Evaluation of Peter Senge’s Learning Organization

Joanne Deitsch

UMUC

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Joanne Deitsch, 20 Vine Street, #1543, Lansdale, PA 19446. E-mail: joanne@joannedeitsch.com

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**Introduction**

This paper evaluates Peter Senge’s Learning Organization mangement theory. The student author presents a summary of the Learning Organization. A literature review to research and evaluate the Learning Organization in relation to the advancement of management theory and the relevance to today’s distance education organizations concludes the paper.

**Summary of Peter Senge’s Learning Organization**

Senge challenges organizations to develop five disciplines to transform into a Learning Organization (Training & Development, 1991). “His precepts boil down to the assertions that people should put aside their old ways of thinking (mental models), learn to be open with others (personal mastery), understand how their company really works (systems thinking), form a plan everyone can agree on (shared vision), and then work together to achieve that vision (team learning)” (Dumaine, 1994, para. 11). Senge views each discipline as equally important (Training & Development, 1991).

There are a number of tools related to Learning Organizations (Dumaine, 1994). Workers use the ladder of inference to reveal underlying assumptions to explore existing mental models (Dumaine, 1994). The left-hand, right-hand columns reveal personal biases related to existing mental models (Dumaine, 1994). The causal loop helps workers to map an organization’s systems and encourages systems thinking (Dumaine, 1994).

Movement towards a Learning Organization involves personal change and embracing systems thinking (Dumaine, 1994). A “deep intent to transform the prevailing organizational culture or the nature of work itself or people’s relationship to their work could have amazing results” (Senge, Schneider, & Wallace, 2014). Efforts to apply the five disciplines without this intent usually do not result in a changed organization (Senge et al., 2014).

**Advancement of Understanding of Leadership/Management**

Senge’s Learning Organization created a new understanding of management. The Learning Organization focus on teams set the theory apart from existing management theory (Senge et al., 2014). While not all the disciplines are new, this is a case of the sum of the whole are more than the individual parts (Training & Development, 1991).

Echoes of The Fifth Discipline reverberate in new theories such as Dan Pontefract’s *Flat Army* (2018). Pontefract (2018) advocates a “collaborative, connected and participative leadership framework” (para. 5) similar to the Learning Organization. Pontefract’s common purpose and Senge’s shared vision are different phrases for the same concept (Pontefract, 2018; Training & Development, 1991).

**Relevance**

Senge’s Learning Organization are still relevant today based on organizational usage to maintain a competitive advantage. Business giants such as Ford, Federal Express, and Intel worked to transform into learning organizations (Dumaine, 1994). These organizations embraced a “compelling vision of an organization made up of employees skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge. These people could help their firms cultivate tolerance, foster open discussion, and think holistically and systemically. Such learning organizations would be able to adapt to the unpredictable more quickly than their competitors could” (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008, para. 2).

As organizations move from the work of the 20th Century that are rewarded for efficiently following directions (Kiechel, 2012) to the knowledge work of the 21st Century that requires intellectual expertise (Van Dam, 2012), management theories such as Senge’s Learning Organizations that empower employees rather than regulate employees are needed. The reception of The Fifth Discipline has been outstanding with over a million copies sold since the initial publication (Smith, 2001). The Harvard Business Review in 1997 identified The Fifth Discipline as one of the seminal management books in the 20th Century (Smith, 2001).

Senge’s Learning Organizations are particularly relevant to distance education organizations. Course development teams are a major component of distance education organizations (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Per Senge, teams are “the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations; unless the team can learn, the organization cannot learn” (Training & Development, 1991, p. 40). Public Schools have applied the five disciplines successfully (Senge et al., 2014).

**Conclusion**

Peter Senge’s theory brought the importance teams to the forefront of management theory. The team focus required for successful distance education organizations makes this learning theory particularly relevant to inform practice. The combination of five disciplines and related tools can transform organizations that are intentional in pursuing a new way of doing business.

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