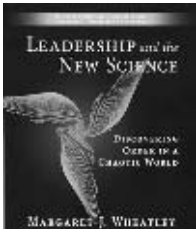




REAL-WORLD LESSONS FROM LIVING SYSTEMS

BY JANICE MOLLOY



Leadership and the New Science

By Margaret J. Wheatley

This past year, two leading management thinkers published new editions of their classic books. In an upcoming issue, we'll dive between the pages of the revised and updated edition of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge (Doubleday/Currency, 2006). This month, we're focusing on the expanded third edition of Margaret J. Wheatley's award-winning book, *Leadership and the New Science* (Berrett-Koehler, 2006).

Bureaucratic Failures

First published in 1992, *Leadership and the New Science* applies breakthrough findings in biology, chem-

istry, chaos theory, and especially quantum physics to the work of organizational change. According to Wheatley, successfully managing in today's environment requires nothing short of a massive overhaul of our worldview—from regarding organizations and the people in them as essentially machines, requiring strong central control, to viewing them as adaptive, creative, and resilient living systems.

Readers over the years have been captivated by these concepts, which Wheatley has presented with increasing clarity and practical application throughout each subsequent revision. In the new edition, she adds a chapter titled "The Real World," in which

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she applies "the lens of new science to two of society's most compelling, real world challenges: How well we deal with natural and manmade disasters and how well we respond to global terror networks." Not surprisingly, given the massive scope of the catastrophe and the human failures that surrounded it, Wheatley first looks at learnings from Hurricane Katrina. When Katrina struck New Orleans in late August of 2005, "the chain of command and the observance of protocol created even more disasters." From firefighters stuck in

mandatory lectures on sexual harassment while flames blazed in New Orleans to U.S. naval personnel awaiting orders on the U.S.S. Bataan while 600 hospital beds lay empty, numerous public safety workers remained handcuffed by bureaucratic constraints.

In contrast, through self-organizing grassroots efforts, volunteers ignored or worked around standard operating procedures to act quickly and save lives. Wheatley cites the residents of Ville Platte, many of whom traveled to New Orleans by boat to rescue people from rooftops. This community of 11,000 welcomed 5,000 displaced victims into their homes, without any support from federal agencies. Wheatley quotes one community member as saying, "All of us know how to spontaneously cooperate. My God, we're always organizing christenings or family gatherings. So why do we need a lot of formal leadership?"

To Wheatley, such acts of bravery and compassion by volunteers illustrate several concepts from the new sciences. These people made choices based on shared meaning and values rather than hierarchy and command-and-control leadership. They relied on relationships, as in the case of amateur ham radio operators who quickly formed an emergency communication network, rather than on formal structures. According to the author, "In a disaster, where quick response is demanded, formal organizations are incapacitated by the very means they normally use to get things done—chains of command, designated leaders, policies, procedures, plans, regulations, and laws." The lessons for future crises include the need for official agencies to work with the forces of self-organization in support of local initiatives.

TEAM TIP

When faced with a new task or challenge, spend as much time examining and talking about the human dynamics as you do the technical requirements, training needs, or budgetary concerns. How can you build trust in the team? How does information flow through the network of relationships? Are people rewarded based on individual or group efforts? Can workers take the initiative or do they need to wait for directions from leaders? Based on lessons from the new sciences, we know that innovative solutions emerge from healthy relationships.

Self-Organized Terror

A sobering example of the effective use of self-organizing networks comes from a surprising source—terrorist organizations. According to Wheatley, the new sciences can give us insight into how groups such as Al-Qaeda have been successful and how we might more effectively combat this new kind of enemy. “At present, we are dangerously blind to their strength because we use the wrong lens to evaluate their capacity. We use factors that apply to our world but not to theirs; to the behavior of hierarchical organizations, not to networks. . . . We assume that if we prevent communication, terrorists won’t be given orders and therefore won’t launch attacks. We assume that if we kill the top leaders, if we decapitate their organizations, that young terrorists will slink away from this anarchic, leaderless group.”

But the truth is, “People who are deeply connected to a cause don’t

need directives, rewards, or leaders to tell them what to do. . . . This combination of shared meaning with freedom to determine one’s actions is how systems grow to be more effective and well-ordered.” By comprehending these dynamics, those trying to combat terrorism may focus less on eliminating the leaders and more on diffusing the sources of anger and rage that fuel the terrorists’ cause.

Fear or Hope

The two scenarios Wheatley describes in “The Real World” are extreme examples of the kind of chaos and uncertainty most of us face in our jobs each day. The foundation on which we’ve built our organizations—and, indeed, our dreams—has been shaken by upheavals in technology, globalization, the reality of climate change, the failures of our economic and political systems, and shifts in the

social structure. In this time of insecurity, we can react in one of two ways: out of fear or out of hope. As Wheatley articulates in this book, the path of fear leads us to struggle harder and harder to implement prescribed fixes that no longer work. The path of hope—as modeled by the natural systems we are a part of—involves freeing ourselves and each other to figure out new approaches, learn quickly, and accomplish things that matter to us all. After all, as Wheatley and her colleagues at the Berkana Institute like to say, “A leader is anyone who wants to help.” In this new edition, she challenges each and every one of us to take on this new kind of leadership role. ■

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