The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations

by Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, and George Roth and Bryan Smith


Book Review by Patricia R. Tusek

Why is it so difficult to sustain change? Over the past two decades, organizations have embarked upon change journeys to meet the challenges of increased global competition, new markets, and pace of the technological development. In their attempts to respond quickly to external changes in the environment, most have failed, even after some initial success. Ten years ago, Peter Senge wrote The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization, a seminal book in the field of organizational change and systems theory. In 1994 Senge and five other authors wrote a follow-up book, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization. This book was filled with practical ways to initiate new ways of thinking in organizations. After its publication, as they met and talked with people, the six authors became increasingly aware of the difficulties people were having in sustaining organizational change.

The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations is the authors’ response to these difficulties. A basic premise of this book is that organizations are products of the ways that people in them think and act. Organizational learning results from individuals participating in activities that embody new ways of thinking and acting and relating together, leading to an increasing and enduring organizational capacity for change. The book grew out of conversations at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning among leaders involved in change efforts. They were responding to the question: “What forces seemed to propel organizational learning efforts forward or to slow them down?”

This book is written for those involved in change initiatives, managers, organization executives, directors, consultants, and facilitators, to help them make sense of the organization’s response to change. It is written from a systems perspective. In the sense that to facilitate is ‘to make easier,’ then understanding the authors’ framework, and utilizing their models and suggestions to meet the challenges of change would help facilitate a change effort. Facilitators working with organizations going through profound change will find this book a major resource. Anyone reading it will gain a theoretical understanding of the systemic dynamics at work in change initiatives, and surely recognize some of the challenges in their own experiences. The thought-provoking questions and exercises can be utilized in many group situations.

Like its predecessor, The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, this book is written as a collection of “notes from the field.” The book is structured around the three major phases of change: 1) initiating change, 2) sustaining momentum, and 3) redesigning or redirecting the organization. The myriad personal stories it contains illustrate what often happens in a system undergoing change, and in meeting challenges of sustaining change inherent in each phase. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the book is the stories, gleaned from conversations and interviews, relating experiences of change efforts. The stories are written in a first-person style. The leaders openly share their vulnerabilities and the mistakes they made. They relate the excitement, the frustration, the confusion, the surprise, and the satisfaction of their experiences. They tell of their struggle to understand what was going on, of the organizational resistance they met, the tactics they used, and the creativity catalyzed in meeting the challenges of leading their organizational change efforts.

The Dance of Change is the authors’ attempt to make sense of change efforts, both the failures and the successes, and to create a framework that holds the dynamics of the change journey. They bring into a coherent whole the fragments of experience from these stories recounted by organizational change leaders. The Dance of Change is seen by its authors as an atlas of organizational change. They tell how early mapmakers drew maps based on the tales told by early explorers, descriptions of the terrain and the coastlines, the dangers experienced, the discoveries made. Later, early atlas makers gathered the rough-drawn charts, notes, and experiences of early explorers into bound collections. Later still, Geradus Mercator, with longitudinal and latitudinal grid lines created a framework of the earth as a whole, an image that is very familiar to us. In a similar way, the six authors of this book describe the terrain, the dan-
The Dance of Change is not just a collection of intriguing stories. Equally compelling are the images, frameworks, models, and definitions of aspects of the change journey that the stories illustrate. Here are a few of these key concepts.

Profound Change: The authors consciously chose the phrase “profound change” to describe the scope and quality of the change this book deals with. They rejected the more ubiquitous label of “transformation” because they fear it has come to mean “really big change,” which is much less than the change they are attempting to describe. The authors describe a fundamental, profound change incorporating both an internal shift in people’s values, aspirations, and behaviors, and external changes in the fundamental thinking patterns of organizations that underlie organizational choices of strategy, structures, and systems.

Think Like Biologists: A major premise of the authors is that more expert advice or more committed managers can’t solve the problems that face organizations today. These problems have become the targets of “flavor of the month” change programs. Senge urges us to think less like managers and more like biologists! All growth in nature arises out of interplay between reinforcing growth processes and limiting processes. He illustrates this with the scenario of a seed which holds the possibility of a tree, and through a natural reinforcing growth process, begins to realize that possibility. Initial feelers take in water and nutrients, then small roots develop, then larger roots and more growth. How successful the seed is in becoming a tree, or what progress it makes depends on natural limits, the amount of water, nutrients, sunshine, space for expansion, and insects. Growth that doesn’t reach full potential has encountered some constraint that is a natural balancing process in living systems. Senge likens most change leaders to gardeners standing over their plants shouting “Grow! Try harder! You can do it!” What can we learn from this analogy? That “sustaining change requires understanding the reinforcing growth processes and what is needed to catalyze them, and simultaneously addressing the limits that keep change from occurring.” This interplay between the two processes is the “dance of change” referred to in the book’s title. Most leaders deal only with the growth processes and don’t pay attention to the limiting processes. Those involved in change or considering how to change must learn to work with nature’s way and give atten-
tion to both the growth processes and the limiting processes. Drawing on the insights of practitioners, the book shows how leaders at many levels of an organization can nurture both the reinforcing growth processes of organizational change, and strategically deal with the limiting processes that can impede or stop that growth.

Leaders of Profound Change: Senge views leadership as the “capacity of a human community to shape its future, and specifically to sustain the significant processes of change required to do so.” The book focuses on “leadership communities” rather than hero-leaders. Organizations that rely on a hero-leader will never achieve the profound change the Dance of Change describes. Three levels of leadership must help generate and sustain a kind of creative tension between the vision and current reality of the organization. They are 1) imaginative, committed local line leaders, 2) enthusiastic mid-level community builders or network leaders, and 3) executive leaders who, in addition to their accountability for organizational performance, must create an environment of innovation and knowledge generation. The book explores these roles with emphasis given to the actions the leaders take, not their personal “style” characteristics.

Critical Learning Capacities: The underlying cause of failure in most change initiatives is that the organization has not developed the learning capabilities necessary to reflect on, inquire about, and talk openly together about impeding structures, practices, and mindsets that are blocking change. People can’t raise the serious issues that need to be addressed without invoking defensiveness. The authors still see that the five disciplines described in The Fifth Discipline (personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking) support the crucial learning capabilities of aspiration, reflective conversation, and understanding complexity. To change, organizations must develop their learning capabilities, “the skills and proficiencies that among individuals, teams, and larger communities, enable people to consistently enhance their capacity to produce results that are truly important to them.”

Three Phases—Ten Challenges

As changes in ways of working and thinking become evident, challenges arise predictably in each of three phases in the life cycle of change. They are manifestations of how the system itself is pushing back, the natural process of moving toward homeostasis. Most change initiatives focus only on the growth processes and not the limiting processes. The ten challenges described in the
Book Reviews

book are initially phrased, not in systems jargon, but in everyday language heard in most change situations:

Initiating Change
1. We don’t have time for this stuff!
2. We have no help!
3. This stuff isn’t relevant!
4. They’re not walking the talk!

Sustaining Momentum
5. This stuff is ___.! [fill in the blank]
6. This stuff isn’t working!
7. We have the right way/They don’t understand us!

Redesigning the Organization
8. Who’s in charge of this stuff?
9. We keep reinventing the wheel!
10. Where are we going? What are we here for?

The thickness of the book (570 pages) may be off-putting to some, but it was not written to be read front to back. Initially, I scanned the book, stopping at particularly intriguing spots, jumping from one section to another. Later I went through the book from front to back for the purpose of this review. I confess it was overwhelming. There is so much here, it is impossible to hold it all in your head at once. Some sections can be confusing to those unfamiliar with systems thinking. To their credit, the authors try to clarify each diagram with an explanation. The structure of the book facilitates remembering the three major categories of initiating, sustaining, and redesigning. The substructure of each challenge section gives a map with increasingly familiar landmarks (the challenge description, the system diagram for that challenge, strategies that have worked in dealing with the challenge, stories the illustrate those strategies, and, exercises to do as a team or individually) that makes it easy to navigate through the very rich landscape. Particularly helpful features are:

- **margin icons**, small graphic symbols, identifying different types of material, such as suggestions for the three leadership roles, or an exercise for a group or one that you do alone – a solo exercise, practical techniques, or guiding ideas the authors found meaningful.

- **systems diagrams** for each of the ten challenges to change, and an initial tutorial in how to read them

- a **lexicon** that gives the roots of words in current use, especially the jargon of organizational change, and a thoughtful description of the author’s meaning and use of the word—words like assessment, governance, time, and tacit knowledge.

- sets of reflective questions to consider using to help groups think systemically together about their situation or their experience, a virtual treasure chest of dialogue questions. It was gratifying to me to see the continual emphasis on profound communication and to find the practical help to enable this to happen.

- well-written paragraph-long descriptions on recommended books on related topics

- brief intriguing introductions to the authors of each illustrating story.

My advice to readers: begin anywhere your interest or need takes you and go forward or backward from there. Read it in chunks and give yourself some time in between to soak up the ideas. Look through the Orientation section that briefly reviews the five disciplines of The Fifth Discipline and how to read a systems diagram. This section also describes the margin icons found throughout the book that will help you navigate through to sections that are of particular interest to the reader. The Dance of Change is resource rich. It makes quite an interactive read, with links identifying related topics in other sections of the book, and in other books. Reading it and following the suggested resource topic threads is rather like clicking on links on the Internet. In fact, the authors encourage readers’ feedback and comments via their website address, www.fieldbook.com.

Sometimes I found it hard to put down the book, as the intriguing titles were seductive. Some of my favorites: Barking and Nonbarking Dogs, Climbing Out of the Muck, The Pinecone Strategy, “As One Of The First Black Engineers In South Africa,” Heretical Tactics, and The Perils of Shared Ideals. The first-person style and crisp writing of the illustrating stories also drew me in. I experienced it not unlike passing by a TV set and getting sucked into the program on my way to doing something else.

This book is a valuable addition to the library of any facilitator working on a systems level with client organizations. The review of systems dynamics was very helpful. Perhaps you, like myself, find it difficult to “read” systems diagrams, or to remember them without a visual picture. After going through the diagrams that accompanied each of the ten challenges, I felt much more comfortable in interpreting them. It was informative to read about how the challenges show up in each phase of change; I was reminded of several instances in past work situations. The resources that are included—both exercises to do with teams and books written by other authors on the topic of
each challenge—are likely to be greatly appreciated; facilitators will find some favorites here and some new ones to explore. I had immediate use for two sections of the book, and recommend them highly. One is an extensive discussion on coaching and mentoring, one of today’s “hot” topics. The other has very helpful information about assessment and measurement of change, along with suggested ways to help a group devise assessment criteria that is appropriate for them.

In the final section of the book Senge reiterates the dynamics of the dance of change, the interplay between the reinforcing factors and the limiting factors to growth. The challenges of change are dynamic, non-linear, and interdependent. He uses the balancing process and compensating feedback that is a natural aspect of the growth process, an illustration of how a living system works to maintain its internal balances, conserving the status quo. Organizational leaders should pay attention to what the balancing process is conserving. In this summary, Senge again speaks of change leaders as constituents of a leadership “ecology” which includes, but is not limited to, the local line leaders, the executive leaders, and the network leaders described earlier.

He concludes with the point that in learning to initiate and sustain change, and in developing the capabilities that support organizational learning, we build a foundation to begin addressing core issues of society. These are the deep problems facing our planet that won’t be fixed by a few great leaders. As more people become capable of thinking systemically about problems and learn to talk openly about the deep, underlying issues that face us, we will gain confidence in our ability to search for ways to address complex issues together. Hopefully, he writes, this capability and confidence will begin to spill over into other aspects of society. In this endeavor, we will be guided by a few core images of the world we want to create, based on how the natural world operates rather than those of industrial society that has given rise to these problems. Perhaps the guiding image may be “that of the Earth itself, the living system that is our home.”

In summary, reading this book was like opening a treasure chest of resources, ideas, models, and provocative, reflective questions for helping groups journey through profound change. The metaphor the authors suggest, an atlas of change, is definitely appropriate. With this book in hand, a change leader, whether facilitator or manager, will be able to navigate the journey with awareness and confidence. Advance warning of inherent challenges along the way and suggestions of ways of addressing them alleviate some of the anxiety of embarking on such a journey.

References

Patricia R. Tuecke is the president of Sierra Circle Consulting in Reno, Nevada. She is a facilitation consultant in organizational development and assists organizations in creating and implementing effective strategies for initiating important changes. Mrs. Tuecke has consulted to public, private, and volunteer organizations for over twenty years in the US, Europe and Asia. She helped develop the Technology of Participation® (ToP®) and trains facilitators in those methods. A major focus of her work is designing and facilitating group processes to help management teams plan systemically for the future of their organizations, including developing a shared vision and strategic resolution of critical issues that may impede success. She designs interactive training programs, delivers presentations and seminars on management topics, coaches managers, and does shadow consulting with practitioners using ToP® methods and other large group processes. She is a founding member of the International Association of Facilitators. Contact at: Sierra Circle Consulting, 514 Island Avenue, Reno, NV 89501; Phone: 775-333-6998; Fax: 775-333-1088; ptglobal@winning.com

85

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