Introduction

Learning and change are inextricably linked. We outline the work of Peter Senge, the organisational learning guru. His two books *The Fifth Discipline* and *The Dance of Change* discuss his influential views on the role of learning in successful transformational change.

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge talks about 'learning organisations', which he defines as being, in its simplest sense, a group of people who are constantly developing their capacity to enhance their future through learning. Successful change programmes are founded on the principle of organisational learning.

Senge identifies five essential components of a learning organisation:

1. **Systems Thinking** – the way in which we consider and solve problems and interpret solutions.
2. **Personal Mastery** – defining what you want to achieve and how you are going to get it.
3. **Mental Models** – deeply held beliefs about the way the world works.
4. **Shared Vision** – sharing common values, beliefs and goals as an organisation.
5. **Team Learning** – learning as a group, sharing experience and expertise.

However, he acknowledges that most earnest attempts to implement such an organisation have not succeeded. The major problems he sees are with systems thinking. As a result, he has come up with eight archetypal problems that affect systems thinking (below):

1. **Fixes that fail** – short-term fixes that collapse, causing the original problem to resurface.
2. **The tragedy of the commons** – a situation where individuals become greedy and take too much from a common resource, causing it to fail.
3. **Escalation** – two organisations threaten each other with escalating seriousness, resulting in disaster.
4. **Shifting the burden** – a short-term fix used repeatedly, becoming ineffective in the process.
5. **Limits to success** – growth limited by an inbuilt factor, such as lack of resources.
6. **Success to the successful** – allocation of resources to the successful means that they stand a better chance the next time round; success breeds success.
7. **Drifting goals** – pressures taking away attention from what an individual or group is trying to achieve.
8. **Growth and underinvestment** – growth outpaces investment.

Senge suggests that we are too used to looking at the symptoms of problems, rather than the effect.
Senge recommends focusing instead on the cause of problems. This might not be immediately obvious, or the cause may not be connected directly to the problem. However, Senge argues that only by addressing outdated systems thinking, can we succeed in building the learning organisation, a prerequisite for effective transformational change.

In Senge’s second book, *The Dance of Change* he refines his theories based on the experience of businesspeople who have taken on his initial advice. He himself admits that the learning and change paradigm that he espoused in *The Fifth Discipline* is much more difficult to implement than he had initially thought.

Senge observes that traditional change models (with change being led by senior management) have a very poor record of success. He maintains that this is not due to lack of resources or intelligence, but rather because we see organisations as machines rather than ‘embodiments of nature’.

Senge shows that rigid hierarchical structures contribute to this idea of the company as a machine. Extending his analogy, he says that we have the false idea that when something is wrong with the company, we can simply draft someone in to fix it (like fixing a machine). However, the low rate of success in change programmes indicates that this view is flawed. Senge recommends a slow, organic attitude to change, rather than a formalised programme.

He also claims that having one change-leader is likely to be ineffective. Senge explains that it is vital to have leaders at all levels of the organisation. Innovation and effective change grow out of middle managers and line managers talking to internal and external customers. In addition, individuals who communicate and network through groups are essential to the process. Senge calls these people ‘seed carriers’.

This exploration leads him to a new definition of a leader as someone who has the ability to produce change.

Senge also recommends starting the change process on a small scale, with a group of informed stakeholders who make up a pilot team. The team should conduct a force field analysis, identifying current processes that will aid the change programme and rooting out those that will hinder it.

He believes that the effectiveness of the pilot team as a change agent is enhanced because the individuals involved develop a personal stake. Once an effective team is in place, they have to deal with what Senge calls the ten challenges of change.

1. ‘We don’t have time for this stuff!’
   The pilot team should be allowed to spend as much time as they need on the change programme. If this means reducing other work commitments, so be it.

2. ‘We have no help!’
   The team needs coaching and assistance from everyone in the organisation.

3. ‘This stuff isn’t relevant’
   There have to be members of the team who can communicate the relevance of the change programme to the organisation as a whole.
4. ‘They’re not walking the talk!’
It is of vital importance that the members of the pilot team and any change leaders embody the values that they are espousing. Commitment and buy-in from the change team are essential.

5. ‘This stuff is . . .’
Personal insecurities and wariness to change must be addressed through open and honest communication.

6. ‘This stuff isn’t working!’
The pilot team must be aware that the programme might not be initially successful. It is important to persevere in the face of initial challenges.

7. ‘They’re acting like a cult!’
The pilot team must be accessible to the rest of the organisation. Actions must be transparent.

8. ‘They never let us do this stuff’
The pilot group has to be empowered to act, even if it does not comprise the most senior individuals in the organisation.

9. ‘We keep reinventing the wheel’
The group should build on previous success, examining what is done well rather than starting afresh with every change initiative.

10. ‘Where are we going?’
The pilot group must define a clear and attainable vision.
Senge argues that by using these guiding principles, it will be possible to create a learning organisation, adaptable to change.