

# Living and Learning: A Conversation with Peter M. Senge

*Peter M. Senge is a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management. He is also founding chair of the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL), a global community of corporations, researchers, and consultants dedicated to the interdependent development of people and their institutions. He is the author of The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization (Doubleday, 1990), which the Harvard Business Review has described as one of the seminal management books of the past seventy-five years. In Senge's new book, Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future (SoL, 2004), he and co-authors C. Otto Sharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers explore their own experiences and those of 150 scientists and social and business entrepreneurs in an effort to explain how profound collective change occurs.*

*Feature articles in BusinessWeek, Fortune, Fast Company, the Sloan Management Review, and other leading business periodicals have highlighted the work of Senge and his colleagues at MIT and SoL. The Journal of Business Strategy in 1999 named Senge as one of the twenty-four people who have had the greatest influence on business strategy in the past one hundred years. The Financial Times in 2000 called Senge one of the world's top management gurus, and BusinessWeek in 2001 rated him as one of the top ten management gurus.*

*Senge has lectured extensively*



*throughout the world, translating the abstract ideas of systems theory into tools for our better understanding of economic and organizational change. His areas of special interest focus on decentralizing the role of leadership in order to enhance people's capacity to work productively toward common goals, especially the creation of more balanced patterns of economic, social, and environmental health. He has worked with leaders in business, education, health care, and government.*

*Karen Dyer, manager of CCL's Education Sector, recently interviewed Senge about his ideas on the theory of learning organizations.*

**KD: You have described yourself as an idealistic pragmatist. What does that mean?**

**PS:** I guess I consider my core work—what I spend most of my time doing and what I care most about—to

be about how people can achieve significant changes. I'm not really a book writer; I got roped into writing *The Fifth Discipline* after years of resisting it. I'm much more interested in how we actually achieve the kind of changes that are needed rather than just talking about them.

**KD: In your books, including *The Fifth Discipline*, you talk about the paradigm shifts needed for organizations to become learning organizations. And learning organizations seems to be the buzzword right now. But what are the paradigm shifts that can actually enable organizations to learn collectively?**

**PS:** We can talk about this on many different levels, and the very term *paradigm shift* probably trivializes it a bit because it makes it sound like a single change. At the individual level, it's easy for any of us to espouse learning, but we've been conditioned by years of institutionalization. It really starts when we're six or seven years old; as schoolchildren we learned that success is all about getting the right answers, not about learning. If we had approached walking the way we approached learning in school, we never would have learned to walk. The only reason you actually learn to do something new is because it's something you really care about and you're willing to stick your neck out for, and you make a ton of mistakes, but you have to embrace that mistake-making mode. Children by their nature are marvelous learners because

they don't have a lot of ego invested in not looking foolish. By the time we're ten years old, usually we've started to strive to avoid making mistakes. By the time we're twenty, it's all about looking good, and by the time we're thirty, it's hopeless.

At the individual level this represents a really big change, and you can talk about it in a lot of different ways, but maintaining our spirit as learners is a very deep challenge. If we're really serious about it, we have to commit our lives to learning. But if you look more closely, there are certain aspects of our lives where we really do embrace learning—where it's something that really does matter a lot to us, we know it's not going to be quick, and we're willing to look foolish and make mistakes. Unfortunately, that usually doesn't characterize our way of operating professionally. In the professional domain, as managers, teachers, or engineers, we get back into this notion of, "I've got to have the right answers; if I don't have the right answers, I better make sure that I look like I have the right answers." So there's this personal level of being learning oriented, and then there's the collective level, as within work teams or larger networks that comprise an organization. In many ways the most important level is the collective.

**KD: So it's about learning, but it's also about what is the collective and who is the collective.**

**PS:** Exactly. And I do believe that organizations are important and businesses are really important, because business is probably the most powerful institution in the world. It's the most global institution in the world—the big multinationals have, arguably, much more global impact than most countries. In fact many are bigger than most economies.

So business is very important. It's not the only game in town, but if you ask, "How can some of the global patterns of conflict—between

rich and poor, globalizers and globalized, people deeply worried about social and environmental destruction and those who believe the status quo patterns are OK—shift?" I think leadership from business is vital. Unfortunately, up until five years ago there were virtually no businesses serious about it. Today I think that's changing. I think there's now a significant minority. It's still a minority, but it is significant. They're starting to see that if they don't take real leadership, these conflicts will continue to get worse and there will be growing threats to social and political stability.

**KD: Regarding this significant minority, are you talking about whole groups or just pockets within organizations?**

**PS:** Both. I think it always comes down to pockets, but in some cases the pockets might include the chairman or the CEO. Still, we're talking about such a profound change. To illustrate what I mean by this, take the idea that the purpose of the business is to maximize profitability. This is crazy. It's never really characterized the best companies. They see profit as a necessary condition to be healthy, but it's not a sufficient condition. Yet maximizing shareholder return has become a kind of religion for the business community over the last twenty years—it's all about shareholder return. It's totally crazy. If you consider all of the stakeholders of a business, the one that cares about you the least is the shareholder. If you don't give an adequate return to your shareholders, they'll take their money somewhere else. And if you look at all the resources that a business needs to be successful, in many ways the most abundant is financial capital. With the evolution of financial markets, there are lots and lots of ways to get capital. So we're trying to optimize the most abundant resource, while genuinely scarce and even diminishing resources such as

talent, human and social capital, and the services nature provides us for free—such as clean air, drinkable water, and fertile soil and fisheries—are ignored in most corporate decisions. Again, it's totally nuts. For example, the members of the organization—the people who commit a major portion of their lives to the organization—were traditionally seen as an expense rather than an asset. Then you think about the way we ignore the human communities and the larger living systems that we all depend upon, and the whole thing is kind of backwards. Obviously the customer is vital in that equation, but a lot of companies just pay lip service to really serving their customers.

**KD: What personal experiences have influenced your thinking about sustaining change and the challenges you just outlined? Can you tell me a little about the evolution of your thinking?**

**PS:** I think the experiences have all been very similar; they've just been opportunities to see and be a part of significant change. Probably two-thirds, or maybe a little more, have been in business settings and the other third in all kinds of different settings. I have been able to see some really gifted change leaders at work and have had opportunities to hang out with and learn from them.

**KD: What are some of the things that have influenced the thinking in your new book, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*?**

**PS:** I always try my best to talk about things based on experience rather than just ideas. Academics have almost an inevitable professional disability of talking about their ideas as opposed to what they have experienced firsthand. I remember when Arie de Geus was writing his book [*The Living Company: Growth, Learning, and Longevity in Business*], about five years after he had retired as an execu-

tive of Shell. Arie had spent ten years at Shell trying to create a whole approach to planning that was really about learning and influencing the way managers thought. I remember him saying, “Academics write about what they think about; practitioners reflect on what they’ve experienced.” That really resonated with me, because to the best of my ability I have always tried to do the same thing. I think that the books I have been involved with have been grounded in this way. *The Fifth Discipline* was based on fifteen years of experience. I would not have written the book and would not have had the conviction about those basic tools and methods and ideas if I hadn’t seen tons and tons of people doing it. The subsequent fieldbooks [*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (Currency, 1994); *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (Currency, 1999); and *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education* (Currency, 2000)] were each written by fifty to a hundred people, many of whom were practicing managers, team leaders, teachers, and principals. *Presence* was a little different. Although we did our best to base it also on direct experience, we were trying to reflect a little deeper on what seems to sit at the heart of the most profound and particularly large-scale change processes we had been part of. We finally concluded that the only way to talk about it was to make part of the book conversations—reflecting together on our personal experiences and stories. Despite the differences, I think the core of these books has been the same—to reflect and try to make sense of what we’ve experienced firsthand.

**KD:** What then would be the implications—and I’m sure you touch on it in *Presence*—for the whole

**idea of collective awareness or sacred mind for organizations?**

**PS:** You might say it’s what defines an organization at a deep level. If you take any organization, such as a school, a business, or CCL—imagine you’re talking to an eight-year-old and you’re trying to explain to the child what the organization actually is. It’s not an easy question. You come to see the building—“Well, that’s just a building.” You look at the annual report—“Well, that’s just a book.” Somehow you have to deal with people doing something, and then you say, “Well, they do lots of things, but what is it that really defines our practice at its best?” I think pretty quickly you’ll start to say, “There’s a lot of stuff we do that’s not that great or not that effective, but sometimes we really do it right.” And at that point you start to confront the fact that there is a kind of collective thinking and acting that goes on when any organization is really at its best. What is it we really do when what we do is what we’re most proud of?

In some ways the metaphor I was using a lot when we were working on *Presence* was the rings of a tree. The principles and tools that became the five disciplines are quite fundamental to collective learning—how we think together about our mental models, how we talk together in ways that really have meaning, how we understand the larger systems that we’re always creating, and what it means to have purpose and vision. But there are even more inner rings of the tree that come closer and closer to the source of it, to the subtle fields of awareness and intention that underlie collective work when it is truly creative.

**KD:** So if this is something that goes on in an organization for a lot of people a lot of times, or maybe sporadically, then to replicate it you have to capture it and then talk about how to cause this to happen more often with more people.

**PS:** And I’m not that optimistic that we can capture it abstractly, but at least we can talk about it, tell our own stories, and then the key is to find ways to bring it out. In other words, the real reason for writing *Presence* was to see if it could be helpful for people who are more and more conscious about this kind of experience of collective creating and who can talk about it and work on it more directly.

**KD:** The topic you’ve chosen for your presentation at CCL’s 2004 Friends of the Center Leadership Conference [September 29 through October 1, in Oak Brook, Illinois] is “Creating a Global Society: Separation Without Separateness.” Can you give me a preview?

**PS:** The phrase *separation without separateness* came from physicist David Bohm, who also originally inspired our work on dialogue. He used to say that separation without separateness is the character of the universe. What separation without separateness means to me is that, at one level, we’re separate—there’s Karen and there’s Peter. We’re separate physically—we’re embodied as human beings with a degree of separateness, and the same is true for all of nature. However, at a deeper level, there may be levels of connectedness that we tend to not be aware of. Just to illustrate, Bohm proposed a particular form of extreme connectedness that was radical, literally violating one of the cornerstones of Newtonian physics. The idea has now been corroborated sufficiently that most physicists now consider it a theory—Bell’s Theorem, named for the physicist who first demonstrated the phenomenon experimentally. Still, it’s a complete mystery given our conventional ways of thinking. It’s called non-locality or quantum entanglement, and it started as a derivation of the mathematics of quantum theory: the idea that if you take an atom-

ic particle and split it, then you take the two separated particles and alter the spin of one, the spin of the other will alter instantaneously, even if the two particles are on opposite ends of the universe. So there is separation without separateness. Versions of the experiment proposed by Bohm have now been carried out even at distances of several thousand miles. If you alter the spin of one of those particles, the other alters instantaneously. This defies conventional notions of causality, where something affects something else through a form of contact or measurable force that gets weaker at greater distances. Bohm said this was not the case, that distance had nothing to do with the result, and that the connect- edness was a feature of the universe.

Similar experiments have now been done with photons, where the light particles are separated at a great distance from each other. One physi- cist used this analogy: It's like two people flipping coins. Each coin flip is random, yet once the two people have been connected, they can go to opposite ends of the universe and every time they flip their coins, the same side will come up for both of

them. And now there are so many examples of this that have been demonstrated at the atomic or sub- atomic level. What more and more physicists are speculating—and this is what Bohm was trying to say—is that this is not just true for the quan- tum universe, this is the condition of the universe, the human condition— separation without separateness.

There are physicists today doing fascinating experiments. For exam- ple, a group based at Princeton has been monitoring random number generators [RNGs] around the world for five years. RNGs are computer programs designed and physically established in a way that makes them immune to any kind of influence, be it electromagnetic waves, telecom- munication waves, or even seismic waves. The basic hypothesis being tested in the RNG research is that there exist fields of human thought and emotion and that shifts in these fields might be registered in these random number generators. So they've been monitoring these RNGs around the world, looking for reac- tions to significant events in the human sphere. And they appear to be finding these reactions quite reliably,

the most significant being the instan- taneous reaction of the network of RNGs to the events of September 11, 2001. The entire network of thirty- seven RNGs around the world behaved very anomalously in con- junction with the unfolding events of the morning of September 11.

I believe such research confirms what many of us working with human systems know intuitively— here is a spirit of team. Experienced and sensitive managers and consul- tants can often sense the “space” in a team meeting, be it fear or deep con- fidence. We believe that gifted lead- ers of all types work with these fields or this space by holding the whole of a team in their consciousness, by learning how to be completely honest about their feelings, and by cultivat- ing their own vulnerability. These skills may be rare and many organi- zations may effectively drive them out, but they are evident in many people and even distributed in some work groups. We believe that the more we can understand these subtle field phenomena, the more we may be able to more reliably release col- lective creativity and the capacity for innovating new social systems. ✍

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## How Leaders Can Bridge the Identity Gap

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4. *Asking clarifying questions:* improving one's understanding of the other person's message and clearing up confusion; in a supportive tone, asking questions such as, “Can you help me understand this?” or, “Could you elaborate on this?”

5. *Making positive assertions:* conveying one's thoughts and feelings and providing feedback to the other person by describing the situation, the behavior, and the personal impact; saying, for example, “During our

telephone conversation yesterday afternoon, I heard you say this, and as a result I felt . . .”

By practicing these skills, leaders enhance their ability to get on other people's wavelengths. They learn to go beyond the tendency to immedi- ately judge, evaluate, or criticize other people's thoughts and feelings. In the words of American lawyer and theolo- gian William Stringfellow, “Listening is a primitive act of love in which a person gives himself to another's word, making himself accessible and

vulnerable to that word.” So listening is risky because it can change people's understanding of themselves and oth- ers. As was the case with the manager Terry, having doubts about being able to connect with others who are differ- ent is understandable. But such doubts can and must be overcome by skill- fully building bridges across the divides of social identity. ✍

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