Higher Education and the Forces of Self-Organization: An Interview with Margaret Wheatley

Margaret Wheatley is the author of Leadership and the New Science and co-author with Myron Kellner-Roberts of A Simpler Way. At CAUSE96 in San Francisco, her general session address challenged basic assumptions about efficiency, motivation, productivity, problem solving, accountability, cooperation, and even human nature itself. Wheatley believes that life and work are self-organizing and that organizations must be approached as dynamic, living systems. How might these concepts apply in higher education? What are the implications for college and university leaders and for our organizations in the next century? CAUSE/EFFECT asked CAUSE Vice President Richard N. Katz to pose a few questions to Wheatley to share with our readers.

What advice would you give college and university presidents about how to lead their institutions into the future? What is the role of the campus leader?

My favorite quote about the role of a leader comes from Mort Meyerson at Perot industries—an unlikely source, but he said, “The first task of a leader is to make sure the organization knows itself.” For me that means that leaders need to see themselves not as the people who give the organization its vision, or its structures, or even its focus, really. I believe the primary role of the leader is to make sure that the organization has this deep inner integrity, this deep, shared understanding of who we are. To get that clarity requires experimenting with different processes, bringing the whole system of the university together—having a kind of a roving conversation on campus about who we are, what we serve, what we think is possible with the resources we have, who we could be. These conversations are very easy to engage people in, but the leader has to create the space for it, then let the process evolve, to have some sense of patience. I’ve seen organizations come to great clarity about who they are and who they want to be in three days, when they’ve had the whole system in one room and worked very intensely. That’s happened on some campuses. On the other hand, this could be a more gradual, evolutionary process. It’s tempting to conclude from some of your work on self-organizing that leaders aren’t terribly important any more.

I think they’re critically important because we’re making a transition from hierarchical forms of organization to this web-like creation. Leaders do reflect their aspirations and dreams to the people in their organizations. Leaders are going to be critically important for decades to come. Not from the heroic posture. Not from, “This is my vision and I will take you where you don’t even know you want to go.” How to be a leader who is a steward, or a servant, is the challenge.

In higher education, it seems that our academic disciplines organize along disciplinary lines, across institutional boundaries. Is that a form of the self-organization you discuss in your book?

Yes, it’s self-organizing, but it’s not self-organizing around an institutional purpose. Therefore it leads to an actual inability of the institution to organize itself in a coherent fashion. I don’t think this is true of all kinds of colleges and universities. Some of the small, four-year liberal arts colleges have a very clear sense of who they are. Some of the church-based schools have a clear sense of who they are. That does give them a kind of coherence. They at least have identified what they exist for. If we pretend that we don’t need to answer that question as an institution, then in fact we don’t have an institution. We have a group of
people competing for resources for self-serving ends, because they decide the institution exists just for them.

In some ways, you’ve just described some elements of our research universities.

Absolutely. This is where there are the greatest issues. If faculty believe that the institution exists to support them, they’re actually not living in the 20th century. God knows what will happen in the 21st century. They will find themselves in non-sustainable isolation.

What are your thoughts about the impact of technology infrastructure such as campus, inter-campus, and global networks on our organizations?

What I have observed is that the minute you create access along these networks, you are creating a revolution. Networking is an incredibly revolutionary act. It’s probably the best way to bring down an existing structure. People find each other. They find who they need. They enjoy the freedom and the creativity that’s available once they can find others for what they need. They self-organize like crazy into different groups. It changes them. It changes their work. Ultimately, they’re ignoring the existing structures. Several years ago, corporate CEOs got wind of this and tried to stop a lot of internal e-mail. It was a big decision whether or not to go ahead with this technology. Now we’re in a place where you can’t decide that anymore. We have this very potent revolutionary force just running wild. Networking people is not a neutral act. It’s a subversive activity if you’re an existing organizational leader.

If you had the opportunity to build the campus of the future with a goal in mind of optimizing the opportunities for creative self-organizing, what would it look like? What would you invest in?

Those experiments are under way in the distance-learning, adult-centered places like Fielding Institute, Union Institute, and Walden University. What they’re experimenting with is how to connect students and mentors electronically, how to support individual work, and yet how to create a community of learners at the same time. They work with localized learning groups, then they come together. Fielding, which I’m most familiar with, comes together twice a year for the community aspect of being together: finding support for each other and learning. The variables that I watch in these experiments are what’s the ratio of individualized self-focused learning to the need for human relationships and physical contact with one another.

We are in this great experiment now in work organization, in telecommuting, believing we don’t need to be together at all. The experiment is, is it true that we don’t need to be together at all? What’s lost when we’re not physically in the same space? We won’t know that for a few more years. The same is true for learning. Where does learning occur and how much of it is in our formal intent, for a class, for a curriculum? How much of it is in the whole environment we create on campus that supports the life of the mind, if you’re lucky? If we’d think of this as an experiment right now instead of a solution, then we’d watch it a little more carefully. We’d be thinking, let’s see what the effects really are.

Do you have some early observations about the need for physical proximity in learning?

I think it’s this deep need in us as human beings to be in physical contact with one another, to be in relationships. This cannot occur electronically and satisfy us. The predictions of [our becoming] a cocooning atomistic society because entertainment was available at home have not borne fruit. Movie theaters are doing better than ever before. Bookstores are doing quite well. They create themselves as community spaces now. People linger and talk at the cafe. I see those as reverse trends from what was predicted a few years ago. I see those as the deeper need of the human spirit to be with other human beings. I don’t think we

Margaret Wheatley is a partner with Myron Kellner-Rogers in a consulting firm and co-founder with him and trustee of the Berkana Institute, a non-profit educational and research foundation supporting the discovery of new organizational forms. The firm’s clients range from the U. S. Army to Fortune 500 companies to schools and community hospitals. Dr. Wheatley received her doctorate from Harvard University’s program in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy. She holds an MA in Communications and Systems Thinking from New York University and has also been a research associate at Yale University.
can create long-distance learning that keeps people isolated. I don’t know who’s watching this or what they’re finding.

Is there any insight that you’ve drawn about inherent limitations of size around self-organizing systems?

Size is a big issue, but I don’t think there’s a simple rule. There are scientists who would disagree. There’s one complexity scientist, Stuart Kauffman, probably the biggest name in this field right now, who says that if there are too many connections in his computer, algorithmic systems, that the whole system freezes. He believes that you should be connected to a few others, but not to the whole system. On the other hand, if you leave the computer screen and move to the biological world, what you see is a process of communicating that we haven’t even begun to understand. Why is the Farmer’s Almanac true at all? There’s communication going on between animals, weather conditions, global warming trends that they are very sensitive to. Somehow they’re in an information environment that I don’t think we’ve begun to understand.

Back to human organizations, size is a critical question, but it’s not answered except in the context of that system. It depends on people’s maturity, their ability to communicate, their desire to communicate, their clarity about what their purpose is, their relationships with one another. If you don’t have any of that, then trying to get fifty people to work together is impossible, but if you do have that kind of foundation, you can get thousands of people working together. I see a lot of corporate organizations playing with this question of what’s optimal size. It varies from you can’t have more than 200 people in a facility to you can’t have more than 1,200! This is quite a range. I don’t think it’s a number; it’s a whole environment of communication we are creating. This is also changing with the Internet, our electronic access to one another. I’m involved with people and some of the chats they’re on, who find they can’t even be in a chat with fifty people. That’s too large a number. They can’t read everything people write. They’re downsizing, fragmenting themselves into groups of twenty. That’s an experiment.

CAUSE is interested, as an organization, in providing linkages between naturally occurring, self-organizing systems. There are technologies now making it possible for networks to materialize around hot topics, around perceived institutional affinities for whatever reason. Is some-

body doing good work in this area—the internetworking of existing self-organizing teams?

I think you want to look at the research that came out of Xerox PARC with John Seely Brown, which is now being extended by the Institute for Research on Learning. They’re doing very good work on a concept that I think is self-evident in the academy, what they call “communities of practice,” looking at how people within an organization reach out and find people they need to work with. In those “information organizations,” that’s where the real competence lies. That’s where the skills are. I have great respect for the work they’re doing. It’s very forward thinking.

Is there an infrastructure that people in our professional community could be thinking of in order to foster that identification of communities of practice?

I assume that people will organize around ideas, and they will do it in spite of us, but I think there’s a role to play to make it easier. I only know of one group that’s dealing with learning communities where people feel there is a real generative exchange of ideas because of the way they’ve created network tools and the way they’ve created themselves internationally. Otherwise, I hear a lot of frustration now, that the existing electronic infrastructure doesn’t work. It takes too long. There is a need for the browsers, the information experts who will help sort through this. That’s a real need. If I were looking for an infrastructure role for CAUSE, I would look to the very paradoxical problem, that in the face of so much data, how do we create greater access to what’s there by doing some sort of presorting?

That’s a real tension in our profession.

This is a critical area to experiment in. The way you experiment is you try something and you see if it works. You get the community of users involved in helping you assess that what you’ve just thought would work, did work. I use this word “experiment” very deliberately. What I find missing in most of our organizational lives is experimentation. We do a project as the solution. All of our energy focus is on “online,” or getting it to start up. Then we don’t look at what happens
afterwards. You would never do that in a scientific set up.

**The language of implementation and the language of experimentation are almost in conflict.**

If you realize these are experiments, you would pay attention to what actually happens and then go on to the next experiment! If you’re in an environment where you're being forced to deliver the right solution, then you will spend all of your energy in convincing people that it’s the right solution and then covering up any results which don’t support that. This is the craziness of our lives.

**Do you sense there’s a generational issue with respect to embracing an organic, self-organizing view of the world, that young people today are leaving behind naturally some of the hierarchical thinking of mechanistic models?**

I think they definitely are. They’re not at all opposed to change. If you talk to 25-year-olds in your institutions, they’re not sitting there hoping nothing changes. They’re in the flow of this in a very different way, as well as in the flow of technology. We are all suffering, intergenerationally, from a loss of meaning about why we’re doing what we do. This is a very deep urge in youth as well as in adults. Somebody in an interview recently asked me if I was really saying that their work should be meaningful. I said, if you just think about it, that’s such a ridiculous, Western-culture statement. Where did we ever get to a place where we thought work wasn’t meaningful? No matter what you’re doing, it’s your life.

**Are there ways you’ve seen that are successful in causing others to find meaning in their work?**

I think you simply invite them into a conversation where they’re really going to be listened to and respected. It’s not just a motivational tool. In fact, it’s a sincere invitation to get engaged in the real work of the organization. I find people just are dying to be asked to participate, but instead we’ve created these organizational cultures in which people are cynical, depressed, bitter, and angry. We created these monsters. We didn’t invite people “in” sincerely. We put them through participative processes and we didn’t mean to. We try to push our leadership onto them, or bring in outside experts which completely divorces people from their expertise. We’ve just done a lot of damage. What’s amazing is that I haven’t seen an organization in which people were so oppressed that they couldn’t come back when the invitation and call was sincere. It takes awhile. It could take a year of testing to see if at this time you’re really the leader you say you are. I’ve learned from this that the human spirit is inextinguishable. It takes an awful lot to kill this desire. We haven’t succeeded in killing it, which is a good thing, even though our behavior is outrageous.

**It sounds like trust is incredibly important.**

It’s the critical thing—trust and respect. People sum up what I’m saying all the time: “You’re just talking about trust and respect.” It’s respect for us as adults, as fully sentient beings, with intelligence, with heart. Learning to trust that I really can depend on you. You’re not going to mess around with me. You’re not going to say one thing and do another. When we do trust our leaders, the way we engage with them is so different. That’s when we will go to the extremes of sacrifice for the organization.

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