

How Leaders Can Create Adaptive, Energetic Organizations

Leaders striving to make their organizations creative and adaptive, yet grounded in spiritual values, can look to chaos science for guidance. In nature, systems that look chaotic have an inherent order, explained Margaret J. Wheatley, EdD, at CHA's System Leadership Development Forum in November. For example, she said scientists tracking seemingly random weather systems found they formed a pattern.

Wheatley urged leaders to have faith that order will emerge from chaos. "We're afraid of what would happen if we loosened our grip and let the elements of our organization reconfigure. What if we stopped looking for control and looked instead for order?"

"Organization wants to happen," continued Wheatley, president of the Berkana Institute, Provo, UT, and principal in the consulting firm Kellner-Rogers & Wheatley, Inc., Provo. When people have freedom to express themselves, "there's a natural creative impulse to respond to change, be creative, and go toward organiza-

A PRESCRIPTION FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Margaret Wheatley, who is the author of *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe* (Berrett-Koehler, 1992), pointed out that the ideas she espouses—unity, freedom, relationships characterized by appreciation and love for one's fellow human beings—have been expressed for hundreds of years. In the words of St. Augustine she found a prescription for organizations:

In essentials unity,
In nonessentials freedom,
In all things charity.



Margaret

Wheatley

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tion," she said. When organizations cease "supervising moment to moment," they see "a gush of energy and creativity" from employees, who normally give only about 10 percent of their energy to work, she said.

"We have to begin believing that human beings and their organizations tend toward change and development"—a notion that contradicts the idea that people resist change, Wheatley said. All people are constantly changing, adapting, growing, and learning, she added. "Resistance is merely people's desire to see their own dignity reflected in the change; people haven't connected their sense of self with what the organization is doing." The leader needs to ask, How can I invoke their dignity, their contribution? Wheatley said.

A NEW ROLE FOR LEADERS

Wheatley advised thinking of tasks not as structured by roles but as "a field of work" that needs to be accomplished. The work then determines how and with whom people work. "We need specialization," she affirmed, "but how we use specialization keeps changing."

To lead in a "field of work" environment, leaders must focus on the "essentials"—the organization's values ("how we work together"), its identity and purpose, and its core competencies ("what we're good at"). If people understand the organization's purpose, Wheatley said, they will use their creativity to accomplish that purpose. Leaders should insist on results, but will no longer need to focus on variables like individual behavior, the control of information, work roles, and structures.

"Your task is to create the time and space for order to emerge," Wheatley advised the participants. Leaders should ensure that everyone in the organization has access to all the information they need as they need it. Leaders are also responsible for relationships in which everybody has access to anyone they need, she said.

Most work in organizations involves structures, processes, and behavior patterns, according

to Wheatley. "If we see one of these we don't like, we try to change it," she said. Instead, she advised organizational leaders to view problems as manifestations of malfunctions in the way the organization attends to information, relationships, and its purpose and identity. She described a plant that was experiencing problems with safety. Rather than focusing on how employees could alter its safety processes, the organization worked on building a shared sense of values (in this case, safety) and purpose.

Another challenge is finding the delicate balance between too much order and too much chaos. Wheatley cautioned that organizations can err by focusing on a vision that is too chaotic, seizing every opportunity for change but having no clear idea of the organization's purpose. "We are looking for that edge where there's just enough newness but also just enough sense of purpose. It's like skiing. It's exhilarating; but you know the next bump can take you off your edge."

LEADER AS SOCIAL ARCHITECT

Executives' task is to redesign the culture and systems they are responsible for. Traditional patriarchal, paternalistic systems cannot handle the changing demands of a competitive arena, according to Peter Block of Designed Learning, Inc., Plainfield, NJ, and author of *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest* (Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 1993).

Patriarchal workplaces deny self-expression and, through compensation and performance appraisal processes, imply that organizations can buy employees' commitment and accountability—qualities that cannot be bought. Block advised getting rid of traditional performance appraisals and restructuring pay systems so they reward teams, rather than individuals, for real business outcomes.

Organizations reflect how society functions, Block said. "If we are to progress as a society, we have to be willing to take risks and implement these concepts."

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CHANGING THE WAY WE CHANGE

Responding to participants' concerns about how to measure the success of changes, Wheatley warned against insisting on immediate results. She said the change process can be considered successful if, after the change, people are more knowledgeable and competent, more committed to achieving the organization's purpose, and more prepared for the next wave of change. When a major change such as a downsizing leaves only "survivors" who are shell-shocked, she said, "this is a terrible indictment of the process." We have to change the way we change, Wheatley insisted, to a process where people are involved continually and feel connected to the change.

—Judy Cassidy

LEADERS' QUESTIONS ABOUT CHANGE

Sitting in a circle, participants at CHA's System Leadership Development Forum shared with each other personal questions raised by the concepts Margaret Wheatley and Peter Block had presented. Following are the concerns they mentioned most frequently:

- What type of personal transformation do I as a leader need to make?
- Will the ideas work, and will we give them enough time to work?
- How can I help employees move out of a structure with which they are comfortable?
- In our individualistic society, how do we cultivate a more inclusive, open attitude?
- How do we begin to change our organizations?
- What are the risks of the new approach?

Although the group did not attempt to answer each question, Wheatley suggested leaders start with small changes. Individuals can create a "zone of peace"—an area in their work life that is closer to the model they are trying to achieve.

CHA President and CEO Jack Curley noted the applicability of the meeting's concepts for the Catholic healing ministry. The ministry is examining and refounding itself, and Curley said it has a history of taking risks for what it believes in. The order that emerges from chaos is a reflection of God's presence. This, he suggested, can be a "tremendous organizing principle" for the ministry as it undergoes change.