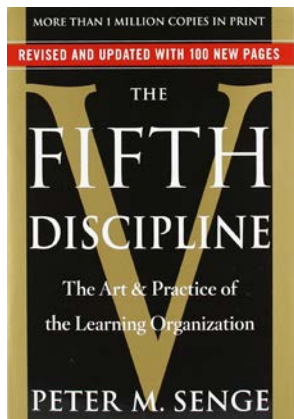*We are delighted to announce that Peter Senge has joined the cadre of Mobius Senior Experts. We join colleagues from around the world in congratulating him, and his team at the Society for Organizational Learning, on the 25th Anniversary of his landmark book* The Fifth Discipline.

Peter Senge on the 25ᵗʰ Anniversary of *The Fifth Discipline*

An interview reprinted from *Reflections*, a journal from The Society for Organization Learning (SoL)

By Mobius Senior Expert Peter Senge with Frank Schneider and Debora H. Wallace

Although it was published 25 years ago, *The Fifth Discipline* continues to have a profound influence on organizations around the world. What accounts for its lasting relevance, and how has the way people work and learn together changed in that time? In this interview with *Reflections*, Peter Senge talks about what he has learned since the initial publication of *The Fifth Discipline* and from the global response it has generated.

> **REFLECTIONS: What impact do you think *The Fifth Discipline* has had over the past 25 years?**

PETER SENGE: A lot has changed in the world in 25 years, but to me it always feels like we're doing more or less the same thing. Complementary tools and methods have evolved that didn't exist 25 years ago, like Theory U and the Presencing tools. Because of this evolution, we can now see the larger field of know-how that is emerging, what we have started to call "awareness-based systemic change." But nothing that we do has changed so terribly. The work has always been about how the systems that shape our lives function as they do because of how we function. Whether we use the language of mental models or "sensing" and "presencing," real change involves both the "inner" and the "outer," both how we see the world and what we truly care about as well as what we measure and how we organize. So the work has both evolved and stayed the same.

In many ways, the main thing that has changed is the context for the work. Twenty-five years ago, all of the initial practical experiences were in the business world. Today, we work in a much broader variety of organizations. A lot of the most interesting projects for me have been cross-organizational and even cross-sectoral projects, involving business, civil society, and government. So in that sense, there has been a significant evolution in the application domains. Otherwise, a lot of the basics really haven't changed much.

A story might make this more concrete. *The Fifth Discipline* was originally translated and published in Taiwan in 1994–1995 and then found its way into Mainland China in 1996 or 1997, where it became popular. I remember seeing a list of nonfiction bestsellers in Shanghai in 1998, and *The Fifth Discipline* was number

two, behind Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. I thought that was pretty good company.

In 2011, *The Fifth Discipline*, along with the rest of the books in the series – *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Schools That Learn, The Dance of Change*, and *Presence* – was retranslated and republished in China. The next year, it was the number one bestselling business book in China, and two years later it was the number two bestselling book in China. That says something about the relevance of the ideas, the tools, and the basic spirit of the book over a long period of time. So I don't think the relevance has changed at all. If anything, it's more relevant today than it was in 1990.

With this particular sort of success, people tend to over-attribute things to you. People tend to think the ideas are mine, because I was the sole author of the first book. One reason I like the subsequent fieldbooks is that they clearly demonstrate that the work has always arisen from a community of practitioners, consultants, and researchers. In fact, every book since the original *The Fifth Discipline* has been jointly authored.

> **REFLECTIONS: How has your thinking and work evolved over time?**

SENGE: Who can remember how they were thinking and feeling 25 years ago? We're all victims of retrospective sense-making, right? We look back at the past from where we are today. I was very confident about the relevance of the tools and ideas when the book came out, and the reason for that was simple. We had had 10 years of experience with these tools prior to the publication of the book, through lots of consulting and training and initial research projects. We even had a CEO group that met regularly at MIT throughout the 1980s.

So *The Fifth Discipline* was a reflection on and an attempt to organize 10 years of previous experience, which was really the reason for writing the book. There was no question that the basic tools and ideas were

> **"There's no learning from reading if you define learning as processes that enhance your capacity for effective action over time."**

enormously useful for people. I remember sitting on an airplane one day, looking out the window and seeing a bunch of droplets and thinking, *This book will sell a million copies*. It was just that clear to me, even though it was a crazy thing to say for an unknown body of work by an unknown writer. But it was because of the prior practical experience, not only on my part but on the part of a large number of people. I knew how useful the work had already been to many people. As for the evolution of my thinking, it starts with understanding that books serve a function, but it's a narrow function. You can't learn to walk by reading a book about walking. In fact, you can't really learn anything by just reading about it. And that's because the modalities of awareness and thought involved in reading are different from those involved in real learning.

We take in a lot of important ideas by reading books that are well written and get us thinking. That's an important first stage for a lot of learning. But reading is basically passive, and to learn you have to do. There's no learning from reading if you define learning as processes that enhance your capacity for effective action over time. That has always been our definition of learning in the SoL community. Knowledge is a capacity for effective action, and learning is a process that enhances knowledge.

I never thought a book by itself would be very significant. The real question was, how does a book fit into something larger that could have more impact? It was no coincidence that the publication of the book and establishment of the Organizational Learning Center at MIT, which was the precursor to SoL, occurred at the same time. In fact, I consciously wrote the book to be able to launch the MIT Organizational Learning Center.

The idea was simple. Books may have a lot of interesting ideas, but the only way to support people in developing new capabilities over time is to build learning communities where people inspire each other and help each other become part of a larger network of collaboration. It's that collaboration that helps people sustain the efforts needed to learn something in a way that just reading a book will never do.

A couple of things became really evident in the ensuing years. One was that different people were having dramatically different results from working with the same tools. Some people produced amazing results, and others produced nothing.

This data that it made all the difference where people were coming from was what led to the book *Presence*. For example, someone who just picked up the tools of *The Fifth Discipline* and said, "Hey, we can make more money if we use these tools" generally accomplished very little. But someone who had 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. So, where the practitioner is coming from in terms of intent, spirit, and openness is important.

REFLECTIONS: How did those revelations and experiences change your thinking?

SENGE: I don't know if my thinking changed much about any of the basic things. In the early days, we had a lot of chances to work with some wonderful business people. So, I always appreciated that there was something about the quality of the people doing the work that mattered. That is why so much of *The Fifth Discipline* stresses deep personal work, like the disciplines of mental models and personal mastery. In fact, we even had some intuition about the role of connecting to deeper sources of change, which was expressed in terms of David Bohm's "implicate order" in the lead essay I wrote for *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. But Otto Scharmer has been able to take these intuitions much further in his development of Theory U, which *Presence* was meant to introduce in a non-technical way.

Moving beyond focusing on business alone and attempting to address the bigger issues we face in the world was always an intention, at least for me. Many of us always had the idea that businesses contribute to issues such as climate change and the destruction of species and the profound inequality that operates around the world, and that sooner or later, they would need to embrace these issues as part of their core strategies. If they didn't, they would destroy the environments needed for business to be successful. But the main learning was that you had to get different kinds of organizations working together, including but not limited to business.

I would not characterize that as a big shift in my thinking, but a natural evolution of simply continuing to inquire into larger systems. It was no surprise that this expansion of focus would be hard. It's evident that we are still at the beginning of businesses redefining their purpose to go beyond narrow self-interest. In my opinion, this is starting to happen in a few industries, like the food industry, where social and environmental breakdowns around the world are starting to be seen as genuine shifts in businesses' strategic context. But fostering the sorts of collaboration and learning processes needed over time is challenging. For me personally, this was always the direction I cared about. I had no inherent interest in business, but I was drawn to it as a great laboratory to develop practical know-how by virtue of the wonderful business leaders I had the opportunity to meet and learn from, like Bill O'Brien and Ray Stata, who are often mentioned in *The Fifth Discipline*.

I'm trained as a systems guy. I was an undergraduate student at Stanford when Paul Ehrlich wrote The Population Bomb, and I was at the MIT System Dynamics Group when the Limits to Growth study was done. I grew up with the big, global issues. They were always the ones paramount in my mind, because they're paramount for our future as a society and ultimately as a species.

REFLECTIONS: Did the response to the book take you in different directions than you had anticipated?

SENGE: Not really. I knew it would be a long time before we could focus directly on larger issues because they simply were not on the radar screen of businesses in 1990. It felt appropriate to continue the focus on building a community of businesses deeply involved in the work. I always thought that business was the most powerful institution in modern society. That's basically true in all countries, even China, where government clearly plays a much bigger role than it does in a lot of other places.

Really, I've had one interest my whole life: how we can build the capacity to address the common systemic issues that are taking our society in directions no one really wants to go. At one point about 10 years ago,

I had this shocking "aha" moment when I realized that my desk had not moved more than about 10 feet in 20 years. The building my office was in had been completely rebuilt, but when we moved back in after the reconstruction, my desk was right in the same place. That was kind of a symbol for me that my interests have always been exactly the same.

It's just that things unfold and get clearer and new opportunities open up over time.

REFLECTIONS: What are some of the milestones from the last 25 years that have helped you determine what you would be doing next?

SENGE: The first was my visit in 1994 to the first public school using systems thinking and organizational learning and seeing that – wow – there was no reason that educators couldn't do all this stuff – shared vision, team learning, mental models, personal mastery, and obviously systems thinking. It all worked.

The next was the formation of the SoL Sustainability Consortium a few years later. We had several failed efforts in organizing it initially, but the idea was clear. We knew that gradually social and environmental conditions were becoming strategic, and we wanted to get together a small group of businesses that could learn together. We didn't want to waste time arguing about whether climate change was real or things like that. We only wanted to get a small number of businesses that already saw these issues as strategic and see how that affected the way they actually managed.

The one other milestone that really stands out was the formation of the Sustainable Food Laboratory, founded by Oxfam and Unilever in 2003-2004. More than 10 years after its founding, it is still a vibrant global network of 70 of the world's biggest food companies and NGOs working together to make sustainable agriculture the mainstream system.

The initial intent of the Food Lab was simple. We wanted to build networks of collaboration that connected businesses and civil society organizations, specifically food companies and social justice and environmental NGOs, in about equal numbers. Watching it evolve and take root, I think it has had enormous impact on the world. Today,

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many people see the global food industry as one of the most interesting industries in terms of deep change. It's clearly been crucial to understanding the huge problems that people were previously unaware of, particularly in this country. Ten years ago, you talked about food and nobody really saw it as much of an issue. But for a long time, the global food system has been driving farmers around the world into poverty by connecting them to commodity markets that behave as commodity markets invariably do – with growing output and falling prices. We in the rich countries are the beneficiaries, because we have huge varieties of food that we can buy at prices far lower than they would have been 30 years ago. But those lower prices are farmers' incomes.

The global food system has also destroyed half the world's topsoil through practices that maximize short-term yields but do not rebuild soil nutrients. And, by the way, agriculture uses two-thirds of the world's water, and in many ways water is the most acute problem in the world today. People have begun to wake up to these problems, mainly through movements like fair trade and scares about the quality of and ingredients in the food we eat. But of course most only glimpse a bit of the scope of the problem. In my judgment, the industry as a whole, at least in the West, is really waking up. For example, the importance of sustainable sourcing has become evident to many retailers and food companies.

The Food Lab was a first-ever opportunity to move right into the middle of a key industry. You might also say it's the single most important industry we have, since it is the only thing we actually consume.

REFLECTIONS: What would you say has been the greatest impact resulting from the book and this field of work?

SENGE: Well, I think you have to start thinking about that question by distinguishing two levels. There's a top-of-the-mind acknowledgment and then there's the real transformation of capacity and the building of new capabilities.

Top-of-the-mind acknowledgment includes things like organizational culture and organizational learning. Look at the learning field over the last 30 years. In the manufacturing world, for example, quality management, process improvement, just-in-time, and lean represented radical shifts toward embedded learning. Probably the most recent embodiment is the shift to what the software industry calls "agile."

But to me, these are all one wave after another of a larger sea swell of recognition that how we learn really matters. As Arie de Geus said almost 30 years ago in his famous 1987 Harvard Business Review article, "Planning as Learning," "the ultimate determinant of competitive advantage for a business is its relative ability to learn." At the top-of-the-mind level, everybody nods their head at that now in the same way they nod and say, "People really matter; you've got to create an environment for developing the talents of your people." These are big changes in espoused views of business. The focus on teams is another related big change. Twenty-five years ago, people didn't spend that much time on teams. Now almost everyone in the business world works in a team.

The second, deeper level concerns the real transformation of capacity and the building of new capabilities. On this level, the results are pretty uneven, and they vary by industry. I'll use the software industry as an example.

Most competitive, innovative software businesses today are into agile. Agile is a disciplined approach to continuous learning. A good friend of mine who's a serial entrepreneur in the software industry said that somewhere within the last few years, the industry crossed a threshold. And the threshold was that today nobody understands the impact of introducing a new element of software.

The complexity of the software environments into which new elements are placed and will interact has become so great that nobody really knows what's going to happen.

Obviously, when you're designing new software, you have goals and intentions. Maybe you've even made promises to your customers about the benefits. But in fact the unintended side effects can swamp the intended effects. The consequence in that industry is a deep cultural change that is still gradually unfolding.

Think of it like walking in a dark room. You can't really see much. In such a situation, you naturally don't take big, long strides. You walk slowly; you take small steps and feel your way through. It's very much like that in the software industry today. It takes small steps to introduce increments of software, often with thousands of people online gathering data and reflecting on what's happening, what's working, what's not working, what sort of adjustments we have to make. That whole philosophy is bundled up in this idea of agile, the ability to continually keep shifting as you learn more.

Another example of transformation in the business culture of an industry is the phrase you hear again and again in the high tech world: "fail fast and early." It's not just a platitude. It's a philosophy and a discipline of "rapid-cycle prototyping." Don't just sit around and talk about it. Don't make elaborate plans. Get a prototype product quickly, so you can learn what works and doesn't. For me, the phrase "fail fast and early" is encouraging, because it encourages a genuine learning attitude.

> **"Certainly when something isn't going well, trying harder is often not the best strategy, because the problem you are having may not be about effort, but about limited insight."**

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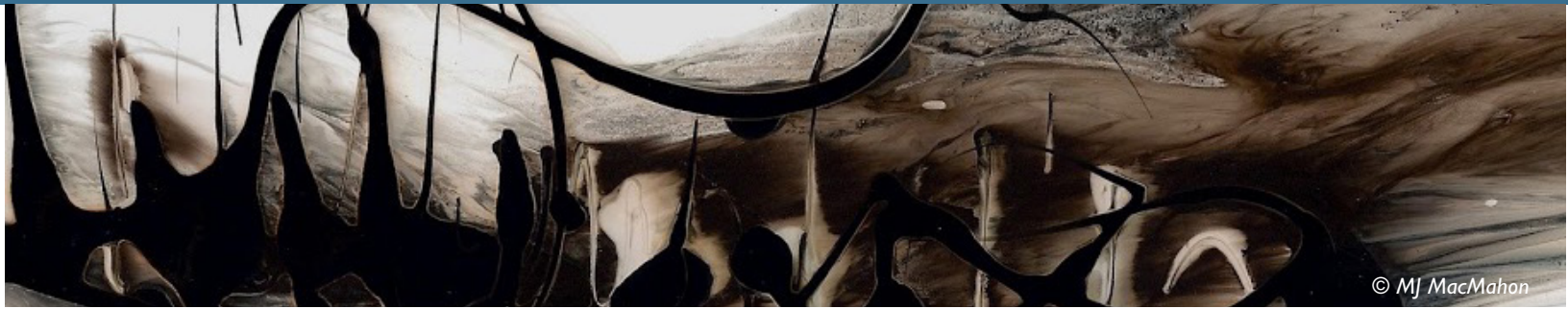
REFLECTIONS: **Looking at the impact of culture and collaboration, what key principles or characteristics do you associate most often with success?**

SENGE: Perhaps the most obvious is people doing something that really matters to them. In *The Fifth Discipline*, there was a lot of stuff about purpose. If you think the purpose of your business is to make money, you should forget all this stuff about learning and systems thinking, because at the most, you'll accomplish a little, but you will never accomplish a lot. The reason is simple: The depth of commitment, time, dedication, openness, and patience just won't be there. If people are only focused on making money, and there is no sense of larger purpose, little will be achieved with these ideas and tools.

Second, I would say is time horizon. If your organization operates on extremely short time horizons, that's fine, that's a realistic part of many businesses today. Some have very short product cycles and more or less continuous introductions of new products. That is not what I am referring to. I'm talking more about the cultural time horizon.

Again, the software industry is interesting, because a company like the one I was referring to before operates in rapidly moving businesses yet has disciplined learning cycles that can steadily move the culture over time. In their reflective practices, people at that company continually ask, "What is happening with new software?" "Is this what we expected?" "What kept us from seeing these changes?" "What are our blind spots?" These are classic reflective questions. During some periods in the development cycle, they have spent up to half a day a week reflecting on these questions and analyzing the data they were gathering. This is a significant amount of time for any business to spend on reflection.

Last, do you really care about people growing and developing? If you're going to foster an environment of deeper thinking and a sense of purpose, you can't do that if you're not focused on people really growing and developing – popular today with Bob Kegan's and Lisa Lahey's work on Deeply Developmental Organizations. These are all pre-requirements for tools like organizational learning taking root.

REFLECTIONS: **What are some of the personal challenges you have experienced in realizing your own vision and aspirations, and how did you move through them?**

SENGE: The first thing that comes to mind is all the failures. We worked for six months to organize the first meeting of the SoL Sustainability Consortium. We had this idea of building such a consortium, but the first meeting was a complete disaster. With a lot of time and effort, we managed to get a bunch of CEOs together, and it was just a waste of time. Most of the time they complained about their investors, their boards, and the government – all that stuff. That was a rude awakening. We thought, "Hey, this is a big issue – social and environmental stewardship and responsibility – so it's got to be driven by CEOs." We had a bunch of people who said the right things, but when we got them together, we realized they actually were just talking. They had no real skill in moving an enterprise. And they spent a hell of a lot of time complaining.

So that was really an eye-opener. I remember talking with one of the CEOs who co-organized the meeting. It was about a day later. We both said, "That was really a horrible meeting. We don't know what we've learned, but we know that was not the way to do it." It was one of those moments where you could draw no conclusion,

except to acknowledge the fact that it didn't work. We went back to the drawing board and restarted about six months later with a group of people who were already leading these changes in their organizations, mostly at local levels or focused on particular issues. The energy was completely different. It was a group of amazing innovators, and that reset became the beginning of the SoL Sustainability Consortium.

Lots of experiences like that have occurred, to the point where I always tell people, "Hey, I expect almost everything not to work." If it worked the first time out, it's probably because you're doing something you know way too much about. If you're doing something really new, the one thing you can be sure of is it's not going to work.

The other lesson would be the importance of relaxing and being patient. I have a predisposition to push a little too hard. But there are times when you just need to stop pushing. Certainly when something isn't going well, trying harder is often not the best strategy, because the problem you are having may not be about effort, but about limited insight.

With regard to working with other people, I probably wasn't nearly as good at listening as I should have been. In fact, I'm sure of that. How do you collectively get better at understanding what's going on, as opposed to,

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"Hey, here's the idea and let's go for it." Getting better at listening has been a lifelong journey, which of course relates directly to collaborating.

REFLECTIONS: Can you give us a few examples of what some of the next generation leaders are doing in the field of systemic change?

SENGE: In the last three or four years, a small group of us has become involved with identifying and supporting next generation leaders in this emerging field of systemic change, people who are in their 30s, who have already accomplished a lot, and who could potentially evolve the whole field in the next 20 or 30 years. This is the Next Generation Leaders initiative of the Academy for Systemic Change.

We've only had this effort organized now for a little over nine months, so it's a little early to identify too many patterns in these leaders' thinking. But one I do see is moving much deeper into different cultural contexts. For example, one of the Fellows is doing marvelous work in the schools of Monterrey, Mexico. He's been doing programs on civic engagement with communities for 10 years and has now begun doing the same thing in schools. He's a tremendously warmhearted guy who also has plenty of drive. But what really strikes me is his connection and credibility with the people in Monterray.

A woman who is the founder of one of the largest indigenous reconciliation movements in the world, Reconciliation Canada, is also one of the Fellows. The native population in Canada, like many native populations in the world, has been the victim of a century of genocide, organized efforts to eradicate its culture. This woman is building a wonderful movement based on dialogue and what she calls fostering a "relational economy." In contrast to a transactional economy, a relational economy goes back to the older ideas where services or products were bartered on a one-to-one basis. This kind of economy has totally vanished in the modern world, where you buy something but don't have any connection to who made it.

If we can support people like the three I just referred to, people who know how to weave the tools

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and methods of systemic change deeply into different cultural contexts, in the next 20 to 50 years, we won't have to use terms like "systems thinking." We can just call it "thinking," because real thinking is about seeing the reality you're in the midst of, which naturally entails appreciating the interconnectedness of things.

The significance of cultural embeddedness is that it is allowing such young leaders to connect more and more to the systemic intelligence already present in older (pre-industrial) cultures – much like the educators are cultivating the innate systems intelligence of children. This may be the really big new idea: tapping and cultivating the genuine "naturalness" of all this work. The more experience you have with these sorts of tools and learning processes, the more you realize that we are doing nothing more or less than enabling people to do what is most natural, though rarely easy – opening head, heart, and will in very challenging settings. ∎

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Visit the back of this edition for opportunities to learn The Fifth Discipline *methodologies directly from Peter Senge at the Society of Organizational Learning.*