

'The Human Spirit is the Most Untapped Unnatural Resource'

Organizational Expert Margaret Wheatley Says
It's Time We Listened to One Another

Margaret Wheatley, Ph.D., is an expert in organizational systems and behavior. The author of four books about leadership and human behavior, she is a sought-after consultant and speaker for her unorthodox views on organizing and motivating people.

The topic of CHA's national assembly this year is "In Our Hands: Changing Ourselves, Our Communities, Our Nation." You have written and spoken a great deal about the need to change our organizations by humanizing them. Some might argue though, that in these turbulent economic times, when the focus is often simply to survive, "humanizing" is a luxury organizations can't afford. What would you say to that?

I love this question because it exposes our whole way of viewing the world. We think we know how to run organizations. We think the way you run an organization is by numeric measures and of production and variations and quality, and look where it's gotten us. We have never run organizations well. We have never gotten the quality of motivation or performance we need by applying our simple numeric measures of the world. Though we have sometimes been successful in spite of ourselves, now we have to

realize that we will not recover from this very serious crisis unless we change the way we do things.

This is not just an economic crisis. It's a crisis of enormous social dimensions because of the number of people who are suffering. So for people to say we don't have time [for humanizing our organizations now], I'm sorry, but it is the only thing we do have time for. ... We have the opportunity now to recognize that the only way you motivate people is to treat them as people with their concerns, their good emotions, their difficult emotions, their generosity, and their desire to help one another. And that's what we need to get serious about right now.

You have said in your book *Turning to One Another* that we can change the world if we just start listening to one another. How do we begin that process within organizations?

Since that book came out in 2002, I have been experimenting with the role of conversations in traditional organizations and communities all over the world. The book is now in its second edition, and we have a lot of new material about the statement "we can change the world if we just start listening to one another again" and how that really works. And we see it really embodied in President Obama and in his staff. I have friends who were at the United Nations, and who were delighted when members of the new administration appeared and said, "We just want to listen." ... Any of us who have worked in community know the great power of listening, how it brings people together, how it stops the back-biting, the scapegoating, the things we do that keep one another apart. ... So, again I'd just like us to notice:



Margaret Wheatley (center) spent time working with the Aboriginal community in Lockhart River, Queensland, Australia, in September 2006.

Is competition working for us? Are the meetings we are all going to these days satisfying? Do things get done? Do we solve our problems by rushing through an agenda and cutting each other off? With people being certain they know exactly what to do, and they don't want to listen to anyone else? ...

Listening to each other is the way to stir creativity, because it gets us past our judgments and into curiosity about each other. When we're really listening to each other, we really do get new ideas, and we begin to see life from multiple perspectives, and all of that is what contributes to really sound decisions.

I'm just going to say it one more time. If for a moment anyone thinks we can continue to work well in this highly competitive, fear-filled, anxiety-ridden environment that characterizes most of our organizations, then I would just ask them to think again. In most organizations, people no longer talk to each other; they no longer reflect on their experiences or reflect on their projects. They just move onto the next one, especially if it has failed. There is no learning going on, and there's a lot of fear. ... It is really destroying people's health. You can see the impact of our fear in our health statistics.

Can you talk about a more contained organization where the ideas you propose have translated into workable and successful?

There are enormous amounts of data now on the effectiveness of high engagement strategies, conversation as process to get good thinking, the power of reflection in organizations, effective ways to empower people. ... The problem isn't lack of data or examples. The problem goes back to the question: Why are organizations so resistant to change? I've come to the sad conclusion that we consistently choose power and control over effectiveness and increased productivity. Even though leaders say they want more productivity — they desperately need it now for sure — we actually do not embrace the methods that are time tested to give us more productivity. Instead, we seem to have a greater need to feel that we're still in control. ... The basic difference between the control paradigm and the newer listening paradigm is what leaders believe about people and their capacity. Do we really believe that people are not motivated unless we force them to be with rewards and punishments? Do we believe that people are not creative ... that most people can't be leaders? The most startling conclusion over these years is how much leaders disrespect and distrust the people who work for them. They create these systems of control and monitoring and make people



Margaret J. Wheatley, Ph.D.

Margaret Wheatley, shown here with a new grandchild, became formally educated in organizational systems after serving in the Peace Corps in Korea in the 1960s, shortly after the Korean War. That experience sparked her lifelong interest in how people gather to process experiences and solve problems. She holds a doctorate in administration, planning and social policy from Harvard University, a master's degree in media ecology and systems thinking from New York University, and a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Rochester and University College, London. Among her honors, she was inducted in 2004 into the Leonardo da Vinci Society for the Study of Thinking.

For more than 30 years, following work as a teacher and administrator in public schools, Wheatley has worked as a consultant with a wide variety of organizations around the world. Using science as the foundation of her thought, she encourages people to think more creatively about organizations by looking to science, particularly quantum physics, as a model.

Her books include *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*; *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*; and *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*.

She is founder and past president of the Berkana Institute, a virtual organization that connects leaders worldwide — and which defines leaders as anyone willing to step forward to work for change. For more information on Wheatley or the Berkana Institute, visit www.margaretwheatley.com or www.berkana.org.

want to disobey them, to stay away from the workplace as much as they can. It's a very vicious cycle and what I attribute is the cause is this basic and unexamined belief on the part of leaders that people are not trustworthy and not as good as they are themselves.

Talk a little about how your ideas developed. They would be viewed by many people I suppose as unorthodox, and particularly so when you first began proposing them.

They evolved from my being out in the world and being curious about human nature. I was in the Peace Corps in Korea in the 1960s, shortly after the Korean War ended, so that was a life-changing experience, and I've always been just fascinated by what happens in groups. So I gradually got educated in that formally, and then I also had the advantage of knowing how to read and understand science, which was my first love in life. I've been in a lot of organizations, and I've worked with all levels of people from 13-year-old Girl Scouts to the head of the U.S. Army, and I've just kept my eyes open and my ears

open and my heart and mind active. ... Gradually I've put together a lot of different streams of thought and a lot of different experiences into my own attempts to understand how life organizes and how we could apply that to ourselves as human beings within these crazy hierarchies that we've created.

I've worked in places like Zimbabwe, which has been in a state of total collapse, and I've watched what being together in community and relying on the better qualities of human beings can do to get people through the most outrageous and horrific circumstances. I've watched how the women of Rwanda come back to lead their country after losing their entire families to massacre. I've seen how people in New Orleans, especially women, are organizing and bringing their communities back in spite of being ignored and not getting the money they need, and being held in distrust by the federal government. I've seen enough to make me believe that the human spirit is the most untapped unnatural resource.

Can you talk a little about the Berkana Institute?

We founded it as a nonprofit in 1992, and since 2000 we've really been focused out in the Third World. ... We have been working with people who are already demonstrating the kind of leadership we believe the world needs to notice and learn from — people who are not visionary leaders but people who know how to gather their community together, and

to work with people. All the strategies that, as I said earlier, we are not using [in our organizations] here: how you empower people, how you work with them, how you realize that leadership is everywhere in the community. ... These are economically very poor places, but they're very rich in recognizing the resources that are there in their people and in their culture and in their land.

What are you reading right now or planning to read this summer?

I am not reading right now. I am writing, and when I am writing, I browse a lot of different things, looking for quotes and concepts. I am writing a book called *Perseverance*, a book of ideas and thoughts that help us stay in the middle of the river and not grasp for the shore. I am also doing a more traditional book about leadership in crisis. And then, Debbie Frieze, the co-president of Berkana, and I are working on a book that explains and hopefully entices people to understand the theory of change that Berkana and others have used now with great success out in the world, starting small and letting things grow. So it's a very fertile time inside my head right now. ■



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