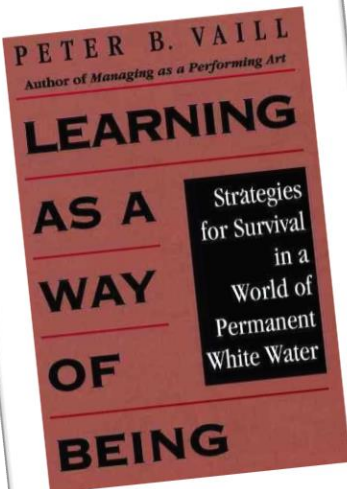


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY BY JEYMMY BOTERO  
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# LEARNING AS A WAY OF BEING BY PETER B. VAILL



Vaill coined the term permanent white water to describe “events that are surprising, novel, messy, costly and unpreventable” (Vaill, 1996, p. 14). He highlights the complexity, turbulent and changing environments in which organizations are trying to operate today, and how this permanent white water demands leaders who are ready to continuously learn and adapt to new conditions. Permanent white water outlines the grim conditions under which people exercise their will and judgement within society’s macrosystems, just as turbulence and uncertainty are intertwined into the microsystem.

## About the Author



*Peter B. Vaill, Ph.D., in Professor of Management at Antioch University in Yellow Springs, Ohio. He is a former Professor of human systems and director of the Ph.D. program at the school of Business and Public Management, George Washington University and former dean of his school. He also worked on the faculty of management of the university of Connecticut and the university of California. He is well-known for his contributions to organizational change and development, and is the author of Managing as a Performing Art.*



What is Permanent White Water?  
“Events that are surprising, novel,  
messy, costly, and unpreventable”



## PART I Characteristics of Permanent White Water



- Environmental conditions are full of surprises, which means that unexpected problems are the norm in any organization.
- Complex systems tend to produce problems that are not even imagined – novel problems.
- Permanent white water conditions feature events that are chaotic and unstructured.
- Very expensive – diversion of time and resources

*PERMANENT WHITE WATER RAISES THE QUESTIONS OF WHETHER AN EVENT COULD HAVE BEEN PREDICTED, WHETHER IT WILL HAPPEN AGAIN, AND WHETHER THERE SHOULD BE A SYSTEM INTENDED TO ANTICIPATE THIS TYPE OF SITUATION IN THE FUTURE.*

## Ways of Learning (doing versus being)



The author defines learning as “changes a person makes in himself or herself that increase the know-why and/or

the know-what and/or the know-how the person possesses with respect to a given subject” (Vaill, 1996, p. 21). These changes increase the reflective capabilities of the individual and equips them with skills to effectively predict, adapt, and deal with changes.

Vaill describes Learning as a means of being as the way that a person becomes qualified and fully competent to address adversity and learning as a means of doing as learning oriented to usefulness.

*The current and most commonly form of learning is*

*Institutional learning,*

*which depicts learning as an institutional activity.*

- *Colleges/universities*
- *Goal-oriented*
- *Encourages a learner to expect and an instructor to provide clear and relevant material*
- *Learners ought to want to learn and reach goals*
- *Learning goal is assumed to be outside the learning process*
- *The faster the learner can go, the better*
- *Learners are passive and dependent*

### LEARNING

“CHANGES A PERSON MAKES IN HIMSELF OR HERSELF THAT INCREASE THE KNOW-WHY AND/OR THE KNOW-WHAT AND/OR THE KNOW-HOW THE PERSON POSSESSES WITH RESPECT TO A GIVEN SUBJECT”

# Institutionalize learning model framework (criteria)

LEARNING MUST BE A WAY OF BEING, WHICH IS "AN AUTHENTIC WAY OF LIVING AND WORKING, THINKING AND FEELING, IN THE WORLD OF PERMANENT WHITE

The institutionalize learning model framework follows the following criteria:



# Permanent white water as a challenge to institutional learning

The philosophy and practice of institutional learning were not designed for permanent white water, instead, learning must be a way of being, which is “an authentic way of living and working, thinking and feeling, in the world of permanent white water” (Vaill, 1996, p. 42). “Being” refers to the whole person – it extends to all aspects of a person’s life.

## Self-directed learning (LWB1)

- Learning needs and goals are often unique to a particular learner.
- Self-direction means control over the process, content, form, and pace of learning, and being able to evaluate when enough learning has occurred.
- Leadership has self-direction as its essence.



## *Qualities or modes of learning as a way of being (LWB)*

*are identified by Vaill as follows:*

- *Self-directed learning (LWB1)*
- *Creative learning (LWB2)*
- *Expressive learning (LWB3)*
- *Feeling learning (LWB4)*
- *On-line learning (LWB5)*
- *Continual learning (LWB6)*
- *Reflexive learning (LWB7)*

*So, the question is, how can these seven qualities of learning as a way of being entwine and enhance each other in the learning of managerial leaders?*

## Expressive learning: Colloquial expressions (Vaill, 1996, p. 72)

*“Taking things as they come”*

*“Rolling with the punches”*

*“Playing the hand I’m dealt”*

*“Keeping my options open”*

*“Hanging in there”*

*“Making do with what I have”*

*“Making lemonade out of lemons”*

*“Reminding myself easy does it”*

*“Crossing that bridge when I come to it”*

*“Throwing away the script”*

*“Feeling my way along”*

*“Learning as I go”*

*“Flying by the seat of my pants”*

*“Keeping scrambling”*

*“Playing it as it lays”*

*“Taking things one day at a time”*

## Creative learning (LWB2)

- Permanent white water presents problems that requires us to explore new areas of knowledge and skill that no one else has ever synthesized before (Vaill, 1996, p. 62).
- Creative learning is a form of learning that is not under our control.
- It is also about finding creative solutions to problems in unknown/uncharted territory.

## Expressive learning (LWB3)

- Expressive learning means “learning by doing” – doing things and learning in the process.
- Expressive learning is not passive but rather an active form of learning.

## Feeling learning (LWB4)

- Feeling learning involves the need to develop self-acceptance of the feelings that arise during learning. Learning is not limited to facts and methods but attitudes of curiosity, courage, trust, self-respect, tough-mindedness, optimism, and keeping a sense of perspective



## On-line learning (LWB5)

- On-line learning is the learning that takes place amid work and life.
- The world is the classroom.
- On-the-job training is the most effective way to learn.

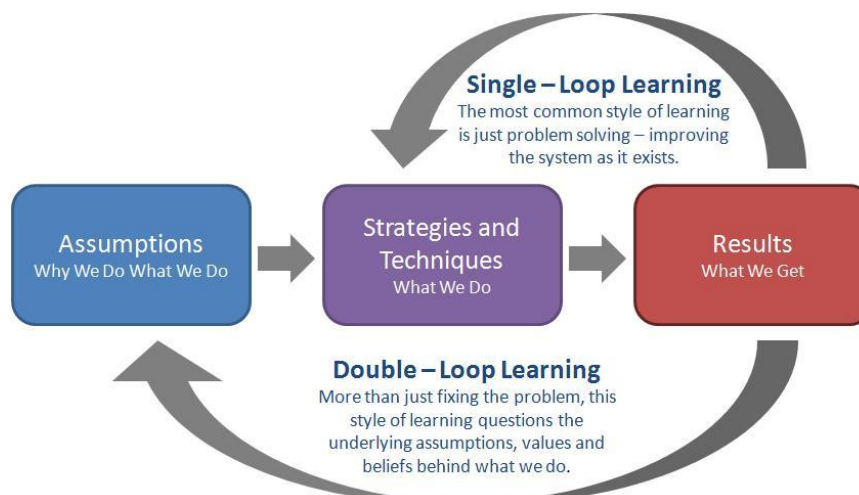
## Continual learning (LWB6)

- Continual learning is a lifelong recurrent process that never stops. Learning takes place at all times, so managers must be open to new learning experiences that take place on a daily basis.

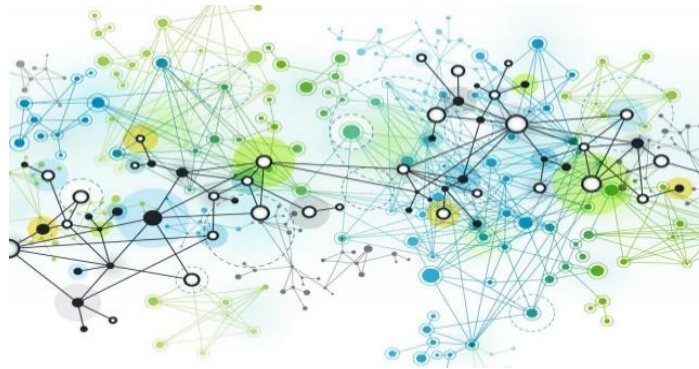


## Reflexive learning (LWB7)

- Reflexive learning is a natural process. It requires us to learn to reflect on our own learning experience.
- Reflexive learning is also known as “double loop learning”.
- This type of learning creates self-awareness and encourages us to observe ourselves as learners.



## Part II Ways of Being – Strategies for Learning



A systems approach helps understand a problem through the search for underlying connections and interdependencies.

**Systems thinking** is the balancing and interrelating of three levels:

- The organization
- The inner-workings (the interaction of the internal elements)
- The phenomenon is its context



*The set of elements that form **a system** have **three main characteristics**:*

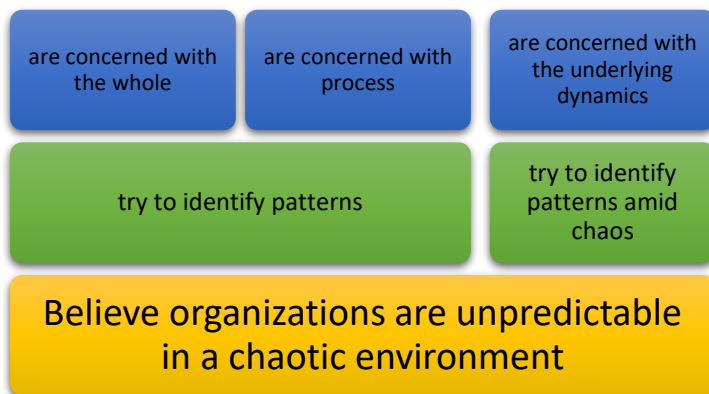
- 1. The properties and behaviors of each element has an effect on the properties and behaviours of the system as a whole.*
- 2. No part has an independent effect on the whole and each part is affected by at least one other part.*
- 3. A system cannot be subdivided into independent systems.*



## Systems thinking involves:

- ongoing inquiry
- continual learning
- learning about one self in interaction with the environment
- content-free learning

### System thinkers



Learning as a way of being is itself a system of ideas about learning and experiences of learning.

The only way to learn systems thinking is to break out of institutional learning practices into a learning process that is more involving, presents more complexity and requires the learner to think in systems term in the real time of learning.



*“Systems thinkers believe organizations are unpredictable in a chaotic environment.”*



*Leaderly learning:*

*“managerial leadership is not learned; managerial leadership is learning” (Vaill, 1996, p. 126). It is an ongoing process in the job.*

*Successful leaders:*

- Take initiative*
- Think about the best course of action to solve problems*
- Find solutions through exploration and discovery*
- Apply and practice what they have learned from experience*
- Use rational thoughts and feelings*
- View genuine, real situations as learning opportunities*
- Understand that ongoing change requires continual learning*
- Must go through a process of self-reflection.*

**Leaderly Learning** through the

seven qualities of learning as a way of being

**Self-directed Leaderly Learning**

- Self-directed leaderly learning views leadership as an initiative. A successful leader takes initiative by thinking about what is needed, the reason why, and the approach to take – this process is an act of learning.
- Self-directed leaderly learning creates opportunities for leaders to think about the kind of approach to take.

**Creative Leaderly Learning**

- Creative leaderly learning includes exploration and discovery.
- Leaders must find ways of doing something they have never done before.

**Expressive Leaderly Learning**

- Expressive leaderly learning is the application and practice of what has been learned through experience.

## Feeling Leaderly Learning

- In order to solve problems, leaders need not only rational thoughts but also the use of feelings. Thus, feelings cannot be eliminated from problem-solving.
- Curiosity is another important aspect of finding solutions to adverse situations.
- Feeling leaderly learning allows for employee empowerment, competitiveness, and concern for the customer.

## On-line Leaderly Learning

- On-the-job training
- On-line leaderly learning encourages leaders to view genuine and real situation as learning opportunities.

## Continual Learning

- Lifelong learning
- Ongoing change demands continual learning

## Reflexive Learning

- This is achieved through the improvement in the practice of the first six qualities. Managerial leaders must choose the learning experiences and challenges they will have.

### *LEARNING AS A WAY OF BEING – AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH*

*Discovering, in the real time of the situation, how to act effectively allows leaders to become less dependent on prior experience or prior study for guidance in the particular situation. In the handling is the learning as a way of being.*



*Permanent white water creates a felt lack of continuity, a felt lack of direction, absence of sense of progress, absence of feeling of cumulative achievement, a lack of coherence, a feeling of meaninglessness, and a lack of control. In times of confusion, fear, loss, and doubt, human beings turn to transcendent sources of meaning for succor and reinspiration (Vaill, 1996, p.178).*



## Cultural Unlearning

- “Discover in the real time of the situation how to act effectively” (Vaill, 1996, p. 155). That way, we become less dependent on prior experience or prior study for guidance in a situation.
- “We do not learn first and then handle these situations”
- In the handling is the learning as a way of being.
- It is important to become more aware of the mentality we bring into situations to see how our mentality conditions what we can see and understand there.
- We can learn to understand contexts to unlearn and let go of previous learnings in order to open ourselves to new learnings.

## Spiritual learning

- Permanent white water leads to confusion: what to believe, whom to trust
- Spirituality in organizational life seeks to go beyond materialist conceptions of meaning.

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Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a way of being: Strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.

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