

THE NECESSARY REVOLUTION

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Peter Senge. The Necessary Revolution. How Individuals and Organizations are working together to create a sustainable world (2008). Doubleday, New York.

This (380 page) book is built on the premise that organizations are now faced with an imperative for sustainability. Senge states that the time is now: “The difference between many random initiatives that add up to little and a revolution that can transform society itself boils down to a shift in thinking” (p. 11).

“Fortunately, more and more people are beginning to sense that the mounting sustainability crises are interconnected – symptoms of a larger global system that is out of balance. As soon as people understand this, the view of the problem shifts. They start to see the extraordinary opportunities for innovation that can occur when we abandon fearful, reactive mentalities. They start to realize the deep problems we face today are not a result of bad luck or a greedy few. They are the result of a way of thinking whose time has passed” (p. 6, 7).

Senge who is famous for his first work, *The fifth discipline*, originally published in 1990, creating a new way of thinking about leadership using a systematic approach. Systemic approaches look at the whole of an organization to view how each of the parts connect. For example, Senge thinking would view includes looking at all stakeholders and the connections between all stakeholders before making a decision. He posits that most of business solves the immediate need and create fixes that fail (or make the problems worse in the long run), “managers may feel that they are focusing on tangible, easily measured indicators or performance and masking deeper problems, and even exacerbating these problems” (p. 158).

With this latest work Senge takes the systematic approach and applies it to the issues of sustainability. “If we see each problem- be it water shortages, climate change, or poverty,- as separate, and approach each separately the solutions we come up with be short-term, often opportunistic, “quick fixes” that do nothing to address deeper imbalances” (p. 6).

Senge describes several success stories within the Sustainability movement. He describes the mantra for how the 1996, initial phase of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) occurred, “Seek agreement and go.” This was no easy task as the stakeholders included a broad cross section of individuals with contrasting alliances. “This meant involving the full life cycle of real estate, real estate owners, financiers, engineers, architects, construction companies, to name a few). Senge describes that there were huge areas of disagreement from the seven founding members as to how to proceed “many of the meetings were pretty ugly” (p. 70). “Many LEED members believed that they needed to make a better world for their children and at the same time desired “market-based transformation.”

“Throughout the whole process, we relied on the organizational learning concept of aspiration; people oriented themselves toward what mattered most to them, rather than just problems.” Jim Hartzfeld, of Interface, one of the original ten LEED founders stated: “It was crazy to think that a small group of people could think about transforming a whole industry that represents 8 percent of the U.S. GDP, but that exactly what we had in mind (p 71).” By mid-2007, over 7500 buildings were registered with LEED. Since its inception, LEED has grown to encompass more than 14,000 projects in 50 U.S. States and 30 countries covering 1.062 billion square feet (99 km²) of development area. One example from LEED collaboration is: “system, may of which use a water-source pump to transfer heat between the earth (usually between 50 and 55 degrees) and the building to heat buildings in cooler times and cool them in warmer ones (p.75). LEED certified buildings create between “75 and 25% savings in energy” and are ultimately going to be designed like “trees and forests” or “living buildings” where buildings regenerate or generate all the power they need without taking any resources from other sources.

Senge, who is considered one of the great systems thinkers and teachers applauds all of the current efforts to use systems thinking (evaluating the whole entity rather than just solving some of the parts) in sustainability.

Senge described the new breed of sustainable systems thinkers, “These innovators are creating tomorrow’s regenerative economy and have all, in their own ways, learned how to see the larger systems in which they live and work. They look beyond events and superficial fixes to see deeper structures and forces at play, they don’t allow boundaries (either organizational or culturally imposed) to limit their thinking, they make strategic choices that take into account natural and social limits, and they work to create self-reinforcing cycles of innovation – change strategies that mimic how growth occurs in the natural world” (p. 167).

Senge offers the following five-step plan for becoming an environmental (or any other kind of) game changer:

1. Do some personal reflection to determine issues center to you.
2. Choose a few other like-minded people to talk with similar concerns.
3. Based on discussion, choose and convene an informal team that has common concerns.
4. Think of your informal team as a scouting party.
5. Develop an initial draft of a case for change to your management team and find a way to make these discussions part of the normal management team discussions.

Significant Sentences from the new text:

“One thing we have learned from working on organizational and systemic change is that the leaders are hard to identify in advance” (p. 12).

“Shared future, in a very real sense breaths life into a part of an organization that had been, if not lifeless, at least dormant (p. 148).

“For innovation to be successfully introduced into the marketplace and accepted by society, it must be based on many forms of partnership and continuous dialogue with stakeholders, including governments, NGO’s and academia (p. 128).

“Systems thinking is widely espoused today, but many organizations lack the capacity because they lack the commitment to build the skills and the tools to help them to do so. Buckminster Fuller used to say that “if you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don’t bother to teach them. Instead, give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking (p. 46).”

“The very fact that many of these collaborative efforts exist and continue is a great sign of hope. Businesses are working together on carbon reductions, green, energy, and more comprehensive sustainability strategies (p. 49).”