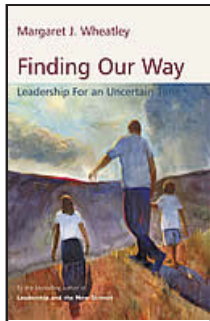


Book Reviews for Managers

Finding Our Way

Leadership For an Uncertain Time

by Margaret J. Wheatley



Berrett-Koehler, 2005
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"The eternal frustration of control-oriented leaders is that they are leading what is, in fact, a living system"

REVIEWED BY IAN COOK

Margaret Wheatley, back in 1992 with her book, *Leadership and the New Science*, was one of the first writers to bring into mainstream discussion the idea that organizations share a lot of the characteristics of living, self-organizing systems in nature. Large weather systems, ant colonies, and rush hour traffic patterns come to mind. In *Finding Our Way* Wheatley provocatively lays out how managers must operate to be effective in a system that is "alive."

Living systems are, by their very nature, both self-organizing and complex. No one part of a system dictates to the rest what will be done throughout the entity. Rather these systems operate from an amalgam of countless individual decisions and actions that take place primarily at the most local levels of the system. At the same time, such systems possess an order, a coherence of purpose and collective behavior. Storm systems hang together for hundreds of miles as they sweep across the country. Ants build a colony, manage their territory, and rally against invasion. Commuters manage to all get to work.

Today's Managers

This is an important book for managers to read. Why? Because most managers, in their heart-of-hearts, see their organization as a *machine*. They see their role is to figure out...

"...how to pump energy into this lifeless mass (of employees). Once the pump is primed, they (i.e. managers) must then rush hither and yon to make sure that everyone is clanking along in the same direction, at the established speed, with no diversions"

Furthermore, since mechanical systems are capable of being controlled and directed, most managers...

- Impose performance standards
- Measure everything possible

- Present mission statements, values and visions that everyone must conform to
- Create organizational charts, formal reporting relationships, and job descriptions
- Expect conformity and compliance
- Relax only when things seem to be under control (whenever that is...?)

The eternal frustration of control-oriented leaders is that they are leading what is, in fact, a living system. It is a system made up of human beings with free will, with different perspectives, needs, personalities and ways of being in the world and with the inconvenient habit of deciding themselves how they will do their work.

And in this time of change and knowledge-based work, if you want out-of-the box thinking, accountability, enthusiastic participation and commitment from your staff, the controlling approach simply won't deliver.

What to do?

So, how can a manager allow his/her living organizational system, be it the whole company or just one unit, to breathe and excel...without sacrificing performance and results?

The author has a number of ideas:

- Accept that fact that too much control over behavior will quash your people's creativity, adaptiveness, and very spirit at work. You will get resistance or, at the very best, compliance.
- Understand the three ingredients of successful self-organizing systems:
 1. *A Sense of Purpose*, collectively shared, seldom imposed
 2. *Information*, the nutrient of a living system.
 3. *Relationships*: by means of which information is transmitted and exchanged, decisions are made and actions are taken at the local level.

"Most managers, in their heart-of-hearts, see their organization as a machine"



Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps managers and supervisors get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

- Organize your people around a clear purpose that *in which they can find meaning*. Claude Taylor, when he was CEO of Air Canada, used to remind employees that they were in the business of uniting Canadians with one another and with the world.
- Facing a complex issue? To the degree possible, invite in everybody who is affected. Listen to the diverse perceptions, ideas and concerns. Look for a unifying center among all the views.
- Maintain and foster connections among members of the organization and provide them with as much information as you can to help them do their job, to stimulate their creativity, to help them see how their job fits into the larger picture, etc.
- In short, ensure there are clear, meaningful goals around which to coalesce their effort. Then delegate, as much as you can, the "how" they do their work.

Wheatley tells the story of a high school principle who despaired of imposing and enforcing strict discipline and procedures. Recognizing the living system he was leading, he ran his institution with three guiding principles—for students and staff alike:

1. Take care of yourself.
2. Take care of each other.
3. Take care of this place.

Would something akin to these high-level operating guidelines work in your company, unit or team? It may be worth thinking about.

Let Go of Outdated Beliefs

I agree with Margaret Wheatley that, if we are to successfully guide our complex, living organizations through a constantly changing environment with complex strategic challenges, we need to "clean out" some of our outdated, control-oriented beliefs:

1. *Organizations are machines*. People need to be moved around, directed, programmed, retooled, etc., like parts of the machine.
2. *Only material things are real*. This, of course, devalues vital intangibles such as commitment, accountability, values, teamwork, organizational culture, knowledge and—especially—trust.
3. *Only numbers are real*. So, once you

assign something a metric, you can relax; you've got it pegged.

4. *You can only manage what you can measure*. So, don't bother attending to other elements you can't tabulate or concretely measure.
5. *Technology is always the best solution*.

She raises an interesting point about using measurements for feedback. Rather than imposing what will be measured, she suggests that you involve your employees in identifying what "the system should notice." Then have them self-manage around these indicators, using this performance feedback as a continuous improvement and development tool, not a vehicle for judgment by the boss.

To quote the author, "Dethrone measurement from its godly position [as *controller*] and offer measurement a new job—that of helpful *servant*."

So What?

Knowing full well I cannot capture Wheatley's wide-ranging and thought-provoking presentation in a two-page book review, let me summarize my take on the importance of her message to leaders.

The latest research on the competencies of effective leaders, those who consistently generate bottom-line results, includes a systems perspective. Wheatley's work on the *organization as a living, substantially self-organizing system* reveals why today's leaders need to operate from this holistic perspective. Employees who are spread across departments, "silos," functions, regions and even continents are not independent of one another. What one group of employees knows, thinks, feels and does are impacted by what other employees know, think, feel and do. Your people are connected and interdependent.

Finding Our Way challenges us to see the enterprises we lead in new light. Are you willing to have your current thinking (dare I say, "paradigm"?) disturbed? If so, give this one a read.

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