Development Of A Learning Organization

David J. Bull
EAD 801
December 7, 2007

The day I signed up for this course I expected to learning something that I would be able

to use in my role as a Head Start Director. I had several projects in mind that have not been

successfully dealt with and my thoughts were about learning something new that would help.

These projects were not necessarily big, but nonetheless I thought that improvements would

enhance the program. I am convinced that they are roadblocks preventing us from moving

ahead. The projects I had in mind were:

- Writing a new mission statement

- Rewriting our service plan to better reflect how we provide services to children
  and families (a requirement of our federal grant award)

- Rewriting our monitoring plan to better reflect how our systems are set up to
  identify areas of poor performance (a requirement of our federal grant award)

As the course progressed we learned about emotional intelligence and systems thinking.

I began developing ideas, based on my newly acquired knowledge, about how to make progress

on these roadblocks facing the program. The topics of emotional intelligence and consensus

decision making are very well suited to making progress on these projects. As I thought about

what I would do after this class was over, that was the direction I was thinking about; emotional

intelligence and consensus decision making. However, after reading Peter Senge's book "The

Fifth Discipline," revised and updated in 2006, I realized that I wanted to focus on the process of

transitioning the program into a learning organization. This is a much bigger concept than

emotional intelligence or consensus decision making. I am not giving up on these projects, but

they are just issues that need to be dealt with, and they will be. The whole idea of becoming a

learning organization is big and will not prevent me from working on these or other projects.

> Building learning-oriented cultures is hard work in any setting. It takes months and years
> – indeed, it is a never-ending journey. It is fraught with risks, either of failing to realize
> true cultural change or of succeeding in doing so and thus becoming a threat to those who
> want to keep things as they are. Building learning-oriented cultures is demanding
> because learning stretches us personally, and it is always easier to stay in our comfort
> zone. (Senge, 2006, p. 272)

I am at the beginning of a long journey.

One of the main reasons for my interest in developing a learning organization is my

desire to work in an organization where we recognize that our work is interconnected and that

we should always be striving together to take the next step forward. Where we celebrate our

successes but realize that we can and should do better. I have always thought about the next step

and how we can do things better. Success feels good but I have always felt that improvements

can be made and that I should not be the only one interested in making or supplying the ideas for

those improvements. This is best described by Senge himself.

> The tools and ideas presented in this book are for destroying the illusion that the work is
> created of separate, unrelated forces. When we give up this illusion –we can then build
> 'learning organizations,' organizations where people continually expand their capacity
> to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of think are
> nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually
> learning how to learn together. (Senge, 2006, p. 3)

I recognize that the move to becoming a learning organization is not going to be an easy one nor will it be quick. However, it is a necessary move for two reasons; one, our own thinking is limiting our growth, and, second, change is coming whether we like it or not.

As far as the issue of our own thinking is limiting ourselves is concerned, Senge writes that "when we focus only on our position, we do not see how our own actions extend beyond the boundary of that position." (Senge, 2006, p. 19) I have staff members that are so focused on their own positions they do not see value in some of the other positions that we have and consequently cannot see how they can work with others to achieve their goals and the program's goals. Head Start's history spans over 40 years, with the first 30 years operating with a set of Performance Standards that set things up so that program components (departments) should operate separately from each other and that the work of one component had little impact on the work of another component. There are some on staff who have been in the program for almost all of Head Start's 40 plus years of existence. Their thinking about how the work gets done began with these expectations. We all do our own job and the work will get done. In 1998, this changed with the implementation of a new set of Performance Standards. The focus of the new standards has been on systems thinking. All services to children and families are to be provided through various systems that are set up within local programs. Until I took this course, I never truly grasped the concept of systems thinking. I have always been able to operate within these systems, but because I am such a linear thinker where I need step one followed by step two I just envisioned systems as being flow charts that showed how the work was completed and also showed how the systems were interconnected.   I just never understood the importance or relevance of describing this as a system. This course and in particular Senge's book has taken my thinking beyond Head Start's concept of systems thinking and into the realm of learning

organizations. I better understand the concept of systems thinking in Head Start, but I now feel that the concept and reality of learning organizations are a big step beyond that. As a program we have moved part of the way down this path in terms of recognizing that our work is not separate and that it is interrelated. However, that is only recognized by the management team and some of the staff. There are still staff members who are holding onto a belief of separateness, of operating in silos. I also believe that by becoming a learning organization then dealing with roadblocks will be part and parcel of how we operate and will not actually have to be a special project that has to be assigned to someone. So dealing with our mission statement, service plan and monitoring plan will not have to be a special project for someone to complete and then put up onto the shelf never to be looked at again. These issues will be dealt with but it will just be a part of who we are and not something that is ignored.

Whether or not we like it, we are faced with changes in Head Start that must be dealt with and that occur on a fairly consistent basis. For example, Head Start is authorized and reauthorized on a regular basis through federal legislation. Each reauthorization bill comes with changes, these are based upon a review of how Head Start is doing on a national basis and on the latest best practices that politicians are convinced need to be implemented. As a program we need to be able to deal with these changes and as the issues of accountability and outcomes become even bigger issues for us we need to adapt to the changes. I no longer believe that I can be the only one thinking about these issues. "It's just not possible any longer to figure it all from the top, and have everyone else follow the orders of the grand strategist." (Senge, 2006, p. 4) I have been the grand strategist. When I became a Head Start Director that is what I thought directors needed to be. I pictured that as my most important responsibility. The day to day

details are for others, I needed to set the direction and the tone for the program. The concept of a learning organization has moved me away from that thinking.

The fact that I have never been interested in micromanaging any area within the program is a step towards recognizing that others besides myself can provide valuable input that makes our program a success. I have been very open to ideas from management, with the expectation that they know their area and can make knowledgeable decisions. I have been less open to ideas from other staff members. Their ideas have been considered and studied but I realize now that if an idea wasn't related to something that had already been thought of by the management team or myself then it never made any headway. The idea could be the complete opposite of what I thought needed to be done, but if it was related to an existing idea then it was considered and sometimes acted upon. This, however, puts us in the position where I am the 'grand strategist' with some assistance from the management team. I can see now that we can no longer continue in this manner. There is too much unused talent in the program and up to this point we have either not figured out how to use it or have not even been interested in using it. Becoming a learning organization opens up a whole new world for us to explore and grow.

Since I am convinced that we need to transition to a learning organization the question I ask myself is: what do I need to do? One method is to do initiate all five disciplines at once:

- – Personal mastery

- – Mental models

- – Building shared learning

- – Team vision

- – Systems thinking

However, I do not expect that tactic to be successful since at this point I am only one person and the only who has even heard of a learning organization within my program. "Most people's eyes glaze over if you talk to them about 'learning' or 'learning organizations.' The words tend to immediately evoke images of sitting passively in school rooms, listening, following directions, and pleasing the teacher by avoiding making mistakes." (Senge, 2006, p. 13) This will be one of my biggest hurdles if I just jump in and say 'now we are going to be a learning organization.' I expect that staff will think the idea of a learning organization is just a fad. They will wait for this to blow over. Our Head Start program is part of our local school district and has been subject to one new idea after another with each successive Superintendent. These new ideas and the changes they spawned only lasted as long as the Superintendent and is the reason why I am concerned that this will be considered a fad that has to be waited out. I am not interested in something like that happening, I want to make it happen. The question I ask myself is: how do I initiate the transition to a learning organization without making these same mistakes?

Instead of initiating all five disciplines at once, what I plan on doing is following a strategy that will do two things. First, develop my confidence in the five disciplines. Second, develop my skills in the five disciplines. As I develop skill and confidence I expect that I will be able to share my success with others and I also expect others to notice a difference in the way that I work. "All are concerned with a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future." (Senge, 2006, p. 69) This is what I want, staff to see the whole picture. It doesn't mean they ignore their part; they need to see their part as a function of the whole. Right now, for many, their conscious thought begins and ends at the

door to their classroom or to their office and I am just concerned that if staff think that the idea

of a learning organization is just a fad then they will not be committed to the idea.

In order to develop skill and confidence I will focus on one discipline and attempt to do

four things:

– Study and attend trainings. I will study the books published by Peter Senge on the

subject of "The Fifth Discipline" and also attend trainings to further my

knowledge.

– Practice. I will practice what I have learned, I will make mistakes but I will learn

from those mistakes and practice even more. Perfection is not impossible and

thus I will not expect it.

– Exhibit patience. I will have patience with regards to the transition to a learning

organization. It will be a long and difficult road and if I do not have any patience

then I will give up prior to achieving any success.

– Model. I will model behavior based on the five disciplines, such as, reflective

thinking.

By focusing on one discipline at a time and achieving success with it I expect that this behavior

will set an example that others within the program can build off of. As interest grows I can

develop a team that will be interested in transitioning us to a learning organization. In his book,

Senge says the following two things about executive leaders. "Executive leaders… shape the

overall environment for innovation and change." "Effective executive leaders embrace the

dictum 'Actions speak louder than words,' knowing that in any organization it applies especially

to those who are most visible." (Senge, 2006, p. 320) I am in control of the manner in which this

idea is introduced, but once it is out there I believe one of my primary ways to influence what is happening is by being a role model.

Personal mastery will be the discipline that I begin with. "When personal mastery becomes a discipline – an activity we integrate into our lives – it embodies two underlying movements. The first is continually clarifying what is important to us. … The second is continually learning how to see current reality more clearly." (Senge, 2006, p. 131) It will be necessary that I diligently follow the regimen of study, practice, patience and modeling in order to master this discipline. I can do this on a personal level as well as a professional level. If I am going back and regularly clarifying what is important to me and if I am learning to see current reality more clearly, then I will be able to see the gap that exists between reality and desire and if I see that gap then I will be able to close it. Closing this gap means I am achieving personal mastery, not closing this gap means I will not be able to achieve that which is most important to me.

My first thought had been that reading the book and writing the paper would provide me with a blueprint to implement – 'ten steps to success.' What I have is the first step. Completing the first step will show me the next step. I don't know where exactly this change will take me or the program, but what I do expect "is a shift of mind – from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience." (Senge, 2006, p. 12) The journey to be embarked upon will be one where I know where I have started and I also know the direction I want to go in. I do expect along the way however that other travelers will join me and the route may very well change. We will pass milestones on the way but the journey will not end. That is the way it should be, and that is probably what will make it exciting.

Senge, Peter (2006). <u>The Fifth Discipline – The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization</u>.
Revised and updated. New York: Currency Doubleday