













that is not working and the company has invested millions in it). It is one thing for an organization with Peter Drucker advising it to “abandon practices that are not working.” It is another for the rest of us who can only learn from peers.

For these reasons, assessment is a core research initiative within the new Society for Organizational Learning (SoL), leading companies, researchers, and consultants working together to advance the state of the art of how organizations learn. We are coming to believe that there is a big difference between “assessment for learning” and “assessment for evaluation.” Because most of the assessment we have encountered in our lives was the latter, the very word tends to invoke defensiveness. But no learning can take place without continuous assessment. The key is that the assessment is done by the learners and the purpose is to learn, that is, to enhance capacity to produce intended outcomes, not to judge someone else.

### From Habit to Discipline

Taken together, mission, vision, and assessment create an ecology, a set of fundamental relationships forming the bedrock of real leadership. These tools allow people, regardless of job title, to help shape their future. The failure of Industrial Age institutions to embrace the three components of innovation shows how far there is to go to meet the challenge of the next century. Moreover, Drucker is exactly right that innovation is a “discipline,” a word having its root in the Latin *disciplina*, one of the oldest words for “to learn.” Many have talent but real learning requires discipline, the process through which we draw out our potential through commitment, practice, passion, patience, and perseverance.

It is a difficult process, but there is reason for hope. The discipline of innovation is practiced successfully

in many domains of human affairs, notably the arts and science. Interestingly, when it is practiced effectively it is invariably done within communities, among diverse individuals who share a common purpose. Energized communities, for example, characterize most periods of innovation in the arts, such as the birth of impressionism, or modern dance, or jazz. Likewise, science at its best is an intensely collaborative undertaking; even when the “collaborators” are strong individuals competing with one another, their competition occurs within a larger mediating community. Likewise in business, real innovation is often much more collaborative than at first appears. For example, studies such as those by MIT’s Eric von Hippel have shown that many of the best new product innovations come from customers. The problem is that most companies are not organized to tap this source of innovative thinking.

My guess is that mastering the discipline of innovation will require organizations working together, learning from one another’s efforts. We must learn to do what artists have done for millennia, what scientists do when science works. To do something new, people invariably experience periods of profound change. Confronting the threat and uncertainty such change brings is best done together, not in isolation.

Several years ago, at one of our early SoL community meetings (then called the MIT Organizational Learning Center), a manager approached me and said, “I see exactly what you’re talking about, all these organizations learning from one another. This is Alcoholics Anonymous for Managers.” I laughed, but I think he hit the nail on the head. We are all addicted to maintaining control, to avoiding failure, to doing things the way we always have. We can’t help it. And we need one another to break the habit. ■