems' and that these systems have certain qualities that can be discerned and predicted. These patterns or [archetypes](#) give fantastic insight into cycles of

boom and bust, fixes that are doomed to fail, how we shift problems to create new problems, how conflicts escalate and how we denude resources without realising it. The news is full of stories that fit these patterns and so too are our organisations.

In addition to nature's patterns Senge introduces the reader to the five disciplines needed to build the eponymous 'Learning Organisation'. He begins with the notion of [mental models](#); how we each hold a unique model of what is happening and why we generate so much potential for misunderstanding. Tools for sharing our mental models include The Ladder of Inference, The Left Hand Column, Reflection, Inquiry and Advocacy among others. These tools allow us to locate small points of [leverage](#) that can be used to create large changes within our system.

[Personal Mastery](#) deals with maintaining the Creative Tension between what we want and our current reality whilst at the same time overcoming our limiting self-beliefs. Anyone who has ever tried to achieve anything of note within an organisational context will recognise the challenges. Senge provides the framework within which to overcome them.

Building a [Shared Vision](#) transforms what may be an individual vision developed in Personal Mastery into a vision shared by members of the entire organisation. Rather than a top down vision created on a management away day, he advocates shifting leadership style to a more involving, shared mode where the vision is co-created by all.

As the team begins to bring the vision into being there is huge potential for individuals to go off on a tangent and do their own thing. The phrase "It's like herding cats" was made for this experience. [Team Learning](#) is the antidote to such dysfunction and Senge introduces the concept of Dialogue as the path to learning together. Dialogue, which merits a book all to itself, is achieved through the four disciplines of Listening, Suspending, Voicing and Respecting.

The [Learning Organisation](#) hints at the potential within the book. How much more effectively would an organisation achieve its goals if its members had a basic grounding in the five disciplines that underpin the Learning Organisation?

This is a fantastic book to begin your exploration of another world. If you ever came out of a meeting wondering what just happened there is every chance the answer lies somewhere in this book.

Whilst it is often the first book people turn to when thinking about Systems Thinking it is not the last word. First published in 1990, there have been amazing developments in systemic thinking and the complexity sciences that take these ideas to another level, many of which we will be reviewing in the coming months.