Peter Senge's book
The Fifth Discipline

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PERSONAL MASTERY

THE SPIRIT OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs.

A small number of organizational leaders are recognizing the radical rethinking of corporate philosophy which a commitment to individual learning requires. Kazuo Inamori, founder and president of Kyocera (a world leader in advanced ceramics technology used in electronic components, medical materials, and its own line of office automation and communications equipment), says this:

> Whether it is research and development, company management, or any other aspect of business, the active force is "people." And people have their own will, their own mind, and their own way of thinking. If the employees themselves are not sufficiently motivated to challenge the goals of growth and technological develop-

ment . . . there will simply be no growth, no gain in productivity, and no technological development.[1]

Tapping the potential of people, Inamori believes, will require new understanding of the "subconscious mind," "willpower," and "action of the heart . . . sincere desire to serve the world." He teaches Kyocera employees to look inward as they continually strive for "perfection," guided by the corporate motto, "Respect Heaven and Love People." In turn, he believes that his duty as a manager starts with "providing for both the material good and spiritual welfare of my employees."

Half a world away in a totally different industry, Bill O'Brien, president of Hanover Insurance, strives for

> . . . organizational models that are more congruent with human nature. When the industrial age began, people worked 6 days a week to earn enough for food and shelter. Today, most of us have these handled by Tuesday afternoon. Our traditional hierarchical organizations are not designed to provide for people's higher order needs, self-respect and self-actualization. The ferment in management will continue until organizations begin to address these needs, for all employees.

Also like Inamori, O'Brien argues that managers must redefine their job. They must give up "the old dogma of planning, organizing and controlling," and realize "the almost sacredness of their responsibility for the lives of so many people." Managers' fundamental task, according to O'Brien, is "providing the enabling conditions for people to lead the most enriching lives they can."

Lest these sentiments seem overly romantic for building a business, let me point out that Kyocera has gone from startup to $2 billion in sales in thirty years, borrowing almost no money and achieving profit levels that are the envy of even Japanese firms. Hanover was at the rock bottom of the property and liability industry in 1969 when O'Brien's predecessor, Jack Adam, began its reconstruction around a core set of values and beliefs about people. Today, the company stands consistently in the upper quarter of its industry in profits and has grown 50 percent faster than the industry over the past ten years.

No less a source of business acumen than Henry Ford observed,

> The smallest indivisible reality is, to my mind, intelligent and is waiting there to be used by human spirits if we reach out and call them in. We rush too much with nervous hands and worried minds. We are impatient for results. What we need . . . is reinforcement of the soul by the invisible power waiting to be used . . . I know there are reservoirs of spiritual strength from which we human beings thoughtlessly cut ourselves off . . . I believe we shall someday be able to know enough about the source of power, and the realm of the spirit to create something ourselves . . .
>
> I firmly believe that mankind was once wiser about spiritual things than we are today. What we now only believe, they knew.[2]

"Personal mastery" is the phrase my colleagues and I use for the discipline of personal growth and learning. People with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek. From their quest for continual learning comes the spirit of the learning organization.

MASTERY AND PROFICIENCY

Personal mastery goes beyond competence and skills, though it is grounded in competence and skills. It goes beyond spiritual unfolding or opening, although it requires spiritual growth. It means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint. As my long-time colleague Robert Fritz puts it:

> Throughout history, almost every culture has had art, music, dance, architecture, poetry, storytelling, pottery, and sculpture. The desire to create is not limited by beliefs, nationality, creed, educational background, or era. The urge resides in all of us . . . [it] is not limited to the arts, but can encompass all of life, from the mundane to the profound.[3]

When personal mastery becomes a discipline—an activity we integrate into our lives—it embodies two underlying movements. The first is continually clarifying what is important to us. We often spend too much time coping with problems along our path that we forget why we are on that path in the first place. The result is that we only have a dim, or even inaccurate, view of what's really important to us.

The second is continually learning how to see current reality more clearly. We've all known people entangled in counterproductive relationships, who remain stuck because they keep pretending everything is all right. Or we have been in business meetings where

everyone says, "We're on course relative to our plan," yet an honest look at current reality would show otherwise. In moving toward a desired destination, it is vital to know where you are now.

The juxtaposition of vision (what we want) and a clear picture of current reality (where we are relative to what we want) generates what we call "creative tension": a force to bring them together, caused by the natural tendency of tension to seek resolution. The essence of personal mastery is learning how to generate and sustain creative tension in our lives.

"Learning" in this context does not mean acquiring more information, but expanding the ability to produce the results we truly want in life. It is lifelong generative learning. And learning organizations are not possible unless they have people at every level who practice it.

Sadly, the term "mastery" suggests gaining dominance over people or things. But mastery can also mean a special level of proficiency. A "master" craftsperson, for instance, doesn't *dominate* pottery or weaving. But the craftsperson's skill allows the best pots or fabrics to emerge from the workshop. Similarly, personal mastery suggests a special level of proficiency in every aspect of life—personal and professional.

People with a high level of personal mastery share several basic characteristics. They have a special sense of purpose that lies behind their visions and goals. *For such a person, a vision is a calling rather than simply a good idea.* They see "current reality" as an ally, not an enemy. They have learned how to perceive and work with forces of change rather than resist those forces. They are deeply inquisitive, committed to continually seeing reality more and more accurately. They feel connected to others and to life itself. Yet they sacrifice none of their uniqueness. They feel as if they are part of a larger creative process, which they can influence but cannot unilaterally control.

People with a high level of personal mastery live in a continual learning mode. They never "arrive." Sometimes, language, such as the term "personal mastery," creates a misleading sense of definiteness, of black and white. But personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas. And they are deeply self-confident. Paradoxical? Only for those who do not see that "the journey is the reward."

At Hanover, where the quest is for "advanced maturity," O'Brien has written of truly mature people as building and holding deep values, making commitments to goals larger than themselves, being open, exercising free will, and continually striving for an accurate picture of reality. They also, he asserts, have a capacity for delayed gratification, which makes it possible for them to aspire to objectives which others would disregard, even considering "the impact of their choices on succeeding generations." O'Brien points to a deficiency in modern society's commitment to human development:

> Whatever the reasons, we do not pursue emotional development with the same intensity with which we pursue physical and intellectual development. This is all the more unfortunate because full emotional development offers the greatest degree of leverage in attaining our full potential.[4]

"WHY WE WANT IT"

"The total development of our people," O'Brien adds, "is essential to achieving our goal of corporate excellence." Whereas once the "morals of the marketplace" seemed to require a level of morality in business that was lower than in other activities, "We believe there is no fundamental tradeoff between the higher virtues in life and economic success. We believe we can have both. In fact, we believe that, over the long term, the more we practice the higher virtues of life, the more economic success we will have."

In essence, O'Brien is articulating his own version of the most common rationale whereby organizations come to support "personal mastery"—or whatever words they use to express their commitment to the growth of their people. People with high levels of personal mastery are more committed. They take more initiative. They have a broader and deeper sense of responsibility in their work. They learn faster. For all these reasons, a great many organizations espouse a commitment to fostering personal growth among their employees because they believe it will make the organization stronger.

But O'Brien has another reason for pursuing personal mastery, one closer to his own heart:

> Another and equally important reason why we encourage our people in this quest is the impact which full personal development can have on individual happiness. To seek personal fulfillment only

outside of work and to ignore the significant portion of our lives which we spend working, would be to limit our opportunities to be happy and complete human beings.

Herman Miller's president Ed Simon said recently, "Why can't work be one of those wonderful things in life? Why can't we cherish and praise it, versus seeing work as a necessity? Why can't it be a cornerstone in people's lifelong process of developing ethics, values, and in expressing the humanities and the arts? Why can't people learn through the process that there's something about the beauties of design, of building something to last, something of value? I believe that this potential is inherent in work, more so than in many other places."

In other words, why do we want personal mastery? We want it because we want it.

It is a pivotal moment in the evolution of an organization when leaders take this stand. It means that the organization has absolutely, fully, intrinsically committed itself to the well-being of its people. Traditionally, there was a contract: an honest day's pay for an honest day's labor. Now, there is a different relationship between employee and institution.

Pollster Daniel Yankelovich has been taking the pulse of the American public for forty years. As noted in Chapter One, Yankelovich has pointed to a "basic shift in attitude in the workplace" from an "instrumental" to a "sacred" view of work. The instrumental view implies that we work in order to earn the income to do what we really want when we are not working. This is the classic consumer orientation toward work—work is an instrument for generating income. Yankelovich uses the word "sacred" in the sociological not religious sense: "People or objects are sacred in the sociological sense when, apart from what instrumental use they serve, they are valued for themselves."[5]

Traditionally, organizations have supported people's development instrumentally—if people grew and developed, then the organization would be more effective. O'Brien goes one step further: "In the type of organization we seek to build, the fullest development of people is on an equal plane with financial success. This goes along with our most basic premise: that practicing the virtues of life and business success are not only compatible but enrich one another. This is a far cry from the traditional 'morals of the marketplace.' "

To see people's development as a means toward the organization's ends devalues the relationship that can exist between individual and organization. Max de Pree, retired CEO of Herman Miller, speaks of a "covenant" between organization and individual, in contrast to the traditional "contract" ("an honest day's pay in exchange for an honest day's work"). "Contracts," says De Pree, "are a small part of a relationship. A complete relationship needs a covenant . . . a covenantal relationship rests on a shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals, and to management processes . . . Covenantal relationships reflect unity and grace and poise. They are expressions of the sacred nature of relationships."[6]

In Japan, a *Christian Science Monitor* reporter visiting the Matsushita corporation observed that "There is an almost religious atmosphere about the place, as if work itself were considered something sacred." Inamori of Kyocera says that his commitment to personal mastery simply evolved from the traditional Japanese commitment to lifetime employment. "Our employees agreed to live in a community in which they would not exploit each other, but rather help each other so that we may each live our life fully."

"You know the system is working," O'Brien said recently, "when you see a person who came to work for the company ten years ago who was unsure of him/herself and had a narrow view of the world and their opportunities. Now that person is in charge of a department of a dozen people. He or she feels comfortable with responsibility, digests complex ideas, weighs different positions, and develops solid reasoning behind choices. Other people listen with care to what this person says. The person has larger aspirations for family, company, industry, and society."

There is an unconditional commitment, an unequivocating courage, in the stand that an organization truly committed to personal mastery takes. We want it because we want it.

RESISTANCE

Who could resist the benefits of personal mastery? Yet, many people and organizations do. Taking a stand for the full development of your people is a radical departure from the traditional contract between employee and institution. In some ways, it is the most radical departure from traditional business practices in the learning organization.

There are obvious reasons why companies resist encouraging personal mastery. It is "soft," based in part on unquantifiable concepts

such as intuition and personal vision. No one will ever be able to measure to three decimal places how much personal mastery contributes to productivity and the bottom line. In a materialistic culture such as ours, it is difficult even to discuss some of the premises of personal mastery. "Why do people need to talk about this stuff?" someone may ask. "Isn't it obvious? Don't we already know it?"

A more daunting form of resistance is cynicism. The human potential movement, and along with it much of "humanistic management," overpromised itself to corporations during the 1970s and 1980s. It prompted executives to idealize each other and expect grand, instant, human character transformations, which can never happen.

In combating cynicism, it helps to know its source. Scratch the surface of most cynics and you find a frustrated idealist—someone who made the mistake of converting his ideals into expectations. For example, many of those cynical about personal mastery once held high ideals about people. Then they found themselves disappointed, hurt, and eventually embittered because people fell short of their ideals. Hanover's Bill O'Brien points out that "burnout" comes from causes other than simply working too hard. "There are teachers, social workers, and clergy," says O'Brien, "who work incredibly hard until they are 80 years old and never suffer "burnout"—because they have an accurate view of human nature. They don't over-romanticize people, so they don't feel the great psychological stress when people let them down."

Finally, some fear that personal mastery will threaten the established order of a well-managed company. This is a valid fear. *To empower people in an unaligned organization can be counterproductive*. If people do not share a common vision, and do not share common "mental models" about the business reality within which they operate, empowering people will only increase organizational stress and the burden of management to maintain coherence and direction. This is why the discipline of personal mastery must always be seen as one among the set of disciplines of a learning organization. An organizational commitment to personal mastery would be naive and foolish if leaders in the organization lacked the capabilities of building shared vision and shared mental models to guide local decision makers.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PERSONAL MASTERY

The way to begin developing a sense of personal mastery is to approach it as a *discipline*, as a series of practices and principles that must be applied to be useful. Just as one becomes a master artist by continual practice, so the following principles and practices lay the groundwork for continually expanding personal mastery.

PERSONAL VISION

Personal vision comes from within. Several years ago I was talking with a young woman about her vision for the planet. She said many lovely things about peace and harmony, about living in balance with nature. As beautiful as these ideas were, she spoke about them unemotionally, as if these were things that she *should* want. I asked her if there was anything else. After a pause, she said, "I want to live on a green planet," and started to cry. As far as I know, she had never said this before. The words just leaped from her, almost with a will of their own. Yet, the image they conveyed clearly had deep meaning to her—perhaps even levels of meaning that she didn't understand.

Most adults have little sense of real vision. We have goals and objectives, but these are not visions. When asked what they want, many adults will say what they want to get rid of. They'd like a better job—that is, they'd like to get rid of the boring job they have. They'd like to live in a better neighborhood, or not have to worry about crime, or about putting their kids through school. They'd like it if their mother-in-law returned to her own house, or if their back stopped hurting. Such litanies of "negative visions" are sadly commonplace, even among very successful people. They are the by-product of a lifetime of fitting in, of coping, of problem solving. As a teenager in one of our programs once said, "We shouldn't call them 'grown ups' we should call them 'given ups.' "

A subtler form of diminished vision is "focusing on the means not the result." Many senior executives, for example, choose "high market share" as part of their vision. But why? "Because I want our company to be profitable." Now, you might think that high profits is an intrinsic result in and of itself, and indeed it is for some. But for

surprisingly many other leaders, profits too are a means toward a still more important result. Why choose high annual profits? "Because I want us to remain an independent company, to keep from being taken over." Why do you want that? "Because I want to keep our integrity and our capacity to be true to our purpose in starting the organization." While all the goals mentioned are legitimate, the last—being true to our purpose—has the greatest intrinsic significance to this executive. All the rest are means to the end, means which might change in particular circumstances. *The ability to focus on ultimate intrinsic desires, not only on secondary goals, is a cornerstone of personal mastery.*

Real vision cannot be understood in isolation from the idea of purpose. By purpose, I mean an individual's sense of why he is alive. No one could prove or disprove the statement that human beings have purpose. It would be fruitless even to engage in the debate. But as a working premise, the idea has great power. One implication is that happiness may be most directly a result of living consistently with your purpose. George Bernard Shaw expressed the idea pointedly when he said:

> This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one . . . the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.[7]

This same principle has been expressed in some organizations as "genuine caring." In places where people felt uncomfortable talking about personal purpose, they felt perfectly at ease talking about genuine caring. When people genuinely care, they are naturally committed. They are doing what they truly want to do. They are full of energy and enthusiasm. They persevere, even in the face of frustration and setbacks, because what they are doing is what they must do. It is *their work.*

Everyone has had experiences when work flows fluidly; when he feels in tune with a task and works with a true economy of means. Someone whose vision calls him to a foreign country, for example, may find himself learning a new language far more rapidly than he ever could before. You can often recognize your personal vision because it creates such moments; it is the goal pulling you forward that makes all the work worthwhile.

But vision is different from purpose. Purpose is similar to a direction, a general heading. Vision is a specific destination, a picture of a desired future. Purpose is abstract. Vision is concrete. Purpose is "advancing man's capability to explore the heavens." Vision is "a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s." Purpose is "being the best I can be," "excellence." Vision is breaking four minutes in the mile.

It can truly be said that nothing happens until there is vision. But it is equally true that a vision with no underlying sense of purpose, no calling, is just a good idea—all "sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Conversely, purpose without vision has no sense of appropriate scale. As O'Brien says, "You and I may be tennis fans and enjoy talking about ground strokes, our backhands, the thrill of chasing down a corner shot, of hitting a winner. We may have a great conversation, but then we find out that I am gearing up to play at my local country club and you are preparing for Wimbledon. We share the same enthusiasm and love of the game, but at totally different scales of proficiency. Until we establish the scales we have in mind, we might think we are communicating when we're not."

Vision often gets confused with competition. You might say, "My vision is to beat the other team." And indeed, competition can be a useful way of calibrating a vision, of setting scale. To beat the number-ten player at the tennis club is different from beating the number one. But to be number one of a mediocre lot may not fulfill my sense of purpose. Moreover, what is my vision after I reach number one?

Ultimately, vision is intrinsic not relative. It's something you desire for its intrinsic value, not because of where it stands you relative to another. Relative visions may be appropriate in the interim, but they will rarely lead to greatness. Nor is there anything wrong with competition. Competition is one of the best structures yet invented by humankind to allow each of us to bring out the best in each other. But after the competition is over, after the vision has (or has not) been achieved, it is one's sense of purpose that draws you further, that compels you to set a new vision. *This, again, is why personal mastery must be a discipline. It is a process of continually focusing and refocusing on what one truly wants, on one's visions.*

Vision is multifaceted. There are material facets of our visions, such as where we want to live and how much money we want to have in the bank. There are personal facets, such as health, freedom, and being true to ourselves. There are service facets, such as helping

others or contributing to the state of knowledge in a field. All are part of what we truly want. Modern society tends to direct our attention to the material aspects, and simultaneously foster guilt for our material desires. Society places some emphasis on our personal desires—for example, it is almost a fetish in some circles to look trim and fit—and relatively little on our desires to serve. In fact, it is easy to feel naive or foolish by expressing a desire to make a contribution. Be that as it may, it is clear from working with thousands of people that personal visions span all these dimensions and more. It is also clear that it takes courage to hold visions that are not in the social mainstream.

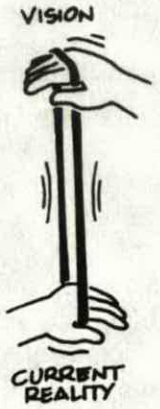
But it is exactly that courage to take a stand for one's vision that distinguishes people with high levels of personal mastery. Or, as the Japanese say of the master's stand, "When there is no break, not even the thickness of a hair comes between a man's vision and his action."[8]

In some ways, clarifying vision is one of the easier aspects of personal mastery. A more difficult challenge, for many, comes in facing current reality.

HOLDING CREATIVE TENSION

People often have great difficulty talking about their visions, even when the visions are clear. Why? Because we are acutely aware of the gaps between our vision and reality. "I would like to start my own company," but "I don't have the capital." Or, "I would like to pursue the profession that I really love," but "I've got to make a living." These gaps can make a vision seem unrealistic or fanciful. They can discourage us or make us feel hopeless. But the gap between vision and current reality is also a source of energy. If there was no gap, there would be no need for any action to move toward the vision. Indeed, the gap is *the* source of creative energy. We call this gap *creative tension*.

Imagine a rubber band, stretched between your vision and current reality. When stretched, the rubber band creates tension, representing the tension between vision and current reality. What does tension seek? Resolution or release. There are only two possible ways for the tension to resolve itself: pull reality toward the vision or pull the vision toward reality. Which occurs will depend on whether we hold steady to the vision.



The principle of creative tension is the central principle of personal mastery, integrating all elements of the discipline. Yet, it is widely misunderstood. For example, the very term "tension" suggests anxiety or stress. But creative tension doesn't feel any particular way. It is the force that comes into play at the moment when we acknowledge a vision that is at odds with current reality.

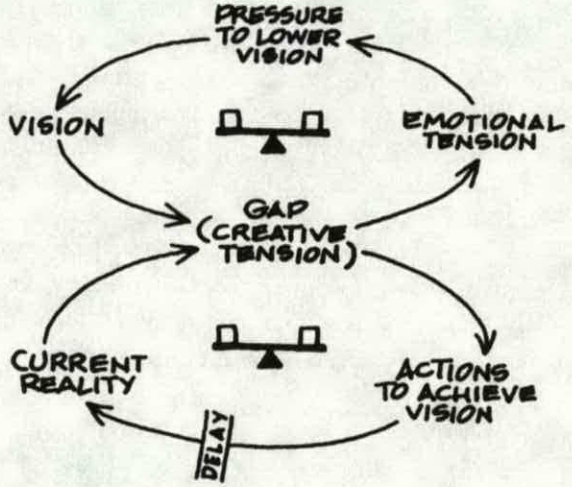
Still, creative tension often leads to feelings or emotions associated with anxiety, such as sadness, discouragement, hopelessness, or worry. This happens so often that people easily confuse these emotions with creative tension. People come to think that the creative process *is all about being in a state of anxiety*. But it is important to realize that these "negative" emotions that may arise when there is creative tension are not creative tension itself. These emotions are what we call *emotional tension*.

If we fail to distinguish emotional tension from creative tension, we predispose ourselves to lowering our vision. If we feel deeply discouraged about a vision that is not happening, we may have a strong urge to lighten the load of that discouragement. There is one immediate remedy: lower the vision! "Well, it wasn't really that important to shoot seventy-five. I'm having a great time shooting in the eighties."

Or, "I don't really care about being able to play in recital. I'll have to make money as a music teacher in any case; I'll just concentrate there." The dynamics of relieving emotional tension are insidious because they can operate unnoticed. Emotional tension can always be relieved by adjusting the one pole of the creative tension that is completely under our control at all times—the vision. The feelings that we dislike go away because the creative tension that was their

source is reduced. Our goals are now much closer to our current reality. Escaping emotional tension is easy—the only price we pay is abandoning what we truly want, our vision.

The dynamics of emotional tension deeply resemble the dynamics of eroding goals that so troubled WonderTech and People Express, in Chapters 7 and 8. The interaction of creative tension and emotional tension is a shifting the burden dynamic, similar to that of eroding goals, that can be represented as follows:



When we hold a vision that differs from current reality, a gap exists (the creative tension) which can be resolved in two ways. The lower balancing process represents the "fundamental solution": taking actions to bring reality into line with the vision. But changing reality takes time. This is what leads to the frustration and emotional tension in the upper balancing process, the "symptomatic solution" of lowering the vision to bring it into line with current reality.

But a onetime reduction in the vision usually isn't the end of the story. Sooner or later new pressures pulling reality away from the (new, lowered) vision arise, leading to still more pressures to lower the vision. The classic "shifting the burden" dynamic ensues, a subtle reinforcing spiral of failure to meet goals, frustration, lowered vision, temporary relief, and pressure anew to lower the vision still further. Gradually, the "burden" is shifting increasingly to lowering the vision.

At WonderTech and People Express relieving emotional tension took the form of decline in key operating standards that seemed impossible to meet—standards for delivery performance and for service quality. The decline was especially difficult to see because it was gradual. During each crisis at Wonder Tech delivery standards eroded just a bit relative to where they had settled after the last crisis. Likewise, managers at People Express didn't wake up one morning and declare, "We've solved our problems keeping pace with growth, we'll lower our service standards." Rather, service standards eroded quietly during repeated crises and with turnover among key leaders. So, too, do eroding personal goals go unrecognized, as we gradually surrender our dreams for the relationships we want to have, the work we want to do, and the type of world we want to live in.

In organizations, goals erode because of low tolerance for emotional tension. Nobody wants to be the messenger with bad news. The easiest path is to just pretend there is no bad news, or better yet, "declare victory"—to redefine the bad news as not so bad by lowering the standard against which it is judged.

The dynamics of emotional tension exist at all levels of human activity. They are the dynamics of compromise, the path of mediocrity. As Somerset Maugham said, "Only mediocre people are always at their best."

We allow our goals to erode when we are unwilling to live with emotional tension. On the other hand, when we understand creative tension and allow it to operate by not lowering our vision, vision becomes an active force. Robert Fritz says, "It's not what the vision is, it's what the vision does." Truly creative people use the gap between vision and current reality to generate energy for change.

For example, Alan Kay, who directed the research at Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) that led to many key features of the personal computer, actually had a vision for a different machine, which he called the "dynabook." This would be a book that was interactive. A child could test out his understanding, play games, and creatively rearrange the static presentation of ideas offered by the traditional book. Kay failed, in a sense, because the "dynabook" never became a reality. But the vision reshaped the computer industry. The prototype machines developed at PARC achieved the functionality—windows, pull-down menus, mouse control, iconic displays (images rather than words)—that was introduced commercially ten years later in the Macintosh.

Bill Russell, the legendary center for the Boston Celtics basketball team, used to keep his own personal scorecard. He graded himself after every game on scale from one to one hundred. In his career he

never achieved more than sixty-five. Now, given the way most of us are taught to think about goals, we would regard Russell as an abject failure. The poor soul played in over twelve hundred basketball games and never achieved his standard! Yet, it was the striving for that standard that made him arguably the best basketball player ever.[9]

It's not what the vision is, it's what the vision does.

Mastery of creative tension transforms the way one views "failure." Failure is, simply, a shortfall, evidence of the gap between vision and current reality. Failure is an opportunity for learning—about inaccurate pictures of current reality, about strategies that didn't work as expected, about the clarity of the vision. Failures are not about our unworthiness or powerlessness. Ed Land, founder and president of Polaroid for decades and inventor of instant photography, had one plaque on his wall. It read:

> A mistake is an event, the full benefit of which has not yet been turned to your advantage.

Mastery of creative tension brings out a capacity for perseverance and patience. A Japanese executive in one of our seminars once told me how, in his view, Japanese and Americans have quite different attitudes toward time. He said that, "U.S. businessmen in Japan to negotiate business deals often find the Japanese evasive and reticent to 'get down to business.' The American arrives in Japan on a tight, carefully planned five-day schedule and immediately wants to get to work. Instead, the Japanese greet them with a polite, formal tea ceremony instead, never getting down to nuts and bolts. As the days go by, the Japanese keep their slow pace, while the Americans become antsier and antsier. For the American," the executive said, "time is the enemy. For the Japanese, time is an ally."

More broadly, current reality itself is, for many of us, the enemy. We fight against what is. We are not so much drawn to what we want to create as we are repelled by what we have, from our current reality. By this logic, the deeper the fear, the more we abhor what is, the more "motivated" we are to change. "Things must get bad enough, or people will not change in any fundamental way."

This leads to the mistaken belief that fundamental change *requires* a threat to survival. This crisis theory of change is remarkably widespread. Yet, it is also a dangerous oversimplification. Often in workshops or presentations, I will ask, "How many of you believe people and organizations only change, fundamentally, when there is a crisis?" Reliably, 75 to 90 percent of the hands go up. Then I ask people to consider a life where everything is exactly the way they would like—there are absolutely no problems of any sort in work, personally, professionally, in their relationships, or their community. Then I ask, "What is the first thing you would seek if you had a life of absolutely no problems?" The answer, overwhelmingly, is "change—to create something new." So human beings are more complex than we often assume. We both fear and seek change. Or, as one seasoned organization change consultant once put it, "People don't resist change. They resist being changed."

Mastery of creative tension leads to a fundamental shift in our whole posture toward reality. Current reality becomes the ally not the enemy. *An accurate, insightful view of current reality is as important as a clear vision.* Unfortunately, most of us are in the habit of imposing biases on our perceptions of current reality, a subject we will return to in depth in the following chapter on mental models. "We learn to rely on our concepts of reality more than on our observations," writes Robert Fritz. "It is more convenient to assume that reality is similar to our preconceived ideas than to freshly observe what we have before our eyes."[10] If the first choice in pursuing personal mastery is to be true to your own vision, the second fundamental choice in support of personal mastery is commitment to the truth.

Both are equally vital to generating creative tension. Or, as Fritz puts it, "The truly creative person knows that all creating is achieved through working with constraints. Without constraints there is no creating."

"STRUCTURAL CONFLICT": THE POWER OF YOUR POWERLESSNESS

Many people, even highly successful people, harbor deep beliefs contrary to their personal mastery. Very often, these beliefs are below the level of conscious awareness. To see what I mean, try the following experiment. Say out loud the following sentence: "I can create my life exactly the way I want it, in all dimensions—work, family, relationships, community, and larger world." Notice your internal reaction to this assertion, the "little voice" in the back of your head. "Who's he kidding?" "He doesn't really believe that." "Personally and in work, sure—but, not 'community' and 'the larger

world.' " "What do I care about the 'larger world' anyhow?" All of these reactions are evidence of deep-seated beliefs.

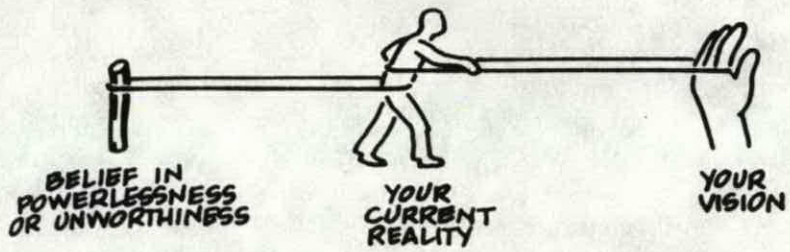
Robert Fritz, who has worked with literally tens of thousands of people to develop their creative capacities, has concluded that practically all of us have a "dominant belief that we are not able to fulfill our desires." Where does this belief come from? Fritz argues that it is an almost inevitable by-product of growing up:

> As children we learn what our limitations are. Children are rightfully taught limitations essential to their survival. But too often this learning is generalized. We are constantly told we can't have or can't do certain things, and we may come to assume that we have an inability to have what we want.[11]

Most of us hold one of two contradictory beliefs that limit our ability to create what we really want. The more common is belief in our powerlessness—our inability to bring into being all the things we really care about. The other belief centers on unworthiness—that we do not deserve to have what we truly desire. Fritz claims that he has met only a handful of individuals who do not seem to have one or the other of these underlying beliefs. Such an assertion is difficult to prove rigorously because it is difficult to measure deep beliefs. But if we accept it as a working premise, it illuminates systemic forces that can work powerfully against creating what we really want.

Fritz uses a metaphor to describe how contradictory underlying beliefs work as a system, counter to achieving our goals. Imagine, as you move toward your goal, there is a rubber band, symbolizing creative tension, pulling you in the desired direction. But imagine also a second rubber band, anchored to the belief of powerlessness or unworthiness. Just as the first rubber band tries to pull you toward your goal, the second pulls you back toward the underlying belief that you can't (or don't deserve to) have your goal. Fritz calls the system involving both the tension pulling us toward our goal and the tension anchoring us to our underlying belief "structural conflict," because it is a structure of conflicting forces: pulling us simultaneously toward and away from what we want.

Thus, the closer we come to achieving our vision, the more the second rubber band pulls us away from our vision. This force can manifest itself in many ways. We might lose our energy. We might question whether we really wanted the vision. "Finishing the job" might become increasingly difficult. Unexpected obstacles develop in our path. People let us down. All this happens even though we are unaware of the structural conflict system, because it originates in



deep beliefs of which we are largely unaware—in fact, our unawareness contributes to the power of structural conflict.

Given beliefs in our powerlessness or unworthiness, structural conflict implies that systemic forces come into play to keep us from succeeding *whenever* we seek a vision. Yet, we *do* succeed sometimes, and in fact many of us have become adept at identifying and achieving goals, at least in some areas of our lives. How do we overcome the forces of structural conflict?

Fritz has identified three generic "strategies" for coping with the forces of structural conflict, each of which has its limitations.[12] Letting our vision erode is one such coping strategy. The second is "conflict manipulation," in which we try to manipulate ourselves into greater effort toward what we want by creating artificial conflict, such as through focusing on avoiding what we don't want. Conflict manipulation is the favored strategy of people who incessantly worry about failure, managers who excel at "motivational chats" that point out the highly unpleasant consequences if the company's goals are *not* achieved, and of social movements that attempt to mobilize people through fear. In fact, sadly, most social movements operate through conflict manipulation or "negative vision," focusing on getting away from what we don't want, rather than on creating what we do want: antidrugs, antinuclear arms, antinuclear power, antismoking, anti-abortion, or antigovernment corruption.

But many ask, "What's wrong with a little worry or fear if it helps us achieve our goals?" The response of those who seek personal mastery is the simple question: "Do you really want to live your life in a state of fear of failure?" The tragedy is that many people who get hooked on conflict manipulation come to believe that *only* through being in a state of continual anxiety and fear can they be successful. These are the people who, rather than shunning emotional tension, actually come to glorify it. For them, there is little joy in life. Even when they achieve their goals, they immediately begin worrying about losing what they have gained.

Fritz's third generic strategy is the strategy of "willpower," where

we simply "psych ourselves up" to overpower all forms of resistance to achieving our goals. Lying behind willpower strategies, he suggests, is the simple assumption that we "motivate ourselves through heightened volition." Willpower is so common among highly successful people that many see its characteristics as synonymous with success: a maniacal focus on goals, willingness to "pay the price," ability to defeat any opposition and surmount any obstacle.

The problems with "willpower" are many, but they may hardly be noticed by the person focused narrowly on "success." First, there is little economy of means; in systems thinking terms, we act without leverage. We attain our goals, but the effort is enormous and we may find ourselves exhausted and wondering if "it was worth it" when we have succeeded. Ironically, people hooked on willpower may actually look for obstacles to overcome, dragons to slay, and enemies to vanquish—to remind themselves and others of their own prowess. Second, there are often considerable unintended consequences. Despite great success at work, the master of "willpower" will often find that he or she has gone through two marriages and has terrible relationships with his or her children. Somehow, the same dogged determination and goal orientation that "works" at work doesn't quite turn the trick at home. (Chapter 16, "Ending the War Between Work and Family," develops these ideas further.)

Worse still, just as with all of the coping strategies, "willpower" leaves the underlying system of structural conflict unaltered. In particular, the underlying belief in powerlessness has not really changed. Despite significant accomplishments, many "highly successful people" still feel a deep, usually unspoken, sense of powerlessness in critical areas of their lives—such as in their personal and family relationships, or in their ability to achieve a sense of peace and spiritual fulfillment.

These coping strategies are, to a certain extent, unavoidable. They are deeply habitual and cannot be changed overnight. We all tend to have a favorite strategy—mine has long been "willpower," as those close to me can attest.

Where then is the leverage in dealing with structural conflict? If structural conflict arises from deep underlying beliefs, then it can be changed only by changing the beliefs. But psychologists are virtually unanimous that fundamental beliefs such as powerlessness or unworthiness cannot be changed readily. They are developed early in life (remember all those "can'ts" and "don'ts" that started when you were two?). For most of us, beliefs change gradually as we accumulate new experiences—as we develop our personal mastery. But if mastery will not develop so long as we hold unempowering beliefs, and the beliefs will change only as we experience our mastery, how many we begin to alter the deeper structures of our lives?

COMMITMENT TO THE TRUTH

We may begin with a disarmingly simple yet profound strategy for dealing with structural conflict: telling the truth.

Commitment to the truth often seems to people an inadequate strategy. "What do I need to do to change my behavior?" "How do I change my underlying belief?" People often want a formula, a technique, something tangible that they can apply to solve the problem of structural conflict. But, in fact, being committed to the truth is far more powerful than any technique.

Commitment to the truth does not mean seeking the "Truth," the absolute final word or ultimate cause. Rather, it means a relentless willingness to root out the ways we limit or deceive ourselves from seeing what is, and to continually challenge our theories of why things are the way they are. It means continually broadening our awareness, just as the great athlete with extraordinary peripheral vision keeps trying to "see more of the playing field." It also means continually deepening our understanding of the structures underlying current events. Specifically, people with high levels of personal mastery see more of the structural conflicts underlying their own behavior.

Thus, the first critical task in dealing with structural conflicts is to recognize them, *and* the resulting behavior, when they are operating. It can be very difficult to recognize these coping strategies while we are playing them out, especially because of tensions and pressures that often accompany them. It helps to develop internal warning signals, such as when we find ourselves blaming something or somebody for our problems: "The reason I'm giving up is nobody appreciates me," or "The reason I'm so worried is that they'll fire me if I don't get the job done."

In my life, for example, I often felt that people let me down at critical junctures in major projects. When this happened, I would "bulldoze" through, overcoming the obstacle of their disloyalty or incompetence. It took many years before I recognized this as a re-

curring pattern, my own special form of the "willpower" strategy, rooted in a deep feeling of being powerless to change the way others let me down. Invariably, I ended up feeling as if "I've got to do it all myself."

Once I recognized this pattern, I began to act differently when a colleague let me down. I became angry less often. Rather, there was a twinge of recognition—"Oh, there goes my pattern." I looked more deeply at how my own actions were part of the outcome, either by creating tasks that were impossible to accomplish, or by undermining or demotivating the other person. Further, I worked to develop skills to discuss such situations with the people involved without producing defensiveness. Chapter 10, Mental Models, illustrates these skills.

I would never have developed those skills or known how to put them into practice without a shift of mind. So long as I saw the problem in terms of events, I was convinced that my problems were externally caused—"*they* let me down." Once I saw the problem as structurally caused, I began to look at what I could do, rather than at what "they had done."

Structures of which we are unaware hold us prisoner. Once we can see them and name them, they no longer have the same hold on us. This is as much true for individuals as it is for organizations. In fact, an entire field is evolving, structural family therapy, based on the assumption that individual psychological difficulties can be understood and changed only by understanding the structures of interdependencies within families and close personal relationships. Once these structures are recognized, in the words of David Kantor, a pioneer in the field, "It becomes possible to begin to alter structures to free people from previously mysterious forces that dictated their behavior."[13]

Discovering structures at play is the stock and trade of people with high levels of personal mastery. Sometimes these structures can be readily changed. Sometimes, as with structural conflict, they change only gradually. Then the need is to work more creatively within them while acknowledging their ori rather than fighting the structures. Either way, once an operating structure is recognized, the structure itself becomes part of "current reality." The more my commitment to the truth, the more creative tension comes into play because current reality is seen more for what it really is. In the context of creative tension, commitment to the truth becomes a generative force, just as vision becomes a generative force.

One of the classic illustrations of this process is Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Through the visitations of the three ghosts on Christmas Eve, Scrooge sees more and more of the reality from which he has turned away. He sees the reality of his past, how the choices he made steadily whittled away his compassion and increased his self-centeredness. He sees the reality of his present, especially those aspects of reality that he has avoided, such as Tiny Tim's illness. And he sees the reality of his likely future, the future that will occur if he continues in his present ways. But then he wakes up. He realizes that he is not the captive of these realities. He realizes that he has a choice. He chooses to change.

Significantly, Scrooge can't make the choice to change before he becomes more aware of his current reality. In effect, Dickens says that life always avails the option of seeing the truth, no matter how blind and prejudiced we may be. And if we have the courage to respond to that option, we have the power to change ourselves profoundly. Or, to put it in more classic religious terms, only through the truth do we come to grace.

The power of the truth, seeing reality more and more as it is, cleansing the lens of perception, awakening from self-imposed distortions of reality—different expressions of a common principle in almost all the world's great philosophic and religious systems. Buddhists strive to achieve the state of "pure observation," of seeing reality directly. Hindus speak of "witnessing," observing themselves and their lives with an attitude of spiritual detachment. The Koran ends with the phrase, "What a tragedy that man must die before he wakes up." The power of the truth was no less central to early Christian thinking, although it has lost its place in Christian practice over the last two thousand years. In fact, the Hebrew symbols used to form the word *Yeheshua*, "Jesus," include the symbols for Jehovah, "יהוה," with the additional letter *shin* (ש) inserted in the middle. The symbols for Jehovah carry the meaning, "That which was, is, and will be." The inserted *shin* modifies the meaning to "that which was, is, and will be, *delivers*." This is the probable origin of the statement "The truth shall set you free."

USING THE SUBCONSCIOUS, OR, YOU DON'T REALLY NEED TO FIGURE IT ALL OUT

One of the most fascinating aspects of people with high levels of personal mastery is their ability to accomplish extraordinarily complex tasks with grace and ease. We have all marveled at the breath-

takingly beautiful artistry of the championship ice skater or the prima ballerina. We know that their skills have been developed through years of diligent training, yet the ability to execute their artistry with such ease and seeming effortlessness is *still* wondrous.

Implicit in the practice of personal mastery is another dimension of the mind, the subconscious. It is through the subconscious that *all of us* deal with complexity. What distinguishes people with high levels of personal mastery is they have developed a higher level of rapport between their normal awareness and their subconscious. What most of us take for granted and exploit haphazardly, they approach as a discipline.

Is the subconscious relevant in management and organizations? Inamori of Kyocera says:

> When I am concentrating . . . I enter the subconscious mind. It is said that human beings possess both a conscious and subconscious mind, and that our subconscious mind has a capacity that is larger by a factor of ten . . ."
>
> When I talk about our "mind," I risk being called crazy. Nonetheless, I think therein may lie the hint to the secret that may determine our future.

O'Brien of Hanover likewise sees tapping mental capabilities formerly ignored as central to building the new organization:

> The greatest unexplored territory in the world is the space between our ears. Seriously, I am certain that learning organizations will find ways to nurture and focus the capabilities within us all that today we call "extraordinary."

But what is "extraordinary" is actually closely related to aspects of our lives that are so "ordinary" that we hardly notice them. Our lives are full of myriad complex tasks which we handle quite competently with almost no conscious thought. Try an experiment: touch the top of your head. Now, *how* did you do that? For most of us, the answer resembles, "Well, I just thought about my hand on my head —or, I formed a mental image of my hand on top of my head—and *voila*, it just was there." But at a neurophysiological level, raising your hand to the top of your head is an extraordinarily complex task, involving hundreds of thousands of neural firings as signals move from the brain to your arm and back again. This entire complex activity is coordinated without our conscious awareness. Likewise, if you had to think about every detail of walking, you'd be in big trouble. Walking, talking, eating, putting on your shoes, and riding a bicycle are all accomplished with almost no conscious attention—yet all are, in fact, enormously complex tasks.

These tasks are accomplished reliably because there is an aspect of our mind that is exceedingly capable of dealing with complexity. We call this dimension of mind the "subconscious," because it operates "below" or "behind" the level of conscious awareness. Others call it "unconscious" or "automatic mind."[14] Whatever it is called, without this dimension of mind it would be quite impossible to explain how human beings ever succeed in mastering any complex task. For one thing we can say confidently is that these tasks are not accomplished through our normal awareness and thinking alone.

Equally important, the subconscious is critical to how we learn. At one point in your life you were unable to carry out "mundane" tasks such as walking, talking and eating. Each had to be *learned*. The infant does not get the spoon in her mouth the first time out—it goes over the left shoulder, then the right shoulder, then the cheek. Only gradually does she learn to reliably reach her mouth. Initially, any new task requires a great deal of conscious attention and effort. As we "learn" the skills required of the task, the whole activity gradually shifts from conscious attention to subconscious control.

For example, when you first learned to drive a car, it took considerable conscious attention, especially if your were learning to drive on a standard transmission. In fact, you might have found it difficult to carry on a conversation with the person next to you. If that person had asked you to "slow down, downshift, and turn right" at the next corner, you might have given up then and there. Yet, within a few months or less, you executed the same task with little or no conscious attention. It had all become "automatic." Amazingly, before long you drove in heavy traffic while carrying on a conversation with the person sitting next to you—apparently giving almost no conscious attention to the literally hundreds of variables you had to monitor and respond to.

For example, when we first learn to play the piano or any musical instrument, we start by playing scales. Gradually, we move up to simple and then more complex compositions, leaving scales behind as a task that can be handled with little conscious attention. Even concert pianists, when sitting down to an unfamiliar piece will play that piece at half speed in order to allow concentration on the mechanics of hand and pedal positions, rhythm and tempo. But when the concert comes, the same pianist places no conscious attention

on the mechanics of playing the piece. This leaves his conscious attention to focus exclusively on the aesthetics of the performance.[15]

We have all mastered a vast repertoire of skills through "training" the subconscious. Once learned, they become so taken for granted, so "subconscious," we don't even notice when we are executing them. But, for most of us, we have never given careful thought to *how* we mastered these skills and how we might continue to develop deeper and deeper *"rapport"* between our normal awareness and subconscious. Yet, these are matters of the greatest importance to the discipline of personal mastery.[16]

This is why, for instance, people committed to continually developing personal mastery practice some form of "meditation." Whether it is through contemplative prayer or other methods of simply "quieting" the conscious mind, regular meditative practice can be extremely helpful in working more productively with the subconscious mind. The subconscious appears to have no particular volition. It neither generates its own objectives nor determines its own focus. It is highly subject to direction and conditioning—what we pay attention to takes on special significance to the subconscious. In our normal highly active state of mind, the subconscious is deluged with a welter of contradictory thoughts and feelings. In a quieter state of mind, when we then focus on something of particular importance, some aspect of our vision, the subconscious is undistracted.

Moreover, there are particular ways that people with high levels of personal mastery direct their focus. As discussed earlier, they *focus on the desired result itself,* not the "process" or the means they assume necessary to achieve that result.

Focusing on the desired intrinsic result is a skill. For most of us it is not easy at first, and takes time and patience to develop. For most of us, as soon as we think of some important personal goal, almost immediately we think of all the reasons why it will be hard to achieve —the challenges we will face and the obstacles we will have to overcome. While this is very helpful for thinking through alternative strategies for achieving our goals, it is also a sign of lack of discipline when thoughts about "the process" of achieving our vision continually crowd out our focus on the outcomes we seek. We must work at learning how to separate what we truly want, from what we think we need to do in order to achieve it.

A useful starting exercise for learning how to focus more clearly on desired results is to take any particular goal or aspect of your vision. First imagine that that goal is fully realized. Then ask yourself the question, "If I actually had this, what would it get me?" What people often discover is that the answer to that question reveals "deeper" desires lying behind the goal. In fact, the goal is actually an interim step they assume is necessary to reach a more important result. For example, a person has a goal of reaching a certain level in the organizational hierarchy. When she asks herself, "What would it get me to be a senior VP?" she discovers that the answer is "respect of my peers" or "being where the action is." Though she may still aspire to the position, she now sees that there is also a deeper result she desires—a result she can start to hold as part of her vision now, independent of where she is in the organizational hierarchy. (Moreover, if she doesn't clarify "the result" she truly seeks, she may reach her stated goal and find that the more senior position is somehow still dissatisfying.)

The reason this skill is so important is precisely because of the responsiveness of the subconscious to a clear focus. When we are unclear between interim goals and more intrinsic goals, the subconscious has no way of prioritizing and focusing.

Making clear choices is also important. Only after choice are the capabilities of the subconscious brought fully into play. In fact, making choices and focusing on the results that are really important to us may be one of the highest leverage uses of our normal awareness. As Inamori puts it:

> I often tell a researcher who is lacking in dedication . . . unless [he] is motivated with determination to succeed, he will not be able to go past the obstacles . . . When his passion, his desire, becomes so strong as to rise out of his body like steam, and when the condensation of that which evaporated occurs . . . and drops back like raindrops, he will find his problem solved.

Commitment to the truth is also important for developing subconscious rapport—for the same basic reasons that lie detectors work. Lie detectors work because when most human beings do not tell the truth they create some level of internal stress, which in turn generates measurable physiological effects—blood pressure, pulse rate, and respiration. So, not only does deceiving ourselves about current reality prevent the subconscious from having accurate information about where we are relative to our vision, but it also creates distracting input to the subconscious, just as our "chatter" about why we can't achieve our vision is distracting. The principle of creative tension recognizes that the subconscious operates most effectively when it is focused clearly on our vision and our current reality.

The art of working effectively with the subconscious incorporates

many techniques. An effective way to focus the subconscious is through imagery and visualization. For example, world-class swimmers have found that by imagining their hands to be twice their actual size and their feet to be webbed, they actually swim faster. "Mental rehearsal" of complex feats has become routine psychological training for diverse professional performers.

But the real effectiveness of all of this still hinges on knowing what it is that is most important to you. In the absence of knowing what truly matters to you, the specific practices and methods of working with the subconscious run the risk of becoming mechanical techniques—simply a new way of manipulating yourself into being more productive. This is not an idle concern. Almost all spiritual traditions warn against adopting the techniques of increased mental powers without diligently continuing to refine one's sense of genuine aspiration.

Ultimately, what matters most in developing the subconscious rapport characteristic of masters is the genuine caring for a desired outcome, the deep feeling of it being the "right" goal toward which to aspire. The subconscious seems especially receptive to goals in line with our deeper aspirations and values. According to some spiritual disciplines, this is because these deeper aspirations input directly to, or are part of, the subconscious mind.

A wonderful example of what can be accomplished in the pursuit of something truly important to a person is the story of Gilbert Kaplan, a highly successful publisher and editor of a leading investment periodical. Kaplan first heard Mahler's Second Symphony in a rehearsal in 1965. He "found himself unable to sleep. I went back for the performance and walked out of the hall a different person. It was the beginning of a long love affair." Despite his having had *no* formal musical training, he committed time and energy and a considerable sum of his personal finances (he had to hire an orchestra) to the pursuit of learning how to conduct the piece. Today, his performances of the symphony have received the highest praise by critics throughout the world. The *New York Times* praised his 1988 recording of the symphony with the London Symphony Orchestra as one of the five finest classical recordings of the year and the president of the New York Mahler Society called it "the outstanding recorded performance." A strict reliance on only conscious learning could never have achieved this level of artistry, even with all the "willpower" in the world. It had to depend on a high level of subconscious rapport which Kaplan could bring to bear on his new "love affair."

In many ways, the key to developing high levels of mastery in subconscious rapport comes back to the discipline of developing personal vision. This is why the concept of vision has always figured so strongly in the creative arts. Picasso once said:

> It would be very interesting to record photographically, not the stages of a painting, but its metamorphoses. One would see perhaps by what course a mind finds its way toward the crystallization of its dream. But what is really very serious is to see that the picture does not change basically, that the initial vision remains almost intact in spite of appearance.[17]

PERSONAL MASTERY AND THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE

As individuals practice the discipline of personal mastery, several changes gradually take place within them. Many of these are quite subtle and often go unnoticed. In addition to clarifying the "structures" that characterize personal mastery as a discipline (such as creative tension, emotional tension, and structural conflict), the systems perspective also illuminates subtler aspects of personal mastery —especially: integrating reason and intuition; continually seeing more of our connectedness to the world; compassion; and commitment to the whole.

INTEGRATING REASON AND INTUITION

According to an ancient Sufi story, a blind man wandering lost in a forest tripped and fell. As the blind man rummaged about the forest floor he discovered that he had fallen over a cripple. The blind man and the cripple struck up a conversation, commiserating on their fate. The blind man said, "I have been wandering in this forest for as long as I can remember, and I cannot see to find my way out." The cripple said, "I have been lying on the forest floor for as long as I can remember, and I cannot get up to walk out." As they sat there talking, suddenly the cripple cried out. "I've got it," he said. "You hoist me up onto your shoulders and I will tell you where to walk. Together we can find our way out of the forest." According to the ancient storyteller, the blind man symbolized rationality. The cripple

symbolized intuition. We will not find our way out of the forest until we learn how to integrate the two.

Intuition in management has recently received increasing attention and acceptance, after many decades of being officially ignored. Now numerous studies show that experienced managers and leaders rely heavily on intuition—that they do not figure out complex problems entirely rationally. They rely on hunches, recognize patterns, and draw intuitive analogies and parallels to other seemingly disparate situations.[18] There are even courses in management schools on intuition and creative problem solving. But we have a very long way to go, in our organizations and in society, toward reintegrating intuition and rationality.

People with high levels of personal mastery do not set out to integrate reason and intuition. Rather, they achieve it naturally—as a by-product of their commitment to use all resources at their disposal. They cannot afford to choose between reason and intuition, or head and heart, any more than they would choose to walk on one leg or see with one eye.

Bilateralism is a design principle underlying the evolution of advanced organisms. Nature seems to have learned to design in pairs; it not only builds in redundancy but achieves capabilities not possible otherwise. Two legs are critical for rapid, flexible locomotion. Two arms and hands are vital for climbing, lifting, and manipulating objects. Two eyes give us stereoscopic vision, and along with two ears, depth perception. Is it not possible that, following the same design principle, reason and intuition are designed to work in harmony for us to achieve our potential intelligence?

Systems thinking may hold a key to integrating reason and intuition. Intuition eludes the grasp of linear thinking, with its exclusive emphasis on cause and effect that are close in time and space. The result is that most of our intuitions don't make "sense"—that is, they can't be explained in terms of linear logic.

Very often, experienced managers have rich intuitions about complex systems, which they cannot explain. Their intuitions tell them that cause and effect are not close in time and space, that obvious solutions will produce more harm than good, and that short-term fixes produce long-term problems. But they cannot explain their ideas in simple linear cause-effect language. They end up saying, "Just do it this way. It will work."

For example, many managers sense the dangers of eroding goals or standards but cannot fully explain how they create a reinforcing

tendency to underinvest and a self-fulfilling prophecy of underrealized market growth. Or, managers may feel that they are focusing on tangible, easily measured indicators of performance and masking deeper problems, and even exacerbating these problems. But they cannot explain convincingly why these are the wrong performance indicators or how alternatives might produce improved results. Both of these intuitions can be explained when the underlying systemic structures are understood.[19]

The conflict between intuition and linear, nonsystemic thinking has planted the seed that *rationality* itself is opposed to intuition. This view is demonstrably false if we consider the synergy of reason and intuition that characterizes virtually all great thinkers. Einstein said, "I never discovered anything with my rational mind." He once described how he discovered the principle of relativity by imagining himself traveling on a light beam. Yet, he could take brilliant intuitions and convert them into succinct, rationally testable propositions.

As managers gain facility with systems thinking as an alternative language, they find that many of their intuitions become explicable. Eventually, reintegrating reason and intuition may prove to be one of the primary contributions of systems thinking.

SEEING OUR CONNECTEDNESS TO THE WORLD

My six-week-old son Ian does not yet seem to know his hands and feet. I suspect that he is aware of them, but he is clearly not aware that they are *his* hands and feet, or that he controls their actions. The other day, he got caught in a terrible reinforcing feedback loop. He had taken hold of his ear with his left hand. It was clearly agitating him, as you could tell from his pained expression and increasing flagellations. But, as a result of being agitated, he pulled harder. This increased his discomfort, which led him to get more agitated and pull still harder. The poor little guy might still be pulling if I hadn't detached his hand and quieted him down.

Not knowing that his hand was actually within his control, he perceived the source of his discomfort as an external force. Sound familiar? Ian's plight was really no different from the beer game players of Chapter 3, who reacted to suppliers' delivery times as if they were external forces, or the arms race participants in Chapter

5 ("A Shift of Mind") who reacted to each other's arms buildups as if they had no power to change them.

As I thought about Ian, I began to think that a neglected dimension of personal growth lies in "closing the loops"—in continually discovering how apparent external forces are actually interrelated with our own actions. Fairly soon, Ian will recognize his feet and hands and learn he can control their motions. Then he will discover that he can control his body position—if it is unpleasant on his back, he can roll over. Then will come internal states such as temperature, and the realization that they can be influenced by moving closer or further from a heat source such as Mommy or Daddy. Eventually comes Mommy and Daddy themselves, and the realization that their actions and emotions are subject to his influence. At each stage in this progression, there will be corresponding adjustments in his internal pictures of reality, which will steadily change to incorporate more of the feedback from his actions to the conditions in his life.

But for most of us, sometime early in life this process of closing the loops is arrested. As we get older, our rate of discovery slows down; we see fewer and fewer new links between our actions and external forces. We become locked into ways of looking at the world that are, fundamentally, no different from little Ian's.

The learning process of the young child provides a beautiful metaphor for the learning challenge faced by us all: to continually expand our awareness and understanding, to see more and more of the interdependencies between actions and our reality, to see more and more of our connectedness to the world around us. We will probably never perceive fully the multiple ways in which we influence our reality. But simply being open to the possibility is enough to free our thinking.

Einstein expressed the learning challenge when he said:

> [the human being] experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

The experience of increasing connectedness which Einstein describes is one of the subtlest aspects of personal mastery, one that

derives most directly from the systems perspective. His "widening . . . circle of compassion" is another.

COMPASSION

The discipline of seeing interrelationships gradually undermines older attitudes of blame and guilt. We begin to see that *all of us* are trapped in structures, structures embedded both in our ways of thinking and in the interpersonal and social milieus in which we live. Our knee-jerk tendencies to find fault with one another gradually fade, leaving a much deeper appreciation of the forces within which we all operate.

This does not imply that people are simply victims of systems that dictate their behavior. Often, the structures are of our own creation. But this has little meaning until those structures are seen. For most of us, the structures within which we operate are invisible. We are neither victims nor culprits but human beings controlled by forces we have not yet learned how to perceive.

We are used to thinking of compassion as an emotional state, based on our concern for one another. But it is also grounded in a level of awareness. In my experience, as people see more of the systems within which they operate, and as they understand more clearly the pressures influencing one another, they naturally develop more compassion and empathy.

COMMITMENT TO THE WHOLE

"Genuine commitment," according to Bill O'Brien, "is always to something larger than ourselves." Inamori talks about "action of our heart," when we are guided by "sincere desire to serve the world." Such action, he says, "is a very important issue since it has great power."

The sense of connectedness and compassion characteristic of individuals with high levels of personal mastery naturally leads to a broader vision. Without it, all the subconscious visualizing in the world is deeply self-centered—simply a way to get what I want.

Individuals committed to a vision beyond their self-interest find they have energy not available when pursuing narrower goals, as will organizations that tap this level of commitment. "I do not believe

there has been a single person who has made a worthwhile discovery or invention," Inamori states, "who has not experienced a spiritual power." He describes the will of a person committed to a larger purpose as "a cry from the soul which has been shaken and awakened."

FOSTERING PERSONAL MASTERY IN AN ORGANIZATION

It must always be remembered that embarking on any path of personal growth is a matter of choice. No one can be forced to develop his or her personal mastery. It is guaranteed to backfire. Organizations can get into considerable difficulty if they become too aggressive in promoting personal mastery for their members.

Still many have attempted to do just that by creating compulsory internal personal growth training programs. However well intentioned, such programs are probably the most sure-fire way to impede the genuine spread of commitment to personal mastery in an organization. Compulsory training, or "elective" programs that people feel expected to attend if they want to advance their careers, conflict directly with freedom of choice.

For example, there have been numerous instances in recent years of overzealous managers requiring employees to participate in personal development training, which the employees regarded as contradictory to their own religious beliefs. Several of these have resulted in legal action against the organization.[20]

What then can leaders intent on fostering personal mastery do?

They can work relentlessly to foster a climate in which the principles of personal mastery are practiced in daily life. That means building an organization where it is safe for people to create visions, where inquiry and commitment to the truth are the norm, and where challenging the status quo is expected—especially when the status quo includes obscuring aspects of current reality that people seek to avoid.

Such an organizational climate will strengthen personal mastery in two ways. First, it will continually reinforce the idea that personal growth is truly valued in the organization. Second, to the extent that individuals respond to what is offered, it will provide an "on the job training" that is vital to developing personal mastery. As with any discipline, developing personal mastery must become a continual,

ongoing process. There is nothing more important to an individual committed to his or her own growth than a supportive environment. An organization committed to personal mastery can provide that environment by continually encouraging personal vision, commitment to the truth, and a willingness to face honestly the gaps between the two.

Many of the practices most conducive to developing one's own personal mastery—developing a more systemic worldview, learning how to reflect on tacit assumptions, expressing one's vision and listening to others' visions, and joint inquiry into different people's views of current reality—are embedded in the disciplines for building learning organizations. So, in many ways, the most positive actions that an organization can take to foster personal mastery involve working to develop all five learning disciplines in concert.

The core leadership strategy is simple: be a model. Commit yourself to your own personal mastery. 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.