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Work at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning shows that developing new organizational capabilities requires deep reflection and testing.

Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations

FRED KOFFMAN

PETER M. SENGE

Why do we confront learning opportunities with fear rather than wonder? Why do we derive our self-esteem from knowing as opposed to learning? Why do we criticize before we even understand? Why do we create controlling bureaucracies when we attempt to form visionary enterprises? And why do we persist in fragmentation and piecemeal analysis as the world becomes more and more interconnected?

Such questions have been the heart of our work for many years. They led to the theories and methods presented in *The Fifth Discipline*. They are the driving force behind a new vision of organizations, capable of thriving in a world of interdependence and change—what we have come to call “learning organizations.”

The Fifth Discipline generated significant interest, but a book is only one step toward bringing a new set of ideas and practices into the mainstream of management. Shortly after the book appeared, a group of us at MIT established the Center for Organizational Learning. The center now involves many organizations—including Ford, Harley Davidson, Electronic Data Systems, Federal Express, AT&T, Philips North America, Herman Miller, Armco Steel, and Intel—seeking major

breakthroughs via partnership between researchers and practitioners.

Two years of intense practice and reflection have gone by. Some pilot projects are beginning to produce striking results. But we also have learned that it is crucial to address the opening questions. We have not found any definitive answers—nor were we looking for them—but, dwelling *in* the questions, we have found guiding principles for action.

Building learning organizations, we are discovering, requires basic shifts in how we think and interact. The changes go beyond individual corporate cultures, or even the culture of Western management; they penetrate to the bedrock assumptions and habits of our culture as a whole. We are also discovering that moving forward is an exercise in personal commitment and community building. As Dr. W. Edwards Deming says, nothing happens without “personal transformation.” And the only safe space to allow for this transformation is a learning community.

So, we are coming to see our efforts as building “communities of commitment.” Without commitment, the hard work required will never be done. People will just keep asking for “examples of learning organizations” rather than seeking what they can do

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