

Peter M. Senge

**The Fifth Discipline: The Art &  
Practice of The Learning  
Organization**

Made by Blinkist



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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

## **What's in it for me? Become inspired to keep learning and growing.**

When did you last feel really passionate about your work? If you're anything like the majority of office workers, you'll probably struggle for an answer. So many people go to work just to punch the clock – just to count down the years until retirement. To them, that last day of their careers is liberation day. Finally, they are free to pursue their real interests.

But what if work were a place where you could nurture your curiosity and discover new passions? What if you had the support of motivated colleagues and inspiring leaders? Author Peter Senge has helped hundreds of organizations create workplaces just like this. These companies now offer their employees the joy of lifelong learning. In these blinks, you'll learn about the five key disciplines that transform workplaces.

You'll discover how *controlling organizations* can become *learning organizations*, and how you can apply these lessons in your own life.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why resistance to change destroyed the Detroit auto industry;
- how a shared vision allowed Apple to become so successful; and
- why our bosses need to stop trying to run the show.



**Our drive to learn is strong – but our work environments can quickly extinguish it.**

Watch any toddler in action, and you'll see a master of learning. She spends her days hungrily amassing knowledge about the world. She smells, touches, and licks everything she sees. She constantly practices new skills, crawling and walking again and again until she gets it right. She is completely undeterred by failure.

That curious toddler still lives inside every one of us. We're all dying to learn more about the world.

But modern corporations quickly stamp this drive out of us. And it can feel like they throw everything at that effort – from hierarchical structures, to limiting job descriptions, to incompetent managers.

**The key message here is: Our drive to learn is strong – but our work environments can quickly extinguish it.**

One great way for a company to hamper learning is to give everybody a narrow job description. This can very easily kill off any sense of engagement with what happens in the company overall. It encourages employees just to punch the clock. They do their specific tasks, sure, but they never think about how they can learn to solve broader problems.

When something goes wrong, they'll probably blame someone else. But they'd often be much better off thinking about how their own actions contributed to the problem. Why are people so eager to apportion blame? Well, one reason is that sometimes they can't see beyond their own departments. They have no sense of what happens across the entire organization – and thus no sense of ownership.

Companies also destroy learning opportunities when work becomes too reactive. If everyone is continually putting out fires, there's no time to analyze things, or to come up with creative solutions for the future.

This narrow focus on what's happening right now can lead to the so-called "boiled frog" syndrome. It's an old parable: a frog placed in a pot of cool water will eventually boil to death if the pot is heated up very gradually. Change takes so long that the frog doesn't notice it – until it's too late.

If corporations are stuck in reactive mode, they, too, run the risk of missing subtle-but-growing problems.

Finally, a key obstacle to learning is created by managers who have no idea how to support their staff's desire to think creatively and build new skills. This is often because such managers have

themselves long since stopped developing.

The good news is that none of these obstacles is insurmountable. As we'll see in the next blink, there are five key disciplines that can provide a roadmap to a successful learning organization.



**There are five key disciplines that will promote learning within organizations.**

Habits can be very hard to change. Ask anyone who smokes or bites his nails. So how can organizations change their knee-jerk responses to problems? How do they move from fire-fighting to creating truly innovative learning environments for employees?

The author has worked with hundreds of organizations. This experience allowed him to articulate what he calls five key disciplines. These are five philosophies that companies can adopt to become learning organizations.

These disciplines are deeply practical. In fact, they can only work if they become part of the organization's daily life.

**The key message here is: There are five key disciplines that will promote learning within organizations.**

So what are these key disciplines? Let's go through them one by one.

First, companies should promote personal mastery among employees. What does this mean? The author's definition of personal mastery is being committed to learning and growing. He also describes mastery as making sure that you're always doing your best. When people work like this, they often feel a deep sense of fulfillment. What's more, it keeps employees motivated and excited.

Second, organizations need to examine their mental models. Each of us sees the world through a certain filter. This filter – the mental model, as the author calls it – is made up of judgments, assumptions, and life experience. If you can identify your mental models, you'll become more open-minded and learn how to question your thinking.

Once people become aware of their mental models, the third discipline

comes into play. That discipline is team learning. Team learning happens when employees enter into a real dialogue with each other. As a team, they critique, ask probing questions, and examine their own biases and assumptions. When this happens, team members think together. They develop a combined intelligence that can achieve much more than individual effort.

Team learning builds the foundation for the fourth discipline, shared vision. A genuinely shared vision doesn't revolve around a charismatic leader. Instead, employees have a sense of ownership over what they do and what they contribute to the company.

Finally, the most important discipline of all is systems thinking. This means examining problems as a whole. When you practice it, you take into account how one aspect will influence something else – something that may, at first, seem

entirely unrelated. This fifth discipline integrates all the others.

In the next blinks, we'll examine these disciplines more closely and look at how they work in practice.



**Work motivates people when it challenges them to grow.**

What was the last thing that really excited you? As you mull over this question, you're probably thinking about your hobby or an inspirational trip – not about the eight hours you've just spent at the office.

But let's face it – most of us *do* spend most of our lives in offices. So shouldn't they, too, be exciting places, full of life and passion? And if you're an employer, don't you *want* your staff to do their best, not just go through the motions?

**The key message here is: Work motivates people when it challenges them to grow.**

Our work excites us when it stretches us, when it gives us the opportunity to develop personal mastery. This feeling of personal mastery isn't about beating someone at something or measuring up

to someone else's standard. It is internal, not external – a deeply personal pursuit of fulfillment. This fulfillment comes when we figure out our purpose and vision and devote ourselves to them.

Of course, once you've discovered your vision, you'll quickly realize that reality does not live up to it. That can be discouraging – but it can also be motivating. The trick is to view things the right way. The gap between where you are and where you want to be can build creative tension. And it is this tension that will propel you into action.

For employers, the idea of promoting personal mastery in the workplace can seem irrelevant or even threatening. How do you even implement it? And how will it help the company's bottom line?

In fact, there is a lot of evidence that investing in your employees is great for business.

Take Japanese ceramics, technology, and electronics giant Kyocera. It began as a start-up and grew into a company with \$9 billion in sales. How? By putting the growth of its employees at the center of company policy. A similar thing happened in the United States when a new CEO of Hanover, a property firm, insisted that he would prioritize the well-being of Hanover's staff.

So how can an organization support its people in developing personal mastery? The best way is for leaders themselves to model this approach. Genuine curiosity is contagious. If leaders are honest about their limitations and demonstrate a hunger to learn and grow, staff will follow.



**We're all blinded by limiting beliefs we don't even know we hold.**

Remember “The Emperor’s New Clothes”? It’s a fable in which an emperor walks before his subjects stark naked, after his tailors play a trick on him. They convince the emperor that they’ve made sumptuously beautiful garments for him, fashioned from cloth so fine that only truly intelligent or noble people can see it. The emperor, fearful of appearing stupid or insufficiently noble, doesn’t admit that he *can’t* see the clothes. His subjects, also afraid, play along, pretending *they*, too, can see the clothes.

The emperor and his people were blinded by their mental models. None of them believed that an emperor would appear naked in public, and so none of them pointed out the obvious – that he was wearing nothing at all!

**The key message here is: We're all blinded by limiting beliefs we don't even know we hold.**

Like the emperor in the fable, organizations may cling to mental models that have no bearing on reality. And this can be a major stumbling block.

Consider what happened to the American auto industry. Factories in Detroit – the home of the American automobile – failed to change and adapt, even as Japanese automobile manufacturers were disrupting the market. Their failure to adjust had devastating results; their business slipped away.

But, when used properly, mental models can also aid innovation.

For example, Shell, the oil company, became a market leader when it decided to give its managers the tools they needed to take apart their mental

models. In the 1970s, a team of senior planners and strategists at Shell predicted major disruptions in the oil industry. But when the planners tried to tell managers of the impending upheaval, their warnings were ignored. Scenarios they'd forecast were so unprecedented that managers couldn't even comprehend them.

Luckily for Shell, the planners offered managers extra training. This training enabled bosses to examine their own beliefs and prepare for big changes that could have been disastrous for Shell.

So how can an organization help employees interrogate unhelpful mental models? Well, a "learning infrastructure" must be built. Setting that up means creating a system that makes conscious analysis of mental models an integral part of your company's daily life.

Most important is that managers need to create an open environment that

promotes critical thinking. People should never feel scared to challenge themselves and change their minds. No one should be afraid to point out that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes.



## **Learning organizations are fuelled by shared vision.**

When John F. Kennedy promised that the United States would put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s, the idea sounded completely ludicrous. He made this announcement in 1961, when the only rockets that could reach the moon carried no crew and crash-landed when they got there.

But, as it turned out, President Kennedy's idea was not so far-fetched after all. In 1969, astronaut Neil Armstrong walked on the moon and then returned safely to earth. Kennedy's plan only worked because countless scientists and contractors across the US space program shared his vision and gave their all to bring it to life.

**The key message here is: Learning organizations are fuelled by shared vision.**

A shared vision is what gives energy to a learning organization. It keeps people working and experimenting. It helps employees carry on through disappointments and short-term failure.

Think about the world's most successful companies, such as Apple or Ford.

What's made them so special? Well, one answer is that employees have been fully behind their companies' visions. For Apple, the vision was to create computers that were a joy to use. Ford, for its part, wanted to make cars that every American could afford. These visions are powerful because they are positive and ambitious. They're not simply about making money or beating the competition. Rather, they're about contributing to a product that will change people's lives.

Today, almost every company has a vision statement. But a genuinely shared vision will never come together if it's

simply handed down from the lofty heights of senior management. Visions do not come in an HR memo or a lecture from the CEO. You cannot cajole or blackmail employees into sharing a vision; they have to feel genuine ownership of it.

So how can you achieve a truly shared vision? Well, one key step is to make it relevant to every employee. To achieve this, start an open dialogue about the company's vision and how it fits in with employees' personal values. If the company's leader wants to promote her vision of the organization's future, she needs to be honest and say that she is sharing what works for her personally. And then she needs to give employees the freedom to develop it into something that inspires them, wherever they are in the company.



**To be successful, people have to learn to work together in teams.**

Imagine listening to a great orchestra. The sound is exquisite; it seems like all musicians share the same voice. The cellos, violins, harp, and wind instruments work together to achieve what individual musicians, on their own, never could.

A good orchestra is a perfect example of a team working in alignment. Each musician may be lost in her own work, practicing her own personal mastery, but in the orchestra, everyone remains highly attuned to each other.

In the workplace, such alignment is rare. It's much more common to see teams of talented people trying very hard but getting nowhere. Why? Because people are actually working in opposition to each other!

**The key message here is: To be successful, people have to learn to work together in teams.**

So how can we master team learning, an approach that brings people together to complement each other's skills? Well, the most important thing is to practice new ways of communicating. We're all prone to what Harvard researcher Chris Argyris calls "defensive routines." These are fixed behaviors that we employ to avoid threats. For example, if a colleague challenges us, we may try to placate him to avoid conflict. Or we may launch a counterattack, going all-out to prove our point. But both responses will prevent team learning, because none of these actions genuinely allows us to communicate with each other.

It's possible to deal with these defensive tactics. But, to do so, we need to learn to enter into a creative dialogue. This is a type of conversation where we lay aside

all our assumptions. In previous blinks, we mentioned challenging our mental models. That was essential training for this style of communication.

We also need to practice “deep listening,” in which we really take the time to hear what our team members are saying.

Of course, like any new skill, team learning will take a lot of practice. Great orchestras appear to play effortlessly, but stellar performance requires countless hours of difficult rehearsal. Organizations are similar: in order to become great at team learning, they have to practice it every day. Dialogue sessions with clear ground rules can be a very useful exercise. And, of course, organizations also need a healthy appetite for reflection.



**A learning organization's most important characteristic is its ability to think systematically.**

Peter Senge witnessed a tragic accident that he's never forgotten. A man was going down a river in a rowboat. The craft overturned, and the man struggled furiously against the current. He quickly developed hypothermia and died. And as soon as the man stopped struggling, the river swept his lifeless body onto the shore. He hadn't realized that the only thing he needed to do to survive was to stop struggling. The current would have carried him to safety.

Currents are an invisible but powerful force that shapes a river's flow. Similar underlying processes are at play in organizations. If we're ignorant of these currents, we'll never understand why we're being jostled about, or how we can break free.

In order to weather these currents, organizations have to develop the most vital learning discipline of all: *systems thinking*.

**The key message here is: A learning organization's most important characteristic is its ability to think systematically.**

Put simply, systems thinking teaches you to analyze problems holistically. Imagine a company with three departments: manufacturing, marketing, and research. The head of each section is great at his job. He has a clear understanding of problems in his own department. But what if he doesn't know how his work influences other sections? If that doesn't change, the company as a whole will never solve deeper underlying problems.

Systems theory is also about learning to understand cause and effect. We think we all understand that, but most people actually have a very linear approach to

thinking: A causes B causes C. Systems thinking teaches us that cause and effect are in fact circular. Things influence each other in cyclical “feedback loops.”

When you master systems thinking, you start to look at how events develop over time, and you begin to notice recurring patterns. You see that the immediate effects of your actions can be drastically different from what happens over a longer term. Systems theory also analyzes geographic differences: a certain action can have one set of consequences locally, and a completely different one on a global scale.

For a learning organization, systems thinking is vital. It enables sophisticated analysis both within the organization and across broader industries. It also helps leaders understand what drives people’s behavior. And, most importantly, it gives managers the tools they need to apply

the author's other disciplines in a holistic manner.



**We need to redefine the role of a leader in learning organizations.**

What does it mean to be a leader? Today we think of leadership in a very hierarchical sense. Leaders hold senior ranks in a company; they are part of top management.

But for a learning organization, this definition is too limiting. It suggests that only those at the top are permitted to bring about change. Others – people at the bottom of the company – are only there to implement the wishes of their leaders.

**The key message here is: We need to redefine the role of a leader in learning organizations.**

Many organizations now describe themselves as “nonhierarchical.” But that doesn’t mean that management is disappearing. And perhaps it doesn’t

need to. Perhaps we can instead reimagine leadership in a more positive sense.

For example, leaders can think of themselves as designers. These are people whose job it is to create spaces for learning – or, as the author puts it, a learning infrastructure. What could this infrastructure look like? Well, leaders could design innovative conference formats, opportunities for sharing feedback, or even virtual meeting spaces.

A leader can also become a teacher. Not the boring type – the sort who just doles out information and assigns grades – but a teacher who inspires learning. Most of us have had at least one such teacher. They often changed lives simply by sharing their love of knowledge.

Leaders can be like that, too. And the key is to show passion about personal mastery. Leaders who are great at

teaching also need to be curious about the world. And they should be courageous enough to experiment, and humble enough to admit their mistakes.

Perhaps one of the most powerful leadership roles in a learning organization is that of a steward. Stewards protect and preserve things that are truly important. For a leader, this means making sure that growth never overshadows the company's larger ideals or employee well-being. Stewardship supports innovation because it makes change less scary. Employees who know that somebody is protecting the really important things will be more willing to experiment and take risks.

So how does Peter Senge sum up his ideas about leadership in a learning organization? Well, he says that managers should embrace all three roles – they need to combine the skills of designers, teachers, and stewards. This

will empower and support learning throughout a company.



## Final summary

The key message in these blinks is:

**By creating “learning organizations” that celebrate curiosity, experimentation, and dialogue, companies can discover the structures that are holding them back and generate innovative solutions.**

Actionable advice:

### **Reimagine meetings.**

Gathering around a conference table may be the current default model for meetings. But such meetings can be so dull! To spark enthusiasm and interesting conversations, try mixing up the format. How about setting up your conference room like a cafe, with lots of small tables? You could then invite people to brainstorm solutions in several one-on-one conversations. And once they've done some circulating around the room,

they can feed their ideas back to the group.

## **Got feedback?**

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**What to read next: *The Necessary Revolution*, by Peter M. Senge, Bryan Smith, Sara Schley, Joe Laur, Nina Kruschwitz**

By now, you've perhaps been inspired by how systems thinking can help us understand how corporations function. But that's not the only possible application for the theory.

In the blinks to Senge's influential book *The Necessary Revolution*, you'll learn how systems theory can be used to illuminate the true destructiveness of

climate change and help us look for new solutions. The issue of climate change is, to say the least, controversial. People claim that saving the environment will come at the cost of the economy, or that it will destroy the livelihoods of farmers. There are so many interconnected issues that it can become overwhelming. Systems theory can help us unpack these issues and identify how we as individuals can contribute to a solution. If you want a unique perspective on how to tackle the greatest challenge of our time, then don't miss the blinks to *The Necessary Revolution*.



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