



'Working With' Models of Leadership

FACT SHEET

The term 'Working With' models of leadership describes the blend of leadership theories and principles which encourage, support and value humane work practices. These theories can be traced back to the 1920's work of Mary Parker Follett (Graham, 1995) through the 1990's and the learning organization movement (Senge, 1990, for example) to the present day.

Our traditional view of leaders—as special people who set the direction, make the key decisions, and energize the troops—are deeply rooted in an individualist and non systemic worldview. Our prevailing leadership myths are still captured by the image of the captain of the cavalry leading the charge to rescue the settlers from attack. So long as such myths prevail, they reinforce the focus on short-term events and charismatic heroes rather than on systemic forces and collective learning.

The new view of leadership in learning organizations centers on subtler and more important tasks. In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models—that is, they are responsible for learning. (Senge, 1990 p 340)

Peter Senge is the founder of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT's Sloan School of Management. In 1999 the Journal of Business Strategy named Senge one of the 24 people who'd had the greatest influence on business strategy over the last 100 years.

Senge's seminal text on learning organization theory "*The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*" offers a blueprint for individuals and organisations to move from 'working for' thinking and management structures to more contemporary 'working with' structures appropriate for knowledge workers and knowledge organisations operating in a global knowledge-based economy.

Learning Organisation Theory is based on the following five disciplines:

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- 1. Personal Mastery** Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening personal vision, of focusing energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. As such it is an essential cornerstone of the learning organization... An organization's commitment to and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members.
 - 2. Mental Models** Mental models are (often unconscious) deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. They reflect our worldviews.
 - 3. Building Shared Vision** When there is a genuine vision, people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. What has been lacking is a discipline for translating individual vision into shared vision, a set of principles and guiding practices to unearth shared 'pictures of the future' that foster genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance.
 - 4. Team Learning** The discipline of team learning starts with "dialogue", the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together".
 - 5. Systems Thinking** Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools developed to make the patterns of human and business endeavours clearer, and make effective change. Systems thinking is the *fifth discipline*, integrating all disciplines and fusing them all into a coherent body of theory and practice. By enhancing each of the other disciplines, it continually reminds us that the whole can exceed the sum of its parts.

Senge (1990) pp 5 - 11



To value staff then for their *golden capital* and their capacity to contribute ideas for the sustainability of their organisation—rather than as expendable units of labour—is a mark of an organisation's engagement and preparation for a knowledge-based economy.

Golden capital, a term I have coined to express the invaluable and intangible assets of the knowledge worker, based on their:

human capital—the collective knowledge, competency, experience and skills of people

social capital—access through established relationships of resources that include information, ideas, leads, business opportunities, financial capital, power, emotional support, goodwill, trust and co-operation

intellectual capital—the best known of these intangibles because it is already a commodity. Intellectual capital is knowledge that can be exploited for profit or other useful purposes. The term combines intellect with the economic concept of capital

Ideally, the adoption of 'working with' leadership practices like learning organisation theory will best support knowledge workers so they can make best use of their golden capital. This will lead to contemporary organisations operating effectively in a global knowledge-based economy.

Are we there yet? Are we moving to 'working with' leadership and management practices? Well, put simply, "the future is here, it is just unevenly distributed"¹. Some people, some organisations, some countries have taken this agenda further than others. Some have begun the process of change necessary for what is likely to be the next paradigmatic shift in society—similar for example, to the industrial revolution—some have not.

The task of what is ostensibly a huge social engineering program cannot be underestimated. It is appropriate therefore to look backward whilst preparing for the future because history is a salient indicator of change.

Anthropologists use social data and models from the past to provide a frame or a context for the future. The details of millions of years of history and hundreds of societies reveal patterns. What we see is that values and culture are often the last systems to change. Vestiges of old beliefs hang on long after the technological, economic and demographic systems have changed. (James, 1996 p 22)

References

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¹ This quote is widely attributed to William Gibson a science fiction author

