

## Business expert sees ability to listen as key to teamwork



By John Darling, for the Mail Tribune

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Best-seller Peter Senge, whose Fifth Discipline business philosophy revolutionized corporate culture, brought his principles to Rogue Valley groups last week.

Fifth Discipline explains how to solve problems common to organizations ' that people don't listen very well, they become polarized and fixated on reacting to crises and they fail to see the big picture.

People can change, he told about 130 participants from schools, businesses, governments, religious groups and nonprofits during his three-day seminar.

We have to get better at listening ' a lot better, said Senge, who lives in Massachusetts and presents his seminar, Building a Learning Community, throughout the country.

Listening is the oldest process we know, Senge said in an interview, but it's not easy because we're all thinking the other person is crazy, so we're listening to our own thoughts and are intent on what we're going to say next. Of course, we never think that we're crazy.

— Senge said people can learn to listen to their own minds with a grain of salt, then differentiate their own biases and anxieties from what others are really trying to communicate. From there, people can learn to think and plan together, as a learning community, where each member feels heard.

It works, said Taylor Kohn, who brought Senge's philosophy to the South Valley Community Human Services office she manages after taking the training three years ago.

At staff meetings, Kohn does a thoughtful or inspirational reading that relates to the organization's mission, then holds a check-in in which each employee speaks about the reading or his work life since the last meeting.

It took people a while to get used to it, but soon they were looking forward to it, she said. Over time, it helped people see themselves and co-workers as whole people.

I've seen a big increase in joy and satisfaction, she added. People are very happy and there's a real

sense of working together in an atmosphere of mutual support, despite all the budget cuts. Even the clients sense it and remark on the climate of respect we have.

In his workshop, Senge puts attendees, including high school students, through small-group communication exercises in which people recognize that despite their good intentions, there's been a failure to communicate.

Senge's group exercises help people refocus from their own internal monologue to the big picture of the system, organization, school, government or society.

What I'm getting, said Prospect music and computer teacher Al Zeller, a recent winner of the Mr. Holland's Opus Award, is how to listen and look for what we have in common instead of what's different ' how to look at the other person's perspective rather than be preoccupied with selling my own.

I'm going to teach this to my fourth-graders, then see if it can improve a shared vision of the faculty, parents, school and community.

Crossroads High School student Christopher Welch said, I'm learning to listen better and not formulate what I want to say, while trying to devote myself to another person's communications. The payoff? A chance to enact change in the school and the Rogue Valley community.

Rogue Community College teacher Pedro Cabrera, who works in Latino-Anglo community relations, said he hopes to use the teaching to widen the very narrow bridge between the two cultures by coming together, expressing needs and participating in building community that's beneficial for all.

The trick, said Richard Karesh, a consultant working with Senge, is for people to realize they get in trouble by listening to their inner mental chatter while waiting and rehearsing for their air time ' when they get to speak their piece.

Oxygen really helps, said Karesh.

Relax and take a deep breath, slow down the self talk. Become sensitive to it, without criticizing yourself for it. Just bless it and let it go. Be in the present and listen.

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