

A Prescription for Systemic Learning Management

By Vertel T. Martin



Policing in the 21st century requires law enforcement executives, managers, and supervisors to learn more about the ideas, concepts, theories, and research surrounding organizational learning, learning organizations, and systemic policing. Although many different definitions exist for these terms, Peter Senge's notions introduced a creative framework of how institutions can change their perspectives about how to operate.¹ He emphasized the importance of learning in organizations and outlined five key internal interventions for it to continuously occur in them: mental models, personal mastery, team learning, shared vision, and systems thinking.² Senge's premise was that "if these five areas of practice were introduced and cultivated within an organization, it could help to enhance the learning capacities of that organization" and its members.³

Challenging Mental Models

According to Senge, mental models exist in the minds of members of organizations.⁴ These

include the thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions that we hold based upon our knowledge, experiences, and opinions. These mental models are so deeply ingrained in our minds that we cannot readily access nor easily examine them and, therefore, cannot change them without considerable effort. The task of learning requires that we first exhume and scrutinize our mental models because "they influence everything we do, sometimes without us even knowing it."⁵ Only then can we challenge the premises upon which we base them.

This means that police officials need to engage in premise reflection in the way that adult-learning theorist Dr. Jack Mezirow envisioned.⁶ Are our thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes based upon sound reasoning and up-to-date evidence, or are they the result of tradition, malaise, or officially sanctioned knowledge? Are they frozen in time, or can they be defrosted periodically to respond to the elasticity required for the organization to survive?

Fostering Personal Mastery

Senge described personal mastery as the continuous, on-going improvement on the use of information and resources to achieve better results.⁷ Essentially, this means that learning should take place on a day-to-day basis and that the discourse among members of an organization is desirable and necessary because it improves the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities of the employees.

Initiating Team Learning

Senge emphasized team learning, which involves working well as a group.⁸ The agency needs to place emphasis on teaching members how to execute tasks together as a whole organism.⁹ They all must perform their functions for the team to be "fruitful" and to enhance the survival of the institution. If members work separately or do not perform in accordance with their potential, the team (and the system) will fail.

Leaders must promote team building and team work. Managers must communicate with members and reinforce the fact that they are an integral part

of a commendable mission and a worthy organization. Leaders must encourage their managers to engage in acts that inspire “knowing, thinking, remembering, and learning.”¹⁰

Sharing the Vision

To effect change in an organization, leaders should “dismantle old cultures in order to adapt to new realities.”¹¹ Executives must announce new goals and institute new ways of conducting police-related affairs. They must publish and distribute new vision and mission statements, as well as define new values and goals.

Senge stressed the necessity of an organization having a shared vision and mission.¹² When it has these, employees or members of that entity have a shared goal, direction, and purpose. They understand “why the organization exists and how their roles contribute to making the organization better.”¹³

Introducing Systems Thinking

Executives must introduce and operationalize the idea of systems dynamics and not allow units to operate in isolation. They need to stress the imperative of interconnectedness of various intraorganizational units to sustain the institution as a whole. For example, detective squads should work with and through internal and external support and operational units and readily share information, intelligence, and newly acquired learning strategies with other specialized squads, units, divisions, bureaus, and agencies. Only then will the execution of tactics and strategies occur in a coordinated, systematic fashion.

Systems thinking is a paradigm that explains the interconnectedness and interdependence of the parts of an organization. This reliance is so profound that a failure of the functionality of a part can adversely affect the entire agency. Similarly,

proficiency of the part can lead to positive effects on the system or institution (e.g., sustainability, success, and survival).

Systems thinking deconstructs the notion of the organization as a machine made up of interchangeable parts. Instead, Senge noted that “members of an organization and the causes of problems in the organization are part of a single system. It does no good, therefore, to blame others or outside circumstances for any difficulties being faced by the organization—the solutions to problems being faced by the organization lie within the organization.”¹⁴ This notion has been validated from the point of view of the entire criminal justice system, as well as from its component parts.

Conclusion

Under the former New York City police commissioner and deputy commissioner’s tutelage and guidance, systems-thinking enlightened managers, like me, began asking some pertinent questions. What have

we learned? How do we learn? No longer content with acquiring mere informational content, we began to concern ourselves with “the process of acquiring, processing, operationalizing, and storing information.”¹⁵ We were leaders who became learners ourselves. We, in turn, inspired new leaders and learners. We began to open up ourselves to different ways of knowing and learning. Hence, new crime-control strategies began to spring up; old ineffective ways of doing business began to be “unlearned.”¹⁶

Eventually, the momentum of organizational learning and systems thinking will begin to accelerate throughout the agency. The “carriers” of change will become addicted to the idea of what can be. They, in turn, will spread their infections. This new philosophy will “enter into the stream of debates and deliberations” that will affect the

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organization's "policies, programs, and practices."¹⁷ In short, a systemically based institution is on its way to becoming a successful, results-oriented learning organization. ♦

Endnotes

- ¹ For additional background information, see <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>.
- ² C. Kochner and T.R. McMahon, "What TQM Does Not Address," in *Total Quality Management*, ed. W. Bryan (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 89.
- ³ B. Frydman, I. Wilson, and J. Wyer, *The Power of Collaborative Leadership: Lessons for the Learning Organization* (San Diego, CA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000), 5.
- ⁴ Supra note 2, 90.
- ⁵ Supra note 2, 89-90.
- ⁶ S. Merriam and R. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 328.

- ⁷ Supra note 2, 90.
- ⁸ Supra note 2, 91.
- ⁹ F. Capra, *The Web of Life* (New York, NY: Anchor Doubleday, 1996).
- ¹⁰ C. Argyris and D. Schon, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).
- ¹¹ Supra note 3, xv.
- ¹² Supra note 2, 92.
- ¹³ Supra note 2, 92.
- ¹⁴ Supra note 2, 93.
- ¹⁵ Supra note 10, 3.
- ¹⁶ Supra note 10, 3-4.
- ¹⁷ Supra note 10, 7.

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