



Learning as a Way of Being

reviewer: Frumi Rachel Barr

Author: Peter Vaill

Publisher: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Copyright year: 1996

Library of Congress or ISBN: 0-7879-0246-2

Author bio and credits: Peter Vaill is a professor of human systems and director of the Ph.D. program at the School of Business and Public Management, George Washington University. He is considered one of the top ten organization development specialists in the United States.

Author's main point

The author defines learning as: Changes a person makes in himself/herself that increase the know-what and/or the know-how the person possesses with respect to a given subject.

This book is about living and working in a productive and healthy way in the extremely turbulent environments of modern organizations. The author argues that we have barely begun to understand what rapid rates of change mean for our daily work. In this book he is thinking mainly of managerial leaders although the information is relevant to anyone who is interested in organizational change and effectiveness. To successfully navigate the permanent white water of today's work world, managerial learning cannot be left to training courses and degree programs. It must be a day-to-day, integrated discipline practiced on the job - a journey of exploration that corrects its course as it proceeds. Such learning must be marked by strong self-direction, willingness to take risks, and integration of the learning that life teaches outside the institution.

A few supporting ideas:

Chapter One picks up on the note sounded at the end of the Introduction- that the best means of coping with nonstop white water in organizations is through effective learning. The basic argument is that the formal school system, which Vaill calls *institutional learning*, has ill-prepared us for the messy learning world we inhabit as practicing managerial leaders and other kinds of professionals. The formal school system is shown to be primarily a control system, not a truly educational system in which liberation of the mind and spirit of learners is the primary objective. Furthermore, the formal school system has profoundly influenced so called adult education-the kinds of experiences being provided in the world of work for men and women who are trying to do the learning that is so essential. If we think learning is so important, Chapter One concludes with the point that is not made in other critiques is that institutional learning tends to disqualify us for the kinds of learning we need to do throughout our lives under the conditions that form our permanent white water. Without rethinking the institutional learning model, the lifelong learning we all agree is so important will not be what it can be: it will not help people live purposefully and decently under conditions of change.

Chapter Two contains Vaill's core learning and educational philosophy, which he calls *learning as a way of being*. That learning is a way of being is, after all, not such a radical idea. Few would quarrel with the notion that to be a human being is to be a continual learner all of one's life. But institutional learning has prevented us from understanding what such continual learning can be. Learning as a way of being is viewed as a system of seven qualities, each of which is an aspect of the kind of learning that is needed for an environment of permanent white water. These seven qualities are self-directed learning, creative learning, expressive learning, feeling learning, on-line learning continual learning and reflexive learning. While Vaill states that none of the seven qualities is absolutely original, at least a couple of them are learning process qualities we do not hear very much about. The philosophy behind mainstream institutional learning is usually indifferent to these seven qualities and sometimes is outright hostile toward them. This chapter portrays learning as a way of being as a *system* of these seven qualities, which depend on each other for their effectiveness. Educators who have tried to implement versions of one or two of these qualities at a time have learned about this inter-dependency the hard way.

In Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six, Vaill takes four topics and applies concepts of learning as a way of being to them. What might systems learning as a way of being be like (Chapter Three)? Or "leaderly" learning as a way of being (Chapter Four)? How and why must cultural learning as a way of being be cultural unlearning as a way of being (Chapter Five)? And what might spiritual learning as a way of being be like (Chapter Six)? Vaill chose the topics of systems, leadership, culture, and spirituality because they are enormously rich in their learning potential, and because all four are currently regarded as highly important matters of managerial learning. They do not exhaust the list of topics managers might be learning, though. The Epilogue takes the critique of institutional learning to another level and sketches a deeper problem with formal learning systems than is reached by the previous chapters. The philosophy and practice of institutional learning contain profound and far-reaching assumptions about the nature of knowledge itself—assumptions that most educators are either indifferent to or unaware of.

Reviewer's recommendation:

This book was particularly relevant to me as a continual learner. It made me realize that it was time to get busy and coach as I am already ready. The institutional model of learning was so ingrained that I expected to be more done after my certification course. Now I can admit that I'll never stop learning so I might as well begin coaching now or next I will decide I need a PhD before beginning.



Contact Frumi at 949-729-1577
frumi@leaderlylearning.com

Frumi and Deborah Gaal are co-founders of the Leaderly Learning Center, a leadership development company specializing in women. We get results because our workshops are led by women who have been CEO's, entrepreneurs and certified coaches. We walk the walk.

Our unique curriculum enables leaders to achieve results through a combination of learning and implementing research-based leadership lessons, coaching to develop self-awareness, and mentoring to provide support.