

SENGE.

BREAK-THROUGHS OR JUST THE GURU'S KNOCKING.

For more than two years the Economist has been drawing attention to a plague of self-appointed guru's in the field of management. Letters I have received from colleagues in Europe and North America make the same observation. Now Hilmer and Donaldson have made the same observation of the Australian management scene in their book "Management Redeemed".

We rely heavily on the import of new ideas. We expect to be low on the visiting list even if someone has a real insight but relatively higher on the list of so-called guru's looking for unwitting suckers. Those are unavoidable facts of life, given our small economic base.

Despite the efforts of journals like the Economist and the Harvard Business Review the screening process in the Northern hemisphere is poor: it does not protect us from the so-called guru's. I think we have to acknowledge our exposed position and develop our own critical faculties.

A good place to start is with Peter Senge, the most recent big-name in management thinking to land in Australia.

Peter Senge's book on "The Fifth Dimension" has been hailed as the break-through that gives new life to systems thinking. People who have been exposed to his evangelic, Billy Graham like, personal presentations wonder whether he is just not another of the self-proclaimed guru's of management thinking. Senge, of course, presents his ideas as a break-through.

I am not particularly concerned with Senge. I do not doubt that there is a sea-change in what are regarded as managerial responsibilities but I believe that changes like this are also the primary reason for the proliferation of so-called guru's. I am concerned with how we can spot the guru, the fad, in the field of management's relations with the other employees. How can we be sure that something is a genuine breakthrough, not a passing fad?

In the last analysis we can always have resort to our own experience. Innovators have no choice but otherwise this is a school to which only fools go, and only very rich fools graduate. The reason why this is a fools' school is obvious. Other employees are involved and if they see the management as floundering around trying this fad after the last one they will rightly suspect a lack of leadership. Worse still, the management, or their senior overseas managers, might be suspected of merely pretending to seek change.

Something in between is clearly needed; long before a manager even begins trying to convince his fellow managers that the new ideas ought to be given serious consideration.

My suggestion is as mundane as suggestions can come. If the rhetoric of a personal presentation has convinced you that Senge is spot on then get his book. Read it once, put it aside for a week or so and read it again. If Senge has gone more profoundly into systems thinking for managers then you should find the second read even more enthralling than the first. Connections you missed the first time around should become apparent and you are impelled into further reading for connections you might have missed, or you chase up the references to other work that he thinks do spell out the connections. If, on the other hand, you find the second reading flat and far from as interesting as the first you are probably looking at a con-job. A book, like a personal presentation, can be mainly rhetoric. On first contact you will want to know if the sentiments expressed are in accord with your own. It is gratifying to see someone else publicly express them and particularly gratifying if that someone publicly links those sentiments with a field of activity that previously seemed dowdy and unattractive. That is all that we generally expect from a book that is read for entertainment and hence we do not read it twice. I suggest that managers ought to read at least twice those writings that purport to tell them where to lead their organizations. If they only read such a book once they might recommend it to others as a good read but only if they read it at least twice will they stand a chance of deciding whether the ideas might have some depth.

Obviously I think Senge's book, *The Fifth Dimension*, be put to this simple test before a manager recommends it to his fellows. What can the reader expect on the second reading? In what way does Senge draw out connections in systems thinking that others have overlooked? He does not. He comes out of Jay Forrester's school of systems dynamics based at the Massachusetts' Institute of Technology. Forrester has made no bones about his version of systems theory being a solution to the problem of complexity of parts within a whole. An engineering solution to an engineering problem that provides insights to urban planning and national economics, insofar as they can be regarded as closed systems.

Senge does not even make a case for opening up Forrester's system let alone derive his 'Learning Organisation' from the latter's concepts of a system. Senge simply ducks these issues by making a virtue out of the fact that anything could be paraded under the systems label. He thinks that the extraordinary diversity enriches the system view. He got his PhD from Forrester's department at MIT in 1978 which is some years after the first wave of systems thinking had collapsed for the very reason he praised the system view. It collapsed because the general acceptance of the Hall and Fagan definition of a system, as being no more than a set of elements plus their relations, allowed any world-view to mask itself with the appropriate buzz-words and pass as a systems theory. The notion of systems theory involving a synthesis of differing but coexisting facts was overwhelmed by the engineering notion of using computer power to analyse a complexity of facts that could be reduced to a common denominator, eg. dollars. A system was something to be imposed on facts or people. The principle by which the system was organized is irrelevant to facts and none of the business of people who happen to be parts of the system.

So, Senge does not draw on existing systems theory. He sweeps the past under the carpet but he does claim to add something new and very relevant to the present. This is more difficult to judge than whether the author is being more profound. It is possible that the new idea is only tenuously related to existing theory. In this instance Senge identifies *The Learning Organization* as something that previous systems thinkers had overlooked.

The very wording of this claim will set alarm bells ringing for social scientists, if not amongst engineers-cum-systems theorists at M.I.T. Organizations can certainly be seen to behave, and often behave in ways contrary to the wishes of their members but what does it mean to say that organizations learn? Organizations cannot learn; only individuals can learn. Organizations do differ in the extent to which they create the conditions for their constituents to learn. The sea-change we are witnessing today is the change from the traditional organizational principle of seeking reliability through redundancy of parts to the principle of seeking reliability through redundancy of functions. The first principle found its fullest expression in Taylorism. It was variety decreasing, de-skilling, in the extreme. The new principle of redundancy of functions finds its manifestation in team working and multi-skilling i.e., variety increasing for the individual. Senge is certainly trying to ally himself with the new, emerging principle of redundancy of functions. He is, however, very misleading in suggesting that this is but another strategy to be imposed from above. A prior and necessary condition for the transition is that the management trade off some of their traditional prerogatives to a workforce prepared to take some responsibility for their work. Multi-skilling and other forms of learning within the organization are only an expensive farce without this prior agreement to share responsibility for work done. Only a guru would promise haven and gloss over the hard preparatory stage.