



Personal Mastery: The First Discipline of Learning Organizations
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In my last article I wrote about learning organizations and the five disciplines that, when fully integrated, will transform an organization into a learning organization. This article is devoted to the first of those five disciplines, personal mastery. Personal mastery is the foundation on which organizational learning is built.

What is personal mastery?

Personal mastery, as defined by Peter Senge, is “the discipline of personal growth and learning.” (*The Fifth Discipline*, p. 141.) It is more than just competence and skills or spiritual growth. It is about creating a desired future and moving toward it. People with high levels of personal mastery are skilled at creating a personal vision and accurately assessing their current reality with respect to that vision. The gap between current reality and personal vision propels them forward. This gap is often referred to as “creative tension.” Personal mastery is about generating and sustaining creative tension and living comfortably with that tension.

So how does one recognize individuals with a high level of personal mastery? Below is a list of characteristics of those skilled in personal mastery:

- They have a special sense of purpose – a calling.
- They accurately assess their current reality; in particular, they quickly recognize inaccurate assumptions.
- They are skilled at using creative tension to inspire their forward progress.
- They see change as opportunity.
- They are deeply inquisitive.
- They place a high priority on personal connections without giving up their individuality.
- They are systemic thinkers, that is, they see themselves as one part in a larger system.

People with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their capacity to create their desired future. In doing so, they create the potential for considerable organizational capacity building, a potential that can only be realized through integrating all five disciplines of organizational learning.

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How do individuals develop personal mastery?

Developing personal mastery is a lifelong process, and it is never too late to start. Much of what needs to happen has to do with shifting how we think and how we view the world in which we live and work. Here are some things to try:

- **Thinking systemically:** When you encounter an unexpected or undesirable outcome, try to think about what processes enabled that outcome to happen, rather than looking for someone to blame. Thinking systemically is about looking at the whole and the relationships amongst the individual parts. It is also about looking for patterns over time, rather than taking a quick snapshot.
- **Assessing current reality:** In order to be effective at assessing current reality, you need to be very aware of the assumptions you make about existing situations. Those assumptions shape, and sometimes cloud, our view of reality. Assessing current reality requires a great deal of reflection on your own thought processes and an ability to recognize your assumptions.
- **Balancing advocacy with inquiry:** Most of us are accustomed to entering into a discussion with our defenses securely in place. What this means is that we often do not hear what others are saying. By balancing advocacy with inquiry, we take as much time to understand the points of view of others as we do in explaining our own point of view. Those skilled at personal mastery will gently probe until they fully understand a different point of view while inviting others to question their own perspectives and thought processes.
- **Creating shared meaning:** Creating shared meaning takes the previous point to the next level. It involves finding the common ground within various perspectives and broadening the understanding of all involved. People with high levels of personal mastery understand that they only have a piece of the puzzle and only by inquiring into the points of view of others can those puzzle pieces begin to fit together and take shape into a clearer picture of current reality.

Each of the above techniques can take a lifetime to master. In fact, one never really “arrives”; there is always something new to learn. Therefore, it is important to start with small incremental steps. It doesn’t matter where you start, just that you begin at a place where you can feel progress and success.

How can organizations foster personal mastery?

Organizations must have people at all levels capable of personal mastery in order to become successful learning organizations. It is important to remember, however, that personal mastery is a matter of choice. It cannot be dictated from on high. Efforts to do so will only backfire since employees will likely develop a “personal vision” that they think the boss wants to hear.

The most important thing an organization can do to help employees develop personal mastery is to create an environment conducive to personal mastery. Here are some ideas for doing that:

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- Encourage inquiry and curiosity: In most organizations people are rewarded for coming up with solutions and not for asking probing questions. The problem with this is that an organization will often settle on the quick fix rather than take the time to truly understand the nature of the problem. Encourage employees to look deeper into the nature of problems, particularly recurring problems.
- Encourage employees to challenge the status quo: New employees are particularly good at doing this because they don't have a history with the organization and are not yet assimilated into its culture. Take advantage of their fresh perspective and encourage veteran employees to do the same. The results will be infectious.
- Change your assumptions about what motivates your employees: Most organizations, whether they would admit it or not, use external incentives (money, recognition, fear) to motivate their employees. Personal mastery is all about internal motivation, and under the right conditions, it will blossom. Create an environment that is consistent with the belief that most employees are self-motivated and want to do their best.
- Be a model: It is important that organizational leaders practice their own personal mastery. By setting an example, you will send the message that this is important.
- Make a commitment for the long haul: Personal mastery is not a single event or one-day workshop. It is also not a precise process. Make every effort to be flexible in helping employees develop personal mastery and realize that the gains will be incremental over time.

By creating a safe and supportive environment where employees can develop their personal mastery, you are helping them generate that creative tension that will propel them forward and ultimately move the organization along the path toward becoming a learning organization.

In my next article, I will focus on the second discipline of learning organizations, mental models.

Resources:

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization, Peter M. Senge, 1990.

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, and Bryan J. Smith, 1994.

Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) (<http://www.solonline.org/>).

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