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Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time

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Leaders at different levels within organizations, school systems, and communities are becoming increasingly aware of the concepts and principles of the “new science” of leadership. Many of these same leaders are now beginning to integrate the new science ideology into everyday decision-making processes and practices. New science is also offering leaders the knowledge and understanding needed to effectively transform long-established, hierarchical, mechanistic organizational human resource management models into open, participative, and adaptive learning systems.

So, what exactly is the “new science?” How does it relate to leadership theory and practice? In general, the new science embodies the holistic perspective that interdependent relationships tend to form and flourish between networks possessing an inherent ability to self-organize, self-regulate, learn, change, adapt, and evolve. New science specifies that effective and sustainable systems, especially living systems, rely on cooperation, relationships, and patterns for their survival. New science is part of a larger field of thinking known as systems theory, or system dynamics. As applied to organizational theory and behavior, new science is a catalyst which enables progressive ideas and neoteric practices to evolve. It allows for ideas to be freely exchanged among all stakeholders of a system, and, in turn, fosters the growth of dynamic learning organizations. This model of leadership is markedly different from the conventional command and control leadership paradigm, which many of us have used or experienced first-hand (incidentally, this is the most well-known and practiced approach to human resource management globally, both historically and today). However, the traditional model of organizational leadership is gradually becoming viewed as a barrier to productivity, innovation, and sustainability. Accordingly, growing numbers of organizations and communities are beginning to learn and appreciate that to be sustainable they must embrace and apply a new model of leadership, i.e. new science (aka the science of living systems).

How do the dynamics of new science, i.e. the dynamics of living systems, apply to leaders and leadership models within organizations and communities? This question, among others, is addressed through a leadership analysis and a series of personal and practice-focused essays in Margaret Wheatley’s latest book, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*.

Since 1973, Margaret Wheatley, author of several books, including the award-winning bestseller, *Leadership and the New Science* (1992; 1999), has worked as an organizational consultant, researcher, and speaker for a variety of organizations, institutions, and foundations. Dr. Wheatley has also served as a full-time graduate management faculty member at two institutions and as co-founder and president emerita of The Berkana Institute, a global charitable public leadership foundation dedicated to supporting the pioneering efforts of life-affirming leaders. *Finding Our Way* is the product of Wheatley’s long experience and learning in these roles. The book provides readers with a profound and heartfelt look into the mind and soul of one of the great contemporary pioneers in the field of leadership and change.

In the Opening section of *Finding Our Way* Wheatley lays out the general theme and format of the book for her readers, including a discussion on the principles of new science, and on how and why, as

applied to organizational and community leadership, new science can easily be distinguished from conventional leadership theory. Wheatley offers a commentary on the current state and future of leadership, an explanation on the purpose of the book, and a discussion on the book's design, including details on what the reader can expect in the book's three major sections. Two very thought-provoking, introspective, experiential accounts or, as Wheatley calls them, "stories," shape the book's content and message. According to Wheatley, these stories are "each meant to serve as a guide for finding our way to a more hopeful future" (3).

Readers new to Wheatley's work and writings, and to the concepts of new science, will find that the book's first story deconstructs and explains in detail the major attributes of components and capabilities which make living systems function. This story is meant to serve as an introduction to the many ways in which new science philosophy differs from traditional forms of leadership and human resource management. It is also argued here (and throughout the book) that organizational change of the 21st century must be understood and applied as the new paradigm of living systems (new science). The essays compiled and presented in the scope of the book's first story provide readers a base of knowledge and understanding—information which the new science novice can draw on when introduced to more complex ideas and concepts, including new science applications, in the book's later essays. For example, we learn in this story why all living systems perform and learn best when their innate ability to self-organize, learn, change, and adapt are left unadulterated. It is also explained here that the established organizational dogma of relying on and operating under hierarchical, command and control leadership styles, which use authority as a tool for managing human resources, is contrary to human nature, thus unsustainable. The new leadership paradigm, on the other hand, lays emphasis on the critical human element of organizations and communities. Wheatley also uses the first story of the book to describe some of the more significant ways in which she has successfully applied the science of living systems to leadership and organizational models.

The first story is told over two separate but interrelated sections. The first of these sections, entitled "Organizing: There is a Simpler Way," contains four essays and one poem. An essay entitled "The Promise and Paradox of Community" argues that human beings must develop a better understanding and respect for the significance and sanctity of Earth's living systems and communities. Wheatley believes human communities must recognize and respect the webs of relationships that have existed among Earth's ecosystems for millenia. The success of ecosystems, Wheatley explains, is a profound and instructive example of the benefits and outcomes of relationship-building. As applied to organizations, the building of interconnected and interdependent relationships, such as those found in ecosystems, within and between all levels and resources of an organization will engender learning and change. Ecosystems are a model for how organizations might benefit from developing these kinds of important relationships. Ecosystems demonstrate how "communities of diverse species live together in ways that support both the individual and the entire system" (45). We as humans must build and look after our relationships with the planet's ecosystems. Humans have a strong influence on all living systems. The formation of relationships develops from paradoxical phenomena: people need and strive for personal freedom, yet at the same time they hold an inherent desire to cultivate lasting relationships. In other words, even though individual freedom is important to us, we long to become part of a larger community of individuals as well: "As systems form, the paradox of individualism and connectedness becomes clearer" (47): an individual is aware of the circumstance of the entire system or community, and will change and adapt for the betterment and survival of the system. This is a critical evolutionary process: "Human communities are no different from the rest of l

ife. We form our communities from these same two needs—the need for self-determination and the need for one another” (48). Wheatley emphasizes that “the future of community is best taught to us by life” (54).

The second section of this first story, entitled “Leadership: We Make the Road by Walking,” is comprised of six essays and one poem. “Working with Life’s Dynamics in School Systems” is the title of one of these essays. This essay examines how the dynamics of living systems can enhance our understanding of the need for self-organization and change—the dynamics which enable living systems to survive. This discussion includes details on the various ways in which life’s dynamics can be applied to “organizational change efforts.” Interestingly and provocatively, Wheatley argues that the term “school system” is an oxymoron: when we hear the term “system” most of us automatically consider the components and functions of open systems; unfortunately, however, schools have historically been shaped by and managed under those constituents most commonly associated with closed systems: schools often function in absence of shared beliefs on the definition of public education; they have little if any desire to change; and they lack mutually sustaining relationships. Most school districts carry a wide spectrum of beliefs regarding the purpose and role of public education; however, as Wheatley argues, we must apply the dynamics of life to public education if we want to see change occur.

In her second story, Wheatley offers several examples of how her ideas about and approach to leadership and organizations has shifted, changed, and evolved over time. Wheatley informs her readers of the painful struggles, hurdles, and arduous times she endured over the years when attempting to apply the new science of leadership in real world situations. This story is presented through two sections: The first, entitled “Obstacles: Where the Road Gets Hard,” contains four essays and one poem.

“Transforming Aggression into Creativity” is the title of the fourth essay: it “draws not from new science but from ancient wisdom. It is an adaptation of a process taught for eons in Tibetan Buddhism” (141). In this essay, Wheatley addresses the aggressive nature of organizations and communities within Western cultures. She explains that the negative energy which stems from aggressive thinking and aggressive behavior not only destroys relationships but also communities, work groups, families, and organizations. This essay, then, looks at the different ways in which to live, to work together, and to solve problems free of unproductive aggressive thinking and behavior. Wheatley examines the concept and skill of humility and five specific stages to solving complex problems. These stages, according to Wheatley, can be used by organizations and communities to help reduce or eliminate aggressive management practices.

“Personal: Attending to Our Footsteps” is the title of the second section of the second story. It contains several short essays that are designed to help readers better understand the concept of enjoying life. These essays explain why we—both individually and as a society—must slow down and critically reflect more often on our purpose, relationships, and in general, on our daily lives. This will afford us the time and energy needed to challenge some aspects of our everyday thinking and behavior. This strategy may offer us the ability to overcome some of the more negative cycles of our lives. Wheatley asks us to respond to strife and difficult times with courage, not silence. More significantly, Wheatley beseeches us to pay closer attention to the negative and harmful ways in which our culture is influencing our children.

One of the essays presented in this section is titled “Living Our Interconnectedness.” This essay

explains that individuals and society must develop a better understanding and a deeper respect for the universal truth that all people and all things are interconnected and interdependent. We as a people must begin behaving in a manner that is reflective of our role in “the dense and tangled web of life—the interconnected nature of reality” (204). According to Wheatley, “we’re beginning to realize that to live peacefully together on this planet, we need to be in new relationships, especially with those far distant from us” (204).

The third, and final, part of *Finding Our Way* reveals a window into Wheatley’s deepest convictions on the state of the planet’s living systems: “The last part of this book,” Wheatley admits, “is very personal” (5). In this part, entitled “My Own Footsteps,” readers learn about the paradoxical relationship existing between Wheatley’s growing feelings of hopelessness and distress and her feelings of joy, peace, clarity, and energy. We learn of Wheatley’s thoughts about the present state of the world, and about what the future seemingly holds for our children, our nation, and for all of Earth’s living systems. Wheatley chronicles the personal knowledge and inspiration she has acquired over the years from meeting and talking with individuals and groups from different countries and different traditions. Readers learn that these experiences have shaped her belief that at some point we all face life’s “endless spiral of paradox” (5). For her, this has resulted in deep feelings of no longer seeking hope for the “troubled world,” but instead, “right action” (5).

“Beyond Hope or Fear” is the title of one of the essays offered in this last part. In this very personal essay, Wheatley expresses her thoughts and feelings on what the future holds for global systems—a future Wheatley describes as bleak, especially if aggression and violence continue to permeate our interpersonal and global relationships. Wheatley discusses her journey and her growth as a person and as a professional. She tells about how this journey has brought her to a place of peace. Wheatley explains why she has replaced her feelings of hope for the world with hopelessness. She defines “hopelessness” as “a condition beyond hope or fear when we are liberated from results, when we give up outcomes. We choose our actions because they feel right even if they will not succeed in changing things” (262). Citing a Buddhist teaching, Wheatley defends her decision to adopt hopelessness as a way of thinking: hopelessness “is free of fear and thus can feel quite liberating” (262).

The strengths of this book are many. They include Wheatley’s use of storytelling to explain how and why new science offers a roadmap for shaping today’s leaders and for building sustainable organizations and communities. Although the strengths of *Finding Our Way* far outweigh its weaknesses, there is one aspect of the book in particular that warrants addressing: As stated earlier in this review, the book contains two major stories; and the main ideas of each story are demarcated at the beginning of the book. However, it was unclear to this reviewer the precise point at which each of the two stories began and concluded. Inclusion of a preface to each story might have provided more reading fluidity, and also allowed for each story to be more distinguishable in text. Conversely, the nonlinear writing style used by Wheatley might have been intentional and, more significantly, very much needed in the context of the book’s theme and purpose. According to Dr. Janet Haynes, Program Consultant with the Educational Leadership and Change (ELC) program at Fielding Graduate University, Wheatley’s writing style appears to be “deliberate&hellip

;undefined by the Western definition of clarity in time, i.e. beginning and end: One may interpret this choice of style as Wheatley’s way of self-stylizing this unconventional futuristic leadership model.” Dr. Haynes relates the genre of writing and research, known as “auto ethnography,” to which Wheatley appears to be adhering, to her own experience applying the genre (personal communication, May 29,

2006).

Unconventional approaches to leadership and organizational behavior and change have grown in popularity over the past four decades—evidenced in part by the success of several early and pioneering books which described the organization as a place of learning, e.g. Donald Schön's *Beyond the Stable State: Public and Private Learning in a Changing Society* (1973) and Chris Argyris's and Donald Schön's *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (1978). More recently, these concepts were advanced in modern, real-world scenarios. A new understanding about leadership and organizational change has resulted from reflective thinking on contemporary global problems and issues. How general systems theory and the learning organization might be a reasonable and pragmatic remedy and solution to many of these present-day problems has been the topic of numerous books, most notably Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), Karen Watkins's and Victoria J. Marsick's (Eds.) *Sculpting the Learning Organization. Lessons in the Art and Science of Systematic Change* (1993), and Gerald Pieters's and Doyle Young's *The Ever-changing Organization: Creating the Capacity for continuous Change, Learning and Improvement* (1999).

Margaret Wheatley's *Finding Our Way* adds an important voice and perspective to the body of literature on organizational and community leadership. However, while many authors have used systems theory and systems thinking to explain the development and effectiveness of the learning organization, Wheatley is among only a handful of authors who has drawn logical and convincing connections between one specific system, i.e. nature's living systems, and sustainable models for change and leadership in organizations and communities [see also: Fritjof Capra's *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (1996) and *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living* (2002)]. *Finding Our Way* is a very personal and intimate portrayal of Wheatley's extensive experiences with people and institutions and application of new science; this makes *Finding Our Way* an important contribution to the field.

Margaret Wheatley's *Finding our way: Leadership for an uncertain time* provides the fields of systems thinking and organizational and community leadership a resource for learning, relationship-building, change, growth, and sustainability. The knowledge, experience, vision, and honesty offered in this book make it a great tool for leaders at all levels. The intended audience of this book is anyone interested in becoming an organizational or community leader of the 21st century: any person dedicated to the principles and patterns that benefit and sustain living systems.

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