Reflections

The SoL North America Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

In Celebration of the
25th **Anniversary of**
The Fifth Discipline
By Peter Senge

THE
FIFTH
DISCIPLINE
PETER M. SENGE

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David Peter Stroh

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Peter Senge on the 25th Anniversary of *The Fifth Discipline*

Peter Senge with Frank Schneider and Deborah Wallace

Although it was published 25 years ago, *The Fifth Discipline* continues to have a profound influence on organizations around the world. What accounts for its lasting relevance, and how has the way people work and learn together changed in that time? In this interview with *Reflections*, Peter Senge talks about what he has learned since the initial publication of *The Fifth Discipline* and from the global response it has generated. He also discusses how his thinking has evolved over time and the impact the field of organizational learning continues to have in today's context. Peter highlights the importance of learning communities like SoL for helping groups of people translate good ideas into an enhanced capacity for effective action— the true definition of learning.

Inside-Out Collaboration: An Integrated Approach to Working Beyond Silos

David Willcock

People in separate divisions or teams of an organization often speak different "languages," which can make it difficult for them to understand and relate to each other. The costs of this kind of "silo working" can be high: lack of shared learning and innovation; unproductive conflict and stress; and significant financial costs due to program failures. In this article, David Willcock draws insights from psychology and organizational development theory and practice to provide a framework for building and maintaining productive relationships across organizational boundaries. Through an integrated approach to collaboration that includes the individual, team, and organization, managers and leaders can serve as catalysts for "partnership working," which can ultimately lead to high performance and competitive advantage.

The Manager as Mediator: First Manage You

Judy Ringer

In today's workplace, where time is a precious commodity, why should managers or leaders get involved in resolving conflict among members of their teams? One reason is that, in many cases, it takes more time *not* to help address conflict than to constructively intervene. But before managers can successfully guide others in managing disagreements, they first need to be able to manage themselves. According to research, a manager's attitude toward conflict is crucial in determining how an impasse is resolved. In this article, Judy Ringer describes five practices based on the martial art Aikido that managers can follow to set the stage for positive resolutions. Through this process, they also increase their leadership presence, power, and clarity of purpose.

BOOK EXCERPT

Systems Thinking for Social Change: Making an Explicit Choice

David Peter Stroh

One principle of complex systems is that they are perfectly designed to produce the results they are achieving. But all too often, these results are contrary to what we really want to accomplish. In this excerpt from his book *Systems Thinking for Social Change* (Chelsea Green, 2015), systems consultant David Peter Stroh points out that surfacing the discrepancy between what we want a system to achieve and the results it is currently achieving is a powerful force for constructive change. Acknowledging this difference prompts us to question not only our assumptions about how things are supposed to work, but also our intentions about what is most important to us and what we want to accomplish. The article identifies four steps for aligning people's espoused purpose with the purpose their current actions are designed to achieve.

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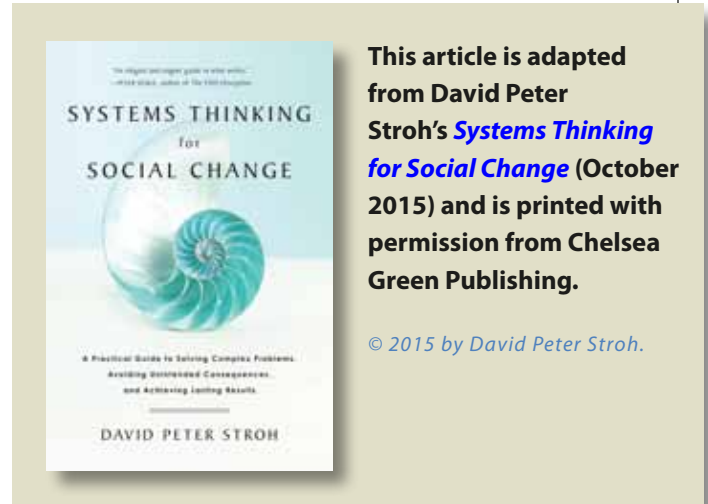
DAVID PETER STROH

One principle of complex systems is that they are perfectly designed to produce the results they are achieving. But all too often, these results are contrary to what we really want to accomplish. In this excerpt from his book _Systems Thinking for Social Change_ (Chelsea Green, 2015), systems consultant David Peter Stroh points out that surfacing the discrepancy between what we want a system to achieve and the results it is currently achieving is a powerful force for constructive change. Acknowledging this difference prompts us to question not only our assumptions about how things are supposed to work, but also our intentions about what is most important to us and what we want to accomplish. The article identifies four steps for aligning people's espoused purpose with the purpose their current actions are designed to achieve.

The broad-based teamwork involved in solving complex social problems requires aligning diverse stakeholders with a common public purpose even when each may have different private agendas. In chapter 6, for instance, we saw the conflicts that almost always emerge in coalitions trying to end homelessness. Everyone has different primary concerns: Elected officials worry about containing costs to keep voter support; downtown businesspeople worry about keeping homeless people away from their storefronts; and shelter providers worry about filling beds to keep their funding. The approach recommended in chapter 6 to align these different interests is to establish common ground by clarifying people's shared aspiration and their initial picture of current reality. But the work doesn't stop there.

While developing common ground is vital, it can miss the even deeper challenge of aligning people with _themselves_. The diversity of concerns held by different

David Peter Stroh

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stakeholders makes it difficult to not only align people with one another, but also to align each stakeholder's highest aspiration with their own immediate self-interests.

Many people are pulled between achieving what they most deeply care about and meeting short-term goals.[1] We want to realize our divine nature while

also ensuring that we meet more basic needs such as economic security, belonging, and recognition. Even our desire to help others relieve their immediate suffering can conflict with helping these same people become independently secure and fulfilled over time. The subsequent question for those who want social change is how to support people to realize their highest aspirations, particularly when these diverge from their more immediate concerns. How do we help people make an explicit choice in favor of what they most profoundly want?

Most people are pulled between achieving what they most deeply care about and meeting short-term goals.

The answer is to connect people even more closely with both their aspirations and current reality by uncovering the bottom of the iceberg—the purpose that inspires them and, often by contrast, the purpose that shapes their everyday actions. By becoming more aware of both purposes, people can make a more conscious commitment to their highest aspirations with full awareness of the potential costs, not only the benefits, of realizing them. In order to align stakeholders most powerfully around their avowed purpose, it is important to help them make an informed choice to commit to this purpose in full light of what it might take to get there. Making this choice is pivotal to aligning people's energies in service of meaningful change.

You can learn to create this alignment by supporting people to take four steps:
• Understand that there are payoffs to the existing system—a case for the status quo.
• Compare the case for the status quo with the case for change.

• Create solutions that serve both their long-term and their short-term interests—or make a trade-off with the recognition that meaningful change often requires letting something go.
• Make an explicit choice in favor of their higher purpose by weakening the case for the status quo and strengthening the case for change.

1. Understand Payoffs to the Existing System

Systems are perfectly designed to achieve the results they are achieving right now.[2] At first glance, when we look at how dysfunctional existing systems can be, this premise seems absurd. For example, why would people design a system that perpetuates homelessness, increases starvation, or undermines children's abilities to learn? The answer that emerges from a systems analysis is that people are accomplishing something they want now, something other than what they say they want. They are receiving payoffs or benefits from the status quo, and they are avoiding costs of change.

Payoffs to an existing system include quick fixes that work in the short run to reduce problem symptoms and the immediate gratification that comes from implementing them. In systems that unwittingly perpetuate homelessness, some of the payoffs to the existing ways of working are reduced visibility of the problem due to temporary shelters that keep people off the streets or out of the public eye, reduced severity of the problem because some forms of shelter exist, good feelings on the part of both shelter providers and funders that they are helping people in need, and continued funding for the shelter system.

Costs of change that people prefer to avoid include financial investment, the discomfort of learning new skills and creating different work, having to act interdependently instead of independently, and being patient while waiting for investments to demonstrate returns over time. In the case of ending homelessness, some of the costs people avoid are investing in safe, permanent,

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affordable, and supportive housing; closing shelters or significantly shifting their mission and work; confronting fears on the part of citizens that they might have formerly homeless people as neighbors; and confronting fears on the part of homeless people that they might not be able to adjust to permanent housing.

The payoffs of the existing shelter system and the costs of changing it combine to yield a case for the status quo of helping people *cope with* homelessness.

> **The case for change includes the benefits of changing and the costs of not changing.**

However, this case for the status quo actually undermines efforts to realize the avowed purpose of *ending* homelessness.

2. Compare the Case for Change with the Case for the Status Quo

The case for change includes the benefits of changing and the costs of not changing. These are often easier for people to clarify than the benefits of not changing and the costs of change. People have already been thinking about their vision for a desired future, and they can also imagine a negative future where the problems that concern them are not addressed.

In order to build the case for change, you can ask people what benefits would be derived from realizing their vision—benefits for their constituents and society as a

whole, for their partners and other stakeholders, and for themselves. Those involved in trying to end (versus cope with) homelessness might respond:

- Reduced costs for the emergency response and social services associated with chronic homelessness—including shelters, hospital bills, and substance abuse treatment.
- Reduced unemployment costs for people who experience episodic homelessness because they have lost their jobs and ability to pay for housing.
- Ability to receive state and federal funds for meeting best-practice requirements to reduce homelessness.
- Positive feelings associated with providing people with permanent housing.

Then, to help people understand the costs of not changing, you can ask them to paint their nightmare scenario —to describe the worst that could happen if they do nothing differently now. For those same people working to end homelessness, the costs of not changing include:

- All the above costs continue to increase.
- Lost funding caused by failing to meet government requirements for implementing best practices.
- Lower quality of street life leading to economic decline.

In order to help people compare the case for change with the case for the status quo, it helps to complete a cost–benefit matrix, as shown in the table "Cost-Benefit Matrix for Ending Homelessness."

The cost–benefit matrix helps people understand at an even deeper level why change is not occurring despite their best efforts. It depicts the often hidden case for the status quo—one that is currently strong enough to override the case for change and perpetuate the way things are.

3. Create Both/And Solutions— or Make a Trade-Off

People ideally want to have their cake and eat it, too: They would like to keep the benefits of the status quo

TABLE 1 **Cost-Benefit Matrix for Ending Homelessness**

Case for Change	Case for Status Quo
Benefits of change • Reduced costs of emergency response, shelters, health care, substance abuse treatment, unemployment • Increased ability to receive government funding • Positive feelings associated with providing people with permanent housing	**Benefits of not changing (payoffs of status quo)** • Reduced visibility of the problem • Reduced severity of the problem • Good feelings of helping people in need • Continued funding for shelter system
Costs of not changing • Above costs continue to increase • Lost funding from failing to meet government requirements • Lower quality of street life leading to economic decline	**Costs of change** • Investment in safe, permanent, affordable, and supportive housing • Closing shelters or shifting their mission and work • Confronting fears of ordinary citizens • Confronting fears on the part of homeless people

Source: Bridgeway Partners and Innovation Associates Organizational Learning.

People ideally want to have their cake and eat it, too: They would like to keep the benefits of the status quo while also realizing the benefits of change.

while also realizing the benefits of change. Indeed, both/and solutions are preferable where they can be found, and there are a number of methods such as Polarity Management for creating those solutions.[3] In the effort to end homelessness, there are hundreds of community-based continuums of care throughout the nation providing housing and services for homeless people. Components may include: street outreach, emergency shelters (least permanent), transitional housing (supporting chronically homeless people to prepare to live in permanent housing), rapid rehousing (helping homeless people quickly move into permanent housing, usually in the private market), permanent supportive housing (permanent, affordable, safe housing combined with supportive services for chronically homeless people), and services only. There can be a place for all these alternatives as long as the overall system is incentivized to provide people with permanent housing as quickly as possible.

However, more often than not, people have to make trade-offs. They have to decide if what they aspire to is worth giving up at least some of what they have. As much as we prefer not to let go of anything to have even more, we also understand "no pain, no gain," "there is no such thing as a free lunch," and "investing now for the future." Not only do systems exhibit a tendency for better-before-worse behavior (for example, through quick fixes that undermine long-term effectiveness), but the reverse is also true. Things often have to get worse (or more difficult) before they get better. We

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have to let go of something such as comfort, security, and independence to have what we want even more. By contrast, the unwillingness to let go of such benefits to the status quo is the greatest obstacle to change.

Lyndia Downie, the president and executive director of Boston's Pine Street Inn, one of the most respected shelters in the country, realized that the inn needed to totally transform its mission in order to truly tackle homelessness.[4] She discovered that 5 percent of the homeless people in her shelters took up more than half of the beds on any given night, and that these were the chronically homeless who most needed permanent housing. Committed to Housing First, which centers on providing homeless people with permanent housing quickly and then providing services as needed, she convinced her board to transform the inn's mission from emergency shelter provider to real estate developer and landlord. She describes the "hard-to-stomach" decision for both the board and staff that involved closing some shelters and shifting those resources to buy homes instead.

> **We have to let go of something such as comfort, security, and independence to have what we want even more.**

The need to let go of current payoffs became compellingly clear to me when I spoke one evening with the president of a nonprofit providing health care for the homeless in a major city. He told me that his COO had participated in a systems mapping exercise I had led that morning with many stakeholders working to end homelessness. After reviewing the map and her organization's place in the larger system, she had returned to a meeting the same afternoon with the president and organization's board, and she had posed the following

challenge: "What might we have to give up as an organization in order for the whole to succeed?" I had never heard the question before and realized how powerful it is in catalyzing change.

As in the case of the Pine Street Inn, sometimes the greatest challenge begins with letting go of one self-image and replacing it with another:

- The Area Education Agencies and local school districts in Iowa realized that they needed to give up their identities as being solely responsible for the students in their respective geographies. In order to improve education outcomes across the state, they needed to access the power of interdependence and let go of a measure of independence with respect to each other and the state Department of Education.
- The regulator of food safety in a major city learned that it was more effective when it shifted its role with restaurant owners from being an enforcer to being an information provider and educator.
- A county public health department increased its ability to improve the health of a poor community when it shifted its role from being an arm's-length expert to becoming the facilitator of a community-driven process.

4. Make an Explicit Choice

You can support people to let go more easily by first weakening the case for the status quo, and then strengthening the case for change.

A systems map naturally helps weaken the case for the status quo by showing how people's current thinking and actions tend to lead them away from achieving the purpose they aspire to. For example, the emergency response system to cope with homelessness unwittingly diverts attention and resources away from ending it. Separately optimizing parts of K–12 education in Iowa undermines the state's ability to improve education outcomes for all its children. Depending on enforcement as a way to motivate restaurant owners

A systems map helps weaken the case for the status quo by showing how people's current thinking and actions tend to lead them away from achieving the purpose they aspire to.

to increase food safety makes it more difficult to achieve the cooperation required to do so.

Strengthening the case for change involves two steps that deepen people's connections with their highest aspirations. The first is more *receptive* in nature and supports people to stop and listen to what calls to them most authentically. Otto Scharmer describes this as *presencing* in his pioneering book *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges.*[5] He states:

> Presencing—the blend of sensing and presence, means to connect with the Source of the highest future possibility and to bring it into the now. When moving into the state of presencing, perception begins to happen from a future possibility that depends on us to come into reality. In that state we step into our real being, who we really are, our authentic self.

Presencing evokes a deep connection described by different names in various wisdom traditions. Scharmer describes it as an eco-centered view, one captured by the famous philosopher Martin Buber when he encouraged people to "Listen to the course of being in the world . . . and bring it to reality as it desires." Asking, "What is being called of us?" can lead people in a significantly different direction than one based on the question "What do we want to create?"—which risks focusing them on a more ego-centered place.

The second step in deepening people's connection to the case for change is more *active* in nature. It supports

people to envision the ideal future that profoundly calls to them. The following guidelines for visioning are based on principles developed by Robert Fritz, a master of the creative process:

- Separate what you want from what you think is possible.
- Focus on what you want versus don't want.
- Focus on the results instead of the process.
- Include the consequences you want.
- See/experience the vision in the present.

I then ask people several questions to describe an ideal time in the future when the vision has been accomplished:

- How are the people you want to serve being served? What are they doing, seeing, feeling, hearing, and saying?
- How does serving these people contribute to other stakeholders and society as a whole?
- What is your group doing differently? What are you seeing, feeling, thinking, and hearing?
- What am I personally doing differently? How does realizing this vision serve my highest self?

Weakening the case for the status quo and connecting people more closely to the case for change through both deep listening and visioning help people make an explicit choice in favor of their highest aspirations.

What Can You Do When People Are Still Not Aligned?

While the four steps above stimulate alignment among diverse stakeholders, they do not guarantee it. One possible outcome is that you still cannot find common ground on which people want to build something together. In this case it helps to remember the alternatives proposed in chapter 6:

- Collaborate indirectly by legitimizing and addressing others' concerns, and then seeking to influence them through mutually respected third parties and/or to engage them at critical phases in the process.

- Work around the people you cannot work with.
- Work against them through such channels as advocacy, legislative policy, and nonviolent resistance.

It is also important to recognize that not everyone needs to agree at once on a new course of action in order for change to occur. Everett Rogers's famous study on the diffusion of innovations concluded that attitudes shift progressively through a population, and that the 15 percent who comprise innovators and early adopters can build sufficient momentum for others to follow.[6]

Another possible scenario is that people look clearly at the case for the status quo and the case for change— and deliberately decide to maintain the status quo with full appreciation of the future they are giving up on. This is certainly a valid choice, and I only encourage people in these cases to make peace with what they have— since they are now consciously choosing it. This means accepting all of current reality including its undesirable aspects since none of it is likely to change if they do not change themselves.

Closing the Loop

- It is difficult to establish common ground when people's everyday actions are not aligned with their highest aspirations.
- Helping people make an explicit choice in favor of what they most profoundly want is a pivotal stage in the change process.
- You can enable people to align their current behavior with their avowed purpose by supporting them to take four steps:
  1. Understand that there are payoffs to the existing system.
  2. Compare the case for the status quo with the case for change.
  3. Create both/and solutions—or make a trade-off.
  4. Make an explicit choice in favor of their higher purpose.
- You still have alternatives available when stakeholders do not align around a higher aspiration even after taking these steps. ∎

ENDNOTES

1   Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *How We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (Jossey-Bass, 2001).

2. This insight has been attributed to many systems thinkers, including Dr. Paul Batalden, professor emeritus at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College; Don Berwick, past president and CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and the former administrator of the US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; and Edward Deming, founder of the quality movement.

3   Peter Stroh and Wynne Miller, "Learning to Thrive on Paradox," *Training and Development,* September 2014.

4   Shirley Leung, "Pine St. Inn's Bold Move to End Chronic Homelessness," *The Boston Globe,* July 16, 2014.

5   Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (Berrett-Koehler, 2009).

6   Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations,* 5th edition (Free Press, 2003).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Peter Stroh is a founding partner of Bridgeway Partners and a founding director of the website Applied Systems Thinking. He also cofounded Innovation Associates, the consulting firm whose pioneering work in the area of organizational learning formed the basis for fellow cofounder Peter Senge's management classic *The Fifth Discipline. dstroh@bridgewaypartners.com*

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