

Finding Our Way

Leadership For an Uncertain Time

Interviewed by **Nelly Kelders**, Member Services Director
Written by **Marisa Celenza**, Editor

Margaret Wheatley, consultant, speaker and author, was the keynote speaker for Symposium 1 of the Mentoring and Coaching for Catholic School and System Leaders in-service on September 26, 2007.



Who is Margaret Wheatley?

My continuing passion is to re-introduce people to our great human spirit and qualities we have for creativity, for learning, and how much we want to be in community together. These are traits and memories we are quickly forgetting

in this rapid-paced world that is so divisive and horrific in what humans are doing to humans. I have done many things in my life, but now it is about helping people remember the better qualities of humanity.

With so many experienced professionals going into retirement, how can we continue to pass on expertise and wisdom to younger educators?

Every profession is suffering from a similar problem; the loss of wisdom and expertise of experienced, mature professionals who are now retiring. Mentoring programs or ways to think about how we convey or transmit this knowledge are essential right now. It is not easy to be a mentor. It requires time and patience and the organization needs to allocate resources of time so that people can really work together. The best model is the old-fashioned craftsman-apprentice model, where you work alongside somebody. Otherwise, all that tacit knowledge is not available to us. It does not help to ask

a mentor to philosophize on their model. You have to be in the classroom with them and watch what they do and how they make decisions then allow time to have a conversation between the mentor and the mentee, to question and discuss why something was done. It takes years of working alongside someone; otherwise, you just get superficial knowledge. Day-to-day watching and questioning makes for a true transfer of expert knowledge.

What makes a community of practice so successful?

What I am focusing on is the power of learning together. Communities of practice or learning communities rely on the intrinsic motivators of human beings who have a desire to learn, to contribute to each other's growth and development. Focus on the word community itself. Instead of thinking of ourselves as isolated teachers or professionals just struggling on our own, when we come together with colleagues, we get support, comfort and ideas. We also develop new skills and new knowledge. We do this better together, than alone. Communities have diversity and robustness to them. Someone has already figured out a solution to your problem. I focus on communities of learning or practice rather than networks. In a community, we are going to be there for each other. We have already made a commitment to each other to respond to a call for help. That kind of bonding and ability to depend on one another is what so many professionals are craving. Wouldn't it be wonderful to feel that you are with a group of colleagues who will help you, who will support you, who are not just going to stand

aside and criticize you or gossip about you, but instead are actively working with you and you with them in a reciprocal relationship? It is more important to focus on the community aspect than the learning aspect right now. Many of us do not know how to be there for each other any more. We get so overwhelmed with the pace of our work that we withdraw or have too many tasks to accomplish and do not have time to sit and have a casual or exploratory conversation. We need to learn how to work together again. I am stressing the quality of our relationships right now. Once we have those relationships, and are focussed on work, it is extraordinary how quickly we learn new things and how quickly we develop new strategies and solutions to the problems that we share in common.

What qualities does a leader need in order to deal with resistance towards learning communities?

Many people resist anything new because we are so overwhelmed with the stress of daily life. The second part is that we have seen so many things come and go. A principal needs to be a little dictatorial and insist that people try it. Do it as an experiment. Bring in research and examples of teachers who have discovered the joys of working together as communities of practice or learning communities. I would ask my faculty to try it for 6 months as an experiment and see if it works for us. Learning communities sell themselves. It takes a while for people to believe it. Once they bring a problem to their learning community and find a solution, there is that feeling that I am not alone. They are the biggest fans and proponents. We need many more experiments out there, where we try something, see if it works, and learn from the experience. It is active leadership to structure this as an experiment, but insist that people engage in it.

How does the tri-level approach fit in with your theory of emergence?

It fits in more with my own understanding of the complexity and systemic nature of the problems we face. We need to come together with our different points of view, our different perspectives, our different experiences that we have gained by working at different levels. In a good hierarchy, people at the top get to see the whole system, if they are looking. Everyone has a different perspective, based on where they are in the hierarchy. Perspectives are essential if we are going to get a full grasp of the complexity of the issues facing us. This kind of collaboration is necessary if we want to make intelligent decisions about very complex problems. We need to engage the whole system. We need lots of eyes, ears and intellects helping us understand the complexity of something before we write a new policy or before we make a decision.

Why has communication through conversation become so difficult in the western world?

I have written that the traditional way that human beings thought together was through conversation. It has become so difficult because of the pace at which we are working, where we have no time for casual conversation anymore. We do not take any time for relationships. We have developed techniques that make us feel efficient. All we are doing is getting through lists; checking off

things. We are not creating time to think. The only way I know for humans to think together is through open-ended conversations that feel messy, non-linear, meandering, and then suddenly you have a good decision made. That is so antithetical to the way leaders are taught to conduct meetings. They see this messiness and wandering as being off-topic; that they have lost control of the meeting; that we have to get on with the agenda. My vast experience is that when people are engaged in a true conversation, where people are contributing and it seems to be off-topic, but is not, there comes a point when suddenly that meeting can crystallize into true consensus or decision-making. There is a wonderful phrase from the Quaker tradition of a *gathered meeting*. This is true of First Nations' councils as well; we talk and we talk and then all of a sudden the decision is there. It feels very mysterious to us Westerners who want it to be analytic and linear. It is in many traditions around the world. In our western leadership, we have to know when we have had enough of the meandering conversation and when to call the question. Going back to the mentor-mentee relationship, this is something you learn as a young person watching someone who is experienced.

Has technology interfered with conversation?

Technology has destroyed our communication abilities. I am more and more aware of how much harm and distance and fragmentation technology has created inside our organizations and inside society. People do not know how to relate to each other any more. I was just told of an organization that every Friday has no electronic communication. If you need to communicate with someone, it must be face-to-face. I think that is very wise. More and more people are speaking to me about their frustration with the lack of intimacy and the lack of clear communication that has grown in their organizations. Everything is text-messaging, BlackBerry messaging or e-mailing. It has had a very negative, destructive impact on us. Everyone could think about what his or her communication with colleagues was like six or seven years ago and what it is like now. Why is it different? Make your own analysis of the impact of technology.

How does leadership in the 21st century differ from that of the 20th?

Leadership in the 21st century is giving up the *heroic* image. I am the person who does it all, who is smartest, who makes it happen, who saves people, who is responsible; that is the hero. I am trying to convert people to what I describe as the leader as *host*. The leader as host understands that it is not up to them. It is up to people; it is people's creativity, contribution and commitment that need to be the focus of their leadership. How do they as host welcome, facilitate, gather and provide resources? The greatest resource that a leader can provide today is the time to think. This has disappeared in our crazy lives. There are many essential things that a leader must do today, but it is mainly around understanding that it is the people in the organization that will provide the good ideas, the energy and the motivation. It is not up to the leader to do any of that. The leader's job is to support people. This is a very old notion of leadership. It is best known under the title *Servant Leadership*.

What should we be aware of as we enter the 21st century?

When we talk about creating learning, about creating community, about teaching as a calling – what we are really getting in touch with are the basic motivators of being human. The desire to learn is what living is about. You find that everywhere on the planet in human beings. The desire to contribute is found everywhere. These are the intrinsic motivators. The desire to be together in good, harmonious relationships is who we are as a species in spite of the news, in spite of this terrible spiralling downward to more and more aggression and genocide and horrific behaviour. We can consult our own experience to test out what motivates us most. If you want to understand why learning is so energizing, look at your own experience with learning. If you want to understand human motivation, look at what motivates you. If you want to think about the power of community, and whether it is worth your time to get involved in a learning community, think about the times when you have felt you were part of a community and what that experience was like. We can go back to our own experience and really start to learn why learning, community and being together is so inspiring to us and so motivating.

Visit the CPCO website at www.cpco.on.ca for the full webcast interview with Margaret Wheatley or consult her book, *Finding Our Way - Leadership For an Uncertain Time* (2007), Barrett-Koehler Publishers, ISBN 978-1-57675-405-4.



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