

Art and Practice of building a Learning Culture in Afterschool Programs

By Sonia M. Toledo

During my master's degree program in Human Services at Lincoln University, I was introduced to Peter Senge's "The Fifth Discipline, the Art & Practice of the Learning Organization" (2006). I was totally intrigued by his philosophy, and I began to make connections to how this theory could be very effective in the afterschool program context. For the last 20 years, I have been training directors using the the Fifth Discipline framework, and supporting directors to develop as leaders in the afterschool field. Although this theory was intended for the corporate world, I thought it was a perfect match for an afterschool director to help develop habits as a leader and create a learning culture for their afterschool programs.

The five disciplines are Personal Mastery, Building A Shared Vision, Team Learning, Mental Modeling, and Systems Thinking. In **Personal Mastery**, leaders check-in with their own perceptions and actions before blaming staff. They understand the importance of continuous personal and professional development in order to keep moving in the intended direction. The **Mental Model** is based on understanding each person's assumptions and perceptions, in this case, about working with children. Another discipline is **Shared Vision**, demonstrated by a group of people imagining ideas about the future together. That vision will be the driver that reminds everyone of the intention and goals of the program, as well as guide direction and practices.



Another framework I have used in my work is the concept of a Professional Learning Communities (PLC), which is aligned with the discipline of **Team Learning**. In the last two decades, the concept of the learning culture has been evolving in the education sector as a method to transform environments where administrators and teachers collaborate to learn together and in constant dialogue about the intentions and goals for the community. PLCs are designed to teach and encourage all stakeholders in a community to listen actively, question what they know, and realign their thinking to the vision and intentions of the community (Peppers, 2015). Both PLCs and the Five Disciplines are designed to encourage administration and staff to embark on a continuous learning process that challenges their current way of thinking and encourages them to problem solve and make decisions as a team.



One of the most successful ways that I have modeled this during Leadership and Management training for afterschool directors is to have participants teach the disciplines to each other. This was intentionally part of the training because in

adult learning we know that we absorb and retain information by teaching it to others rather than just by reading about it. The directors are divided into five teams, instructed to read a description of an assigned discipline, and design symbols that will help them teach the discipline to others. Having participants assign symbols to the discipline also facilitates visual and conceptual learning. Finally, this is a team effort, and they must work collaboratively to achieve the goal. Directors are given approximately an hour to complete this process before they make presentations to the whole group.

The directors have the opportunity to be as creative as they wish during their presentation to translate the information to their peers (see photos below). A large group discussion follows each presentation to dig deeper into the theory and process, and to discuss how it relates to their work with afterschool programs.



In our training, we use the idea of a beehive as a symbol for coming together. The analogy of the beehive creates a visual for the concept of team learning, which begins with dialogue about the intentions of the afterschool program and to clarify assumptions. Once the team is clear on the goals and practices, the team can move forward with problem solving and designing ideas that are aligned with the vision of the program.

Systems Thinking, the fifth discipline, brings it all together. In systems thinking the team focuses on developing procedures and practices as well as creating a roadmap for continuous improvement. The leader and the team can focus on filling the gaps, and creating practices and structures for the program. Both these approaches, the Five Disciplines and PLCs create opportunities to improve, adjust, and keep the vision moving forward for the entire team.

Peppers, G. J. (2015). Teachers' perceptions and implementation of professional learning communities in a large suburban high school. *National Teacher Education Journal*, 8(1), 25-31.

Senge, P. M. (2006). *The Fifth Discipline : The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. Random House, Business Books.



Sonia M. Toledo
Dignity of Children, Inc
www.Dignityofchildren.com