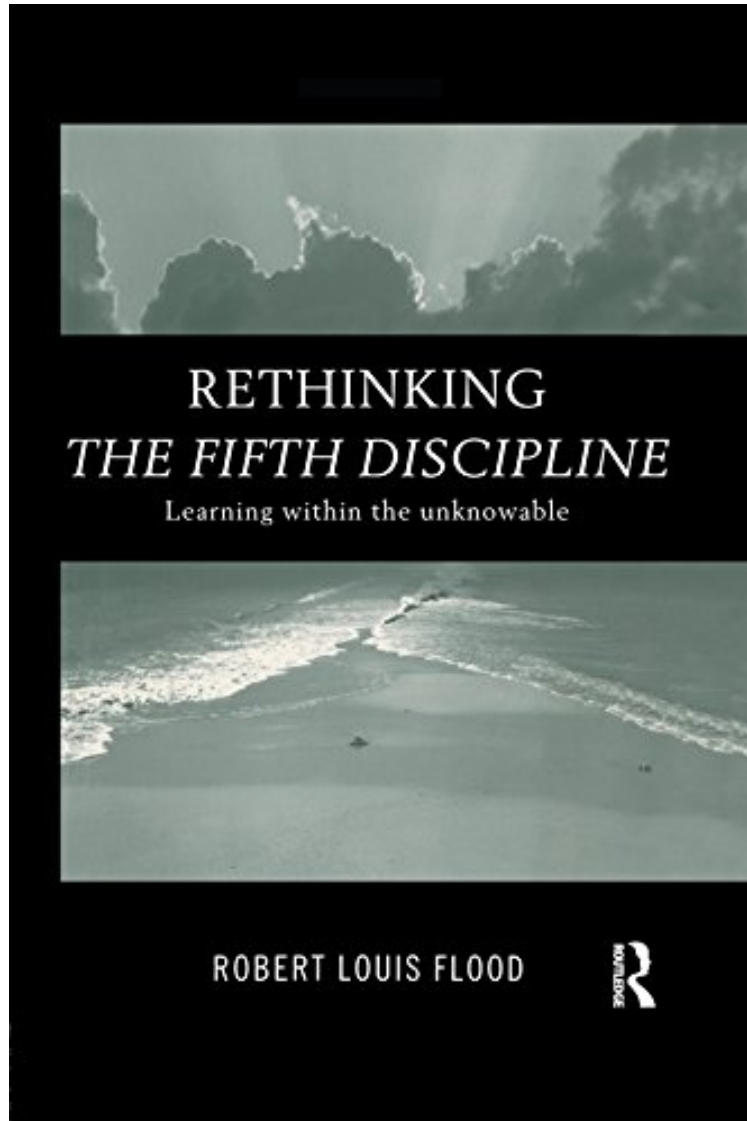


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## Rethinking the Fifth Discipline: Learning Within the Unknowable

*Robert Louis Flood*

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**Robert Louis Flood : Rethinking the Fifth Discipline: Learning Within the Unknowable** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Rethinking the Fifth Discipline: Learning Within the Unknowable:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. 5 Stars for unique importance - 4.5 Stars for contentBy William A. Reed"Rethinking" is a book about enhancing "systems thinking" with perspectives from complexity science. It is both a respectful challenge and an enhancement to Senge's book: The Fifth Discipline: The Art Practice of The Learning Organization which advocates that the complex interactions and outcomes of organizations can be understood from a systems dynamics perspective. According to Flood, systems dynamics provides for emergent outcomes but falls short

in appreciating the "process of" emergence and, therefore, fails to account for many potential sources of emergence. "Rethinking" is divided into two parts. Part I covers the history and basic tenants of systems thinking while exposing gaps in the systems dynamics model of organizational functioning. Part II is focused on complexity concepts and an approach to "learning within the unknowable". The latter is Flood's tutorial on organizational interventions to provide leaders with techniques to better manage organizations. It may be best to read Senge's book first, if the potential reader is not familiar with Senge's approach to management. The Fifth Discipline is a more typical business book with emphasis on reformulating organizations to become holistic learning organizations and providing fairly detailed prescriptions for the transformation. Through the extensive use of case studies, Senge establishes the framework of the "learning organization" based on five "disciplines" that is said to have worked well in his exemplar organizations. These five are personal mastery, mental models, systems thinking, shared vision, and team learning. The first three are applicable to individuals while the last two are oriented toward organizations. Senge indicates that "these might just as well be called the leadership disciplines as the learning disciplines" (Senge, p. 359). He refers to systems thinking as the fifth and most important because it binds and strengthens the other disciplines. For those who wish to start with "Rethinking", Flood begins with a sufficiently detailed review of Senge's book and includes a thorough discussion of the major contributors of systemic theory including Bertalanffy, Beer, Ackoff, Checkland, and Churchman. Don't expect a quick read here. Each of these scholars offer uniquely subtle contributions to systems thinking which may take some time to absorb. Yet, it is portrayed at an accessible level and is not overly philosophical. Flood completes Part I of his book with two primary criticisms of the Fifth Discipline which are both related to the systems metaphor of organizations: 1. Senge's holistic approach is unbounded and, therefore, impossible to identify all of the "system" influences or know when important influences are unaccounted for. Flood describes this as requiring an ever expanding analysis to understand such a system. 2. Senge identifies certain problem types as "convergent problems" - ones which are bounded and solvable. Yet, Flood argues that the boundary setting process is one consumed with ethical choices driven by powerful individuals. According to Flood "a so-called convergent problem is a phantom of an uncritical choice of boundary and a lack of awareness of the ethical nature of boundary judgments" (p. 71). Readers will find the uniqueness of Flood's book in Part II, which introduces complexity science into systemic thinking. But there are no simple answers or singular prescriptions in this book because "complexity theory questions whether long term intended action is possible. It points out that the way things unfold is inherently unknowable to the human mind... (p. 90). Consequently, the next 100 pages or so cover a myriad of stories and metaphors that are intended to help facilitators focus on local actions and discover improvements in meaningfulness and effectiveness along with establishing better systems of learning. This wayward and sometimes unsatisfying journey through the remainder of the book could be more consistent with earlier guidance and more clearly synthesized into a discrete number of principles for action. For example, some concepts like Flood's discussion of boundaries in Chapter 18 seems sometimes inconsistent with his earlier criticisms of boundary construction in the systems dynamics literature. Also, there are numerous single paragraph and half-page topics in the last four chapters that seem disconnected and too brief to fully appreciate their value in formulating facilitated action. The extended ethnography on policing (Chapter 21) which Flood refers to as a "practical animation" highlights some of the systemic principles he previously illustrated, but it quickly becomes tedious and not particularly contributory to the other chapters. Yet, the short three pages of Chapter 22 provides a summary of the book which is precise and to the point. Overall, there are many good reasons for liking this book. Most importantly it clearly identifies important limitations in the systems dynamics literature and specifically in The Fifth Discipline, while articulating a new direction for managers who identify with a systems perspective. As a resource, "Rethinking" offers a solid framework for exploring how to blend systems theory with complexity science. While there is actually very little discussion of complexity in this book, it provides a necessary bridge that connects well established organizational thinking to the relatively new paradigm of complexity management. If you found this review helpful please click "Yes". 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A very readable and practical book on organisational learning By B. WEHMEYER Being a fan of Senge's work I was sceptical at first, but Bob Flood build on Senge's work and puts into a larger context of thinking holistically and futuristically. He adds complexity into the mix in that we must prepare for the unexpected and yet unknown situations using his diagrammatical perspective on scenario planning. I also enjoyed his pages on Satori, his bookshelf metaphor on Process, Structure, Meaning and Fairness (Knowledge-power as he coins it). The bottom line of the book as he puts it: \* we will not struggle to manage over things; we will manage within the unmanageable; \* we will not battle to organise the totality, we will organise within the unorganisable; and \* we will not simply know things, but we will know of the unknowable. Flood co-authored 'Creative Problem Solving' with Jackson, but I recommend getting this book instead as well as Jackson's later book 'Systems Thinking: Creative Holism for Managers'. 29 of 29 people found the following review helpful. Original, profound yet easily understood and operationalised By martin\_a\_blake@yahoo.com The content of Professor Flood's latest book is original and profound, but easily understood and operationalised, therefore this book can be considered a "must have" by academics, students, interventionists, consultants and managers alike. It successfully elucidates how the concepts of Systems Theory, Complexity Theory, Organisational Learning and Organisational Intervention are inextricably intertwined. There is a

significant degree of emergent synergy that arises from the complementarist use of the Senge's approach (as described within the "Fifth Discipline") when used in conjunction with Flood's guiding frameworks for organisational intervention and improvement. In isolation, Senge provided his readers with guidance on organisational learning - but provided no pragmatic steps to guide organisational analysis and the actual selection and use of improvement strategies. Conversely, Flood's previous writings provided a guiding framework for facilitating organisational improvement but lacked the organisational learning approaches that are simultaneously required if the need for organisational improvement (i.e. change) is to be recognised, validated, operationalised, reflexively critiqued and assimilated as part of a revised organisational paradigm. Empirical studies have clearly demonstrated that without the tools to facilitate organisational learning, it is quite likely that the need and desire to implement change strategies will be attenuated by organisational defence mechanisms. (See the work of Argyris in this regard). Therefore, the augmentation of organisational improvement frameworks with organisational learning offers interventionists an enhanced degree of success. Thus, by effectively combining his interventional strategies with the Senge's organisational learning strategies, Flood has successfully created a pragmatic approach that is more potent than the sum of its constituent parts. The emergent synergy is not by any means a coincidental by-product of the amalgam. Flood clearly explains how the inescapable and tangible manifestations of Complexity Theory require us to "learn our way into an unknowable future". Flood's book also effectively prepares the reader for the adaptations that will be necessary in contending with a dynamically changing organisational landscape. This book is highly recommended to all those with an interest in organisational learning, change management, systems theory and complexity theory.

'Fifth Discipline' is one of the very few approaches to management that has attained position on the International Hall of Fame. Professor Flood's book explains and critiques the ideas in straight forward terms. This book makes significant and fundamental improvements to the core discipline - systemic thinking. It establishes crucial developments in systemic thinking in the context of the learning organisation, including creativity and organisational transformation. It is therefore a very important text for strategic planners, organisational change agents and consultants. The main features of the book include: \* a review and critique of 'Fifth Discipline' and systemic thinking \* an introduction to the gurus of systemic thinking - Senge, Bertalanffy, Beer, Ackoff, Checkland, and Churchman \* a redefinition of management through systemic thinking \* a guide to choosing, implementing and evaluating improvement strategies \* Practical illustrations. Robert Flood is a renowned and authoritative expert in the field of management. He has implemented systemic management in a wide range of organisations in many continents and lectured by invitation in 25 countries, including Japan and the USA. Professor Flood has featured on many radio and TV programs. His book Beyond TQM was nominated for the 'IMC Management Book of the Year 1993'.

'An important book, deserves to be read widely' Jennifer Wilby, Systemic Practice and Action Research About the Author Robert Louis Flood is a renowned and authoritative expert in the field of management. His book Beyond TQM (1993) was nominated for the IMC Management Book of the Year 1993. He has implemented systemic management in a wide range of organizations in many continents and lectured by invitation in 25 countries, including Japan and the United States.