



Thoughts from Linda:

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook
*Strategies and Tools for Building
A Learning Organization*

**Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts
Richard Ross and Byran Smith
1994**

I love this field guide and have found myself turning to it over the years as much as any book in my library. It is filled with useful tools for building cultures of collaboration, my own field of play, and provides practical tools for consultants and leaders alike.

This is an older book, published in 1994 and followed the 1990 book, [The Fifth Discipline](#), by Peter Senge, a well-known systems thinker, scientist, professor, and organizational development consultant. The book itself gained notoriety in the 1990s and was identified by *Harvard Business Review* as "one of the seminal management books of the previous 75 years."

This book is not to be confused with the original as it is the 'Field Guide' that supports the theories espoused in the earlier work and provides practical, easy-to-grasp tools for practitioners and organizational leaders aspiring to become systems leaders and build learning organizations.

The concept of a 'field guide' for organizational development was based on a practice used in other disciplines, such as architecture, for example, where there was a definitive book, developed by experts, on techniques with the well-accepted *Architectural Graphic Standards* or for the medical profession where the *Physicians' Desk Reference* provided a useful format and source of quick information. This book was created before the days of information easily located on the internet and, of course, far before AI made almost everything possible to find and use.

Even then, the authors noted that the emerging field (as of the 1990s) of 'learning organizations' was much younger, most likely taking years or decades of work to compile such an integrated source. Fortunately, in the 30 years since this field guide

was published, there is today an abundance of material available ranging from books to documented field work as explained via YouTube, TED Talks, blogs/podcasts, and literary papers and journals devoted to the field.

And still, I often turn to this field guide as a most valuable tool for some project I'm involved with or some activity where I think a tool from this guide would prove useful for others.

The book is a compilation of notes, reflections, and exercises 'from the field' with 172 pieces of writing by 67 authors. There are stories, guiding ideas, graphical renditions of concepts and theories, and pragmatic exercises geared toward helping the reader in their transformation journey. It is divided into eight Chapters: *Getting Started*, *Systems Thinking*, *Personal Mastery*, *Mental Models*, *Shared Vision*, *Team Learning*, *Areas of Practice* and *Frontiers*. The book is easy to traverse, with margin icons for quick reference.

Senge framed the core of the 'learning organization' work into five what he called 'learning disciplines'—i.e., lifelong study and practice programs. "They are:

1. **Personal Mastery**—learning to expand our capacity to create the results we most desire and creating an organizational environment that encourages all its members to develop themselves toward their chosen goals and purposes.
2. **Mental Models**—reflecting upon, continually clarifying, and improving our internal pictures of the world and seeing how they shape our actions and decisions.
3. **Shared Vision**—building a sense of commitment in a group by developing shared images of the future we seek to create and the principles and guiding practices by which we hope to get there.
4. **Team Learning**—transforming conversational and collective thinking skills so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of individual members' talents.
5. **Systems Thinking**—a way of thinking about and a language for describing and understanding the forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline helps us see how to change systems more effectively and act more in tune with the larger natural and economic world processes."

In the field book, the authors lay out tools and methods of systems thinking called 'system dynamics' as developed by Professor Jay Forrester and his colleagues at MIT. The tools and methods described in this chapter include links and loops, archetypes,

and stock and flow modeling, all of which have their roots in the system dynamics approach that uses feedback mechanisms to explore systemic interrelationships of any issue in a way that addresses the whole of the issue.

The chapter on Systems Thinking offers a tutorial on System Dynamics. My friend and colleague, Dr. Jim Hines, also of MIT and a protégé of Jay Forrester, once told me, "Linda, system dynamics is more important than the English language!" After working with Jim for over a decade and participating in many System Dynamics sessions with him and his teams, I may just agree! This book makes the discipline more understandable and offers step-by-step examples that break down what can sound mysterious at first.

Senge's "11 Laws of System Thinking" apply. They include:

1. Today's problems come from yesterday's "solutions."
2. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.
3. Behavior 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 all at once.
10. Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.
11. There is no blame.

Dr. Senge addresses the question: "How do we learn to create learning organizations?"

"How do you know what to do first, second, or third in thinking strategically about building learning organizations?"

At its core, learning organizations build great teams – the trust, the relationships, the acceptance, the synergy, and the results they achieve. It has a strong ability to learn, adjust, and change in response to new realities. It can alter functions and departments when demanded by changes in the work environment or by poor performance. The distinguishing characteristics of a learning organization include a learning culture, a

spirit of flexibility and experimentation, people orientation, continuous system-level learning, knowledge generation and sharing, and critical, systemic thinking.

When we look more closely at the development of such teams, we see that people are changed, often profoundly. There is a deep learning cycle.

Team members develop new skills and capabilities which alter what they can do and understand. As new capabilities develop, so too do new awareness and sensibilities. Over time, as people start to see and experience the world differently, new beliefs and assumptions begin to form, which enables further development of skills and capabilities.

This deep learning cycle constitutes the essence of a learning organization – the development not just of new capacities but of fundamental shifts of mind, individually and collectively. The five basic learning disciplines are how this deep learning cycle is activated. Sustained commitment to the disciplines keeps the cycle going. When this cycle begins to operate, the resulting changes are significant and enduring.

The real work of building learning organizations occurs within a "shell," an architecture.

What makes up the architecture?

- Guiding Ideas
- Theory, methods, and tools.
- Innovations in infrastructure.

Without guiding ideas, there is no passion, no overarching sense of direction or purpose.

Without theory, methods, and tools, people cannot develop the new skills and capabilities required for deep learning.

Without innovations in infrastructure, inspiring ideas and powerful tools lack credibility because people have neither the opportunity nor resources to pursue their visions or apply the tools.

Leaders intent on developing learning organizations must focus on all three architectural design elements. Without all three, the triangle collapses."

This field guide is full of wisdom and practical tools. I suggest you make it a part of your own bookshelf if you do not already have it. It is as fresh today as it was 30 years ago!

