A NEW STORY FOR A NEW TIME

BY KALI SAPOSNICK

Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time
by Margaret J. Wheatley

Throughout our existence, people have told stories as a way to understand our place in the universe and shape our action. When a radically different perspective emerges, it can spark our imaginations and revolutionize how we live. At the same time, a new story can provoke deep resistance, for most people would rather cling to their illusions than behave differently—even when their behaviors don't serve them well.

Despite this paradox, Margaret Wheatley, author, teacher, and radical thinker, has pursued the path of story-telling for more than three decades. In her most recent book, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005), she richly articulates how the insights of modern science—as well as those from primal wisdom traditions, indigenous tribes, spiritual thought, and poets old and new—can usher in a new era of human and planetary health.

According to Wheatley, these insights are forcing us to question, and hopefully discard, a 300-year-old worldview that still dominates Western culture today. This outdated story emerged during the Industrial Age, when scientific discoveries gave rise to the idea that humankind could gain mastery over physical matter. Soon, the image of the universe as a grand, clocklike machine took hold, as well as the belief that we could engineer human beings, organizations, and life itself to perform however we directed them to.

Over time, the machine image has had a pernicious effect on how we think of ourselves and others. Wheatley explains, "When we conceived of ourselves as machines, we gave up most of what is essential to being human. We created ourselves devoid of spirit, will, passion, compassion, emotions, even intelligence. . . . The imagery is so foreign to what we know and feel to be true about ourselves that it seems strange that we ever adopted this as an accurate description of being human. But we did, and we do." One consequence of this imagery is that it has led us to believe that our "unpredictable behaviors, our passions, our independence, our creativity, our consciousness . . . are the problem rather than the blessing."

The mechanistic story not only ignores the deep realities of human existence, says Wheatley, but makes exhausting demands on leaders. If people have no internal capacity for self-creation, self-organization, or self-correction, then leaders must constantly motivate, inspire, and organize them. In short, leaders are responsible for everything.

A New Story

The new story takes the burden off of leaders to run our organizations and puts it back where it belongs—on each of us. It offers a worldview in which creative self-expression and the embracing of systems of relationships are the organizing energies. It looks at humans and the organizations in which they work as living systems—with the capacity to move toward greater complexity and order as needed. And it offers the radical perspective that organization is a process, not a structure.

Explains Wheatley: "Self-organizing systems have what all leaders crave: the capacity to respond continuously to change. In these systems, change is the organizing force, not a problematic intrusion. Structures and solutions are temporary. Resources and people come together to create new initiatives, to respond to new regulations, to shift the organization's processes. Leaders emerge from the needs of the moment. There are far fewer levels of management. Experimentation is the norm. Local solutions predominate but are kept local, not elevated to models for the whole organization. Involvement and participation constantly deepen. These organizations are experts at the process of change."

Where can we find models of self-organizing systems? The author points to what happens when disaster strikes. Without planning, people and resources come together in coordinated, purposeful activity; leaders appear based on who is available and who has information; and everything happens quickly and efficiently. The World Wide Web is another example of a self-organizing network that forms around interests, the availability of information, and limitless access to other people. The tower-building termites of Africa and Australia offer a third example. They construct the largest, most intricate structures on earth proportionate to the size of the builders. Their engineering process is simple: They wander aimlessly, bump into each other, and react. By observing what others are doing and coordinating their own activities based on that information, these insects manage to make their arches meet in the middle.

The Role of Leaders

If blueprints and engineers aren't necessary, what is the role of leaders in

the living systems story? It is, Wheatley says, to foster the conditions that support self-organization. To meet that challenge, leaders first need to shift their thinking in three key areas:

Believe in the Goodness of People. Most leaders assume that employees work primarily for a self-serving reason: to make money. In reality, many people strongly desire to contribute to something beyond themselves that benefits others. Leaders who use participative, self-organizing approaches, in which they clearly communicate the organization's purpose and real values, are amazed by the capacity, energy, creativity, and commitment of their employees to contribute to the enterprise.

Focus on Coherence, not Control. Typically, when an innovative solution emerges in one area, senior management rolls it out to the entire organization. But replication actually destroys local initiative because it denies everyone else's creativity. Rather, leaders should share these success stories in order to spark people's imagination and give them insight into what their own areas need. Eventually, tinkering on the local level will result in systemwide coherence.

Support Self-Organizing Responses. People don't need intricate directions, timelines, plans, and organizational charts; they need information, access to one another, trust, and follow-through. Leaders can help by providing resources, creating connections across the organization, and fostering experimentation. They may not be able to direct employees into excellence, but leaders can engage them enough so that they want to do excellent work.

Part of the reason our organizations are troubled today, Wheatley explains, is that we've forgotten what people are capable of. For too long, we've forced workers into "roles and job descriptions," telling them how to behave rather than allowing their creative, contributive, compassionate selves to emerge naturally. This type of reengineering brings out our worst nature and causes both employees and managers to suffer. By valuing human

relationships, leaders can go a long way toward creating enduring organizations.

Tapping into Creativity

Another negative effect of the command-and-control mentality is that managers fail to appreciate employees' personal initiative. People often complain that workers don't follow instructions, no matter how clearly they're given. Instead, they revise or tweak them in some way. Wheatley offers an interpretation of what's going on. This seemingly resistant behavior actually reflects a principle of living systems: that each of us has "the unalienable freedom to create one's life." Simply put, people need to be involved in how they get work done, and they will somehow find a way to put their unique signature on any situation.

This freedom to create also reveals itself in what we notice. "We choose what disturbs us," Wheatley says. "It's not the volume or even the frequency of the message that gets our attention. If it's meaningful to us, we notice it." In other words, we become engaged when we find shared significance with someone or something. Leaders who want to leverage employees' creative freedom focus on discovering what's meaningful to them, not deciding meaning for them. They listen for diversity rather than expect agreement. They invite people to rethink, redesign, and restructure the organization. They stay alert to the change process, what they're learning, and how their efforts are unfolding and emerging (see "Key Questions to Keep Asking").

When leaders fail to invest in relationships with their employees, it often reflects their desire to maintain organi-

zational flexibility—that is, the ability to let people go when times get hard. Wheatley condemns this behavior. She says, "There is only one prediction about the future that I feel confident to make. During this period of random and unpredictable change, any organization that distances itself from its employees and refuses to cultivate meaningful relationships with them is destined to fail. Those organizations who will succeed are those that evoke our greatest human capacities—our need to be in good relationships and our desire to contribute to something beyond ourselves."

Enduring Organizations

Generous and inspiring, *Finding Our Way* covers so much ground that it can spark any reader's interest. Building in ways similar to how living systems behave, the book's essays are filled with profound wisdom and simple advice. From offering new approaches for facilitating knowledge management and supporting pioneering leaders to providing personal tips for starting the day off peacefully, Wheatley reaffirms her dedication to helping leaders fulfill what she believes is their real desire to create enduring organizations.

Using clear and abundant examples, she demonstrates how the timeless principles of developing trust, sharing information, engaging people's creativity, and investing in relationships can serve as guideposts for finding our way in today's uncertain times. As we implement these principles, the new story will take root and ignite an explosion of much-needed change. ◘

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KEY QUESTIONS TO KEEP ASKING

- Who's missing? Who else needs to do this work?
- Is the meaning of this work still clear? Is it changing?
- Are we becoming more truthful with each other?
- Is information becoming more open and easier to access?
- Where are we using imposition? Participation?
- What are we learning about partnering with confusion and chaos?

Source: Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time, Margaret J. Wheatley, © 2005 by Margaret J. Wheatley.