

APPLYING SYSTEMS THINKING TO MINISTRY

In any ministry, secular tools can be redeemed for the purposes of God. Egyptian neighbors financed the Israelite 40-year trek across the desert. Queen Esther advocated on behalf of her people through her Persian political post, and saved the Jewish remnant from sure annihilation. Paul quoted Greek philosophers to bolster his Gospel message. As long as we critically reflect on these secular tools through the lens of the Bible, we can redeem them to further the Kingdom of God.

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization by Peter Senge can also be redeemed for ministry. Senge masterfully describes five key disciplines that are critical for any learning organization, including the church: *personal mastery*, *mental models*, *shared vision*, *team learning* and *systems thinking*. Like pillars supporting a building, these five are to be viewed together, working in cooperation to create and sustain a learning organization. However, we will look at each of these disciplines separately for clarity.

In this paper, each section will consist of three parts. First, Biblical examples will be provided of each discipline. Then, some theological reflection will be provided. Lastly, the discipline will be defined and applied to the context of ministry.

1. Personal Mastery

The city of Jerusalem was in ruins. About seventy years prior, the Israelites were marched as captives out of their homeland. In the years following, the glory of King David's Jerusalem has been transformed into heaps of broken rubble. Fire had scorched the city gates, and its walls were torn down. People who had survived the exile lived in great trouble and disgrace, struggling to stay alive near a decaying city in the midst of opposition. They wondered whether God would ever make good of his promises to restore Israel.

At this time, Nehemiah enjoyed his position as the cupbearer to the king. As a refugee in a foreign land, he had attained a prominent position, enjoying the comforts of the royal court. He protected the king, tasting the wine before the king drank to insure its purity from deadly toxins. No doubt, he had the trust of the king. Yet, when he heard the news about the sad state of Jerusalem and its people, he could not help but weep. No matter how comfortable he had been, he mourned, fasted and prayed to the God of heaven for months over a ruined city. After four months, a plan was conceived.

He waited for the queen to be present in the Persian court, and he intentionally allowed his face to reflect the sadness in his heart. A royal court steward's job was to always look happy; any deviation could cost him his liberty and possibly his life. However, Nehemiah took a calculated risk, and it paid off. The king knew that in Nehemiah's faithful duration of service, he had never been sad in his presence before, and thus noticed that something was troubling him. Thus, the king asked what was wrong. Nehemiah explained his heart: the city that he loves lies in ruins. The king then asked what he wanted, and Nehemiah proceeded to give his presentation: first, he would like to go and rebuild the city; second, he told him how long it would take; third, he would like letters of protection for his travel; and lastly, he would like a large amount of timber to rebuild the city walls and gates. It was a masterful plan, and the king wholly accepted it. Thus, Nehemiah found himself on the way to rebuild Jerusalem.

In this account from Nehemiah 1:1-2:10, Nehemiah knew his current reality. He knew that he was comfortable, enjoying the pleasures of the royal court, while the city of his forefathers lay in ruins. Thus, when he received the news of his homeland, Nehemiah found himself at a crossroads in his life. It was here that a vision was conceived, a vision of a renewed Jerusalem and his part in it. If anyone was going to rebuild the walls of the city, it would have to be Nehemiah himself. Thus, he took himself to the challenge, to bring his current reality as a cupbearer to the Persian King in line with his future vision, eventually becoming the urban planner of a new Jerusalem. With his life in focus, he knew his role in the outworking of the Kingdom of God.

Nehemiah had *personal mastery*. To define Senge's first discipline, personal mastery is the discipline of "continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. As such, it is an essential cornerstone of the learning organization — the learning organization's spiritual foundation" (7). It's the idea that if we know who we are, and if we know where we're going, we should do the things in life which line up with that purpose.

It has two underlying movements: continually clarifying what is important to us and to see current reality more clearly. Without defining what is important to us, we have no direction. Without priorities, we cannot sort through the many, many demands made on our lives each day; our energies would often be wasted on things less important. On the flipside, if we do not attempt to see current reality more clearly, we will not know the steps necessary to our goals. We will have no foundation from which to start building. Thus, personal mastery is the juxtaposition of what we want and where we are relative to what we want, creating a tension between our current reality and our future vision. And, this tension propels us.

Thus, in ministry, we need to inspire others to practice Biblical personal mastery. Senge believes that we should create their lives exactly the way we want to (155). But, in Ephesians 4, Paul states that each member in the Body of Christ should do works of service, “so that the Body of Christ may be built up.” Thus, we should not seek personal mastery for its own sake or even our sake, but to respond to the callings of God. We can help others seek Biblical visions on how they want to serve the Lord in their current contexts, and provide ways to develop them their Biblical passions and dreams into realities. Instead of seeking to build our own empires, we can help each person build the Kingdom of God.

In this light, people must come before programs. We need to really care about the people whom we serve, and attempt to seek their development as whole people in the Christian faith, instead of using them as cogs in our giant ministry machine.

One practical way to help others develop personal mastery is to be a model. We need to commit to our own personal mastery first, lest we be considered hypocrites. Senge writes, “Talking about personal mastery may open people’s minds somewhat, but actions always speak louder than words. There’s nothing more powerful you can do to encourage others in their quest for personal mastery than to be serious in your own quest” (173).

So, we should not stop at modeling. We then can help others find their visions by illuminating the Scripture, and bringing Biblical principles to bear on their daily lives. Without forcing them into our molds, we urge others to develop their visions for ministry, and assist in their development toward their visions.

2. Mental Models

The servant could not understand how Elisha could be so calm. The Arameans were at war with the Israelites, and Elisha was no neutral party. Time and time again, Elisha would warn the Israelite army of

the Aramean movements, through prophecies given by God. Elisha was so accurate that the King of Aram wondered who in his army was acting as a spy, giving military information to the Israelites. He was enraged and frustrated that his plans were being thwarted. When his army told him about the prophet Elisha, he sent a throng of horses, chariots and soldiers to capture the seer.

Elisha's servant, on seeing the Aramean army approaching, was justifiably scared. The Arameans had surrounded the city, ready to lay siege to capture the prophet. In desperation, the servant cried out, "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?"

The prophet didn't lose his cool. He told his servant, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." The servant must have thought his master crazy! He could see nothing around him, except the blustering force that was upon their city and its impending destruction. Thus, the servant was scared. But, Elisha offers up a prayer, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." And at that moment, the servant saw what was calming Elisha all along: the hills were full of horses and chariots of fire, and they were surrounding and protecting Elisha. What the servant could not see before, he now could see.

Mental models are active; they shape how we act. The servant was scared, because he could not see beyond his own mental models in 2 Kings 6; his own mental constructs did not allow him to see beyond his own material realm into the spiritual realm. Senge writes, "Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action... Mental models are active — they shape how we act... They affect what we see" (174-175). We all have mental models, and what makes them so allusive is that these assumptions lie beneath the surface, beneath the consciousness; we are rarely aware of our own mental models. And yet these models will have a profound influence on how we interpret actions, situations and motivations in the world.

In ministry also, we need to be aware of our own mental models. Just because something works the first time, doesn't mean that it will work again the next. Simple cause-effect explanations just will not suffice. Ministers are often prone to making "leaps of abstraction," generalizing what we observe into universal principles. In fact, whenever we see something in ministry that affirms our prior view, we are often too quick to cite it as an example of model ministry.

To correct our mental models, Senge believes we should first, bring key assumptions about important ministry to light, and second, develop face-to-face learning skills. To apply these two principles, ministries should be done in teams, which has plenty of Biblical warrant. The leaders of the early church are always addressed in plural form: "elders" and "deacons," alluding to team-based ministries in the early church.

In the team context, we can help each other see our own assumptions, merely by presenting differing views. Others will help us recognize the difference between the facts and the generalized interpretations of those facts. And, working together will help us see how we state one theory, yet act in another way. Ministry teams would help us identify our key assumptions and develop relational skills necessary to check our mental models. (I will say more about the team experience in the section, "Team Learning.")

3. Shared Vision

To say that King Jehoshaphat was alarmed would be an understatement. He had received news that a tri-nation alliance was moving against his relatively small nation. Looking at his army roster, he knew that he would come up short against this massive opposition. He was stuck, and it seemed that there was no way to emerge unscathed. If he chose to fight, they would surely be crushed. If he chose to surrender, they would be

captives to pagan nations. Neither option would suffice. Thus, Jehoshaphat chose a spiritual option, and declared a fast for all of Judah.

Everyone else in Judah knew that they were in trouble as well. Both the King and his people had a shared interest in national security. So, when the King called a fast throughout the nation, everyone — every man, women and child — went to Jerusalem to seek the guidance of the Lord. They were all in it together.

Then, the Lord answered. One of the Levites proclaimed a word directly from the Lord! They were to go out march out against them, but he assured them that they will not have to fight, because the Lord would fight for them! To an outsider, this must have seemed like the craziest advice ever given; what foreign policy strategy could be worse? What a risky way to fight; if armed conflict broke out, the Israelites would surely be destroyed.

But, the King accepted his words as a direct revelation from the Lord. He knew that he didn't have all the answers, and he trusted the Levites to speak for the mouth of God. And, everyone in the assembly seemed to accept the counsel of this Levite, for everyone broke out in spontaneous worship, praising the Lord for the victory that was to come.

The next morning, perhaps the men were a little jittery. It was fine to worship the Lord last night, but this was where the rubber meets the road, or the chariot wheel meets the dirt. Jehoshaphat, building on what was shared the night before, urged his men to have faith in the Lord and in his prophets. And, they went out in faith, together.

The Israelites, including the king, had a shared picture of what the future would look like, and took action according to that shared picture. It wasn't merely the lead of the king, for it took the prompting of a prophet to guide the nation. It also took the cooperation of the entire nation to fulfill its destiny. Each person in Judah owned and shared a commitment to follow through with the God-led vision of what the battle would look like.

Shared vision is the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create, managing to bind people together around a common identity and sense of destiny. People excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. A shared vision is not an idea. It is not even an important idea such as freedom. It is, rather, a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power.

Shared vision emerges from personal vision. As a shared vision develops, it becomes both "my vision" and "our vision." Leaders intent on building shared visions must be willing to continually share their personal visions. Yet, they must also listen to their followers' personal visions as well, so that they can build together a shared vision.

In ministry, we seek the commitment and the enrollment of others in a Biblical shared vision. However, we need to be careful in asking others to join into this shared vision. Community precedes commitment, and if we ask others to join into a shared vision without first building a relational tie, we can run the risk of using others for our own purposes.

Senge provides three guidelines for enrollment and commitment. First, we need to be enrolled ourselves. Enrollment is a natural process that springs from our genuine enthusiasm for a vision. Second, we need to be honest. We don't want to inflate the benefits or ignore the problems of the vision. Third, we need to allow others to choose. If we force the shared vision down on others, then the process has merely degenerated into compliance. We need to allow others to willingly choose this vision, so that they will have ownership of the shared vision.

4. Team Learning

Peter did the despicable. How could he call himself a Jew? He actually went to the house of a Gentile, Roman soldier, who was part of the system that is oppressing the Jewish people. Not only did he enter the house of the

uncircumcised, but he actually ate with them! And, not only did he eat with them, but also told them about the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The apostles and the other brothers in Judea were incredulous that Peter's irreverent actions. How could he go against tradition and culture, things which God had pressed upon the Jewish people for thousands of years? What was he thinking? The believers criticized him soundly.

Peter then explained all that had happened. He described the vision he had, where God told him not to call unclean everything that he had made clean. He told them about how he took six brothers out to Caesaria, and he excitedly told about how the Holy Spirit came upon them. He didn't understand everything, but he knew what he saw. He saw the Holy Spirit land on Gentiles, just as it did on Samaritans not too long before. So, how could he oppose God? James followed, sharing from the Scriptures how God had plans for the Gentiles to come to faith from the beginning. After talking together, the believers had no further objections, and they praised God that He would bring salvation even to the Gentiles.

And upon hearing this, the other believers could have pressed their own viewpoint. They could have talked about the many generations of Jewish people who had passed down the law so that they could be in covenant with God. They could have talked about circumcision, and how that was completely necessary for people to enter the kingdom of heaven. Being grown up in the Israelite culture, and knowing little else, the other believers could have polarized their view against their brothers Peter and James, and ostracized him for eating with the unclean. Yet, when Peter told his story and James gave his reasons, the other believers had no further objections. The entire Body of Christ benefited from the wisdom shared that day.

Praise God for the team learning experience in Jerusalem that day! When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise. The discipline of

team learning starts with “dialogue,” the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine “thinking together.”

Thus, teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. Team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire.

Applying this to ministry, there is a need for dialogue. Dialogue is not discussion, where people talk back and forth, arguing for their point of view. Dialogue occurs when all participants must “suspend” their assumptions, literally to hold them “as if suspended before us.” All participants must regard one another as colleagues. And, there must be a facilitator who holds the context of dialogue.

5. Systems Thinking

The apostles had a domestic situation on their hands. The growing number of disciples was placing a heavy burden on the daily distribution of food. Thus, the Grecian widows were not getting their fair share, and the Grecian Jews complained to the Hebraic brothers. The Twelve needed to address this situation with wisdom. They decided that they should focus on the ministry of the Word and to prayer, and appointed seven Greeks to manage the distribution of food.

In Acts 6, the Apostles could have merely met the need. Obviously, some widows were not getting their fair share of the food distribution. So, to meet the need, the Apostles could have merely met the problem head on, dug their arms into the food distribution channels elbow-deep and met the needs of the Grecian widows. However, to do so would have been short-sighted.

If they focused more of their time toward feeding the widows, then the ministry of the Word would be neglected. If the leaders of the movement neglect the preaching of the Word, then non-Christians will not have a decent chance to accept Jesus as their savior. And, current Christians wouldn't grow in discipleship from their teaching, because they're spending most of their time waiting on tables. Though waiting on tables would have been a great solution in the short-run, in the long-run, it would have hurt the entire early Christian movement.

Thus, the Twelve made a wise decision: to allow the ministry to be multiplicative, they needed to devote themselves primarily to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. But, since they could not neglect the widows as well, they appointed seven leaders, all of them Greek, who would distribute the food to the widows. By appointed indigenous leadership, they insured that the Grecian Jews would have their needs met, and it provided the Grecian Jews learning opportunities for leadership in this Christian movement. Eventually, some of these seven would do be on the frontlines of ministry, with Stephen being the first martyr of the faith, and Philip bringing the Gospel to the Samaritans and an Ethiopian. It was multiplicative ministry.

Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively. It enables us to see what Senge calls the "invisible whole." This helps us avoid quick, short-term solutions with its unseen detrimental side-effects. Instead, it assists us in thinking about the overall trajectory of the ministry, giving us better opportunities to produce more viable, long-term solutions. Just as the Twelve were able to see the full picture, so we should grasp the entire picture of what affects our ministries.

Systems thinking is extremely helpful, but we also should not allow this tool to paralyze us in ministry. Given this tool, we still need to allow God the freedom to direct us into something that doesn't make complete sense right away. Sometimes, God asks us to do things that defy commonsense, and yet God is the ultimate systems thinker! He is completely in control and has plans for the progression of the universe. Thus, we can rely on his leading as well. But, systems thinking does provide a wonderful check for those of us who impulsively do ministry without considering its possible consequences.

All together, these five concepts can help revolutionize a ministry, and transform it into a self-generating learning organization. It places a priority on people over programs, and yet doesn't let the overall goal get lost in the shuffle. It forces ministers to think of helping the development of each person, and to work together with others to fulfill God's commission to us for the earth. If used wisely, these tools can help our churches — and each person in them — understand our role in furthering the kingdom of God.