



Margaret J. Wheatley

Is the Pace of Life Hindering Our Ability to Manage? in Management Today,

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Margaret Wheatley ©

Best-selling leadership author, consultant and speaker Margaret Wheatley is disappointed in the pace of Australian business life.

In Australia for a series of seminars, Margaret Wheatley says she is starting to think more about the skills that are needed in order to stay effective in an increasingly fast-paced world.

"I realise that the level of speed and the overwhelming nature that characterises the US and Europe has not yet hit here, but it is clearly on its way.

"One of the things I have certainly noticed is that Australians are certainly working a lot harder than they were six years ago. I think it is an unfortunate trend because I have always admired Australians for having set clear boundaries.

"For me it is just another indication of the power of the global pressure on people to go faster and faster."

The author of the management classic *Leadership and the New Science* says she has for many years been interested in seeing the world differently, seeing beyond the Western, mechanical view of the world to what else might appear when the lens is changed.

"I've learned, just as Joel Barker predicted when he introduced us to paradigms years ago, that 'problems that are impossible to solve with one paradigm may be easily solved with a different one'.

"With colleagues, I've been exploring the question: "How might we organise differently if we understood how life organises?" It's been an exploration that has helped me look into old patterns and problems and develop new and hopeful insights and practices."

As an example, she does not make a big distinction between the roles of managers and leaders in an organisation.

"I believe that the capacity that any organisation needs is for leadership to appear anywhere it is needed, when it is needed.

"So if there is a crisis or an unhappy consumer or a client suffering or an idea that needs to be developed, we don't want people in their little squares.

"I think it is quite dangerous for an organisation to think they can predict where they are going to need leadership. It needs to be something that people are willing to assume if it feels relevant, given the context of any situation.

"So, as a member of the team I can go along and do my job quite happily but if there's a sudden crisis and I am there, on the spot, I can take up a leadership role. That's why I think it is dangerous to make a distinction between management and leadership."

She says that in her own work, which has been global, she sees leaders appearing everywhere and it all depends on whether the situation or circumstance calls on them to exert leadership.

"It is not something you have or don't have. It is much more dependent on whether it is something that really moves you and you say to yourself, 'I could do something here'."

As the founder of the Berkana Foundation, she says a leader is defined as someone who wants to help.

"For us, someone who is willing to step forward and help is much more courageous than someone who is merely fulfilling the role.

"It is also true in an organisation that when something goes wrong in a plant or someone dies suddenly, then someone needs to step in. You want people to feel that this is a welcome gesture and they don't have to wait for anyone to tell them to."

Wheatley says the current theme of her talks is that people need to develop time to think.

"And to really learn from our experiences. There is an enormous wasted wisdom out there."

"We do something and then we rush on to the next thing and if it goes badly we don't want anyone to look at it and if it goes well, we still don't take the time to take a good look at it. We just rush on..."

"So there is a quality lacking. It is something that disturbs me and it is a severe problem in the US and Europe. We are just not learning from all the experiences we are having. I think a major act of leadership right now, call it a radical act, is to create the places and processes so people can actually learn together, using our experiences."

She cautions that learning is not an abstract thing .

"It is about when we do something and there is a significant outcome, either for good or ill,

we need to look at it and learn from it. And for me if a leader can actually sponsor these processes and allow more time for people to think, then I believe that is a major contribution."

For instance, she says, there are managers who equate how effective they are by how busy they seem to be.

"We are all caught up in this measurement mania. We are not growing in wisdom right now. We may be just growing in freneticism."

Wheatley continues: "I don't know if you can wind back the number of hours but I certainly think we could be using them differently. And time for reflection with colleagues is for me a lifesaver; it is not just a nice thing to do if you have the time. It is the only way you can survive.

"I think we have to notice that the business processes we use right now for thinking and planning and budgeting and strategy are all delivered on very tight agendas.

"We are going to talk about this subject for seven minutes and this other subject for 10 minutes. These are not processes that bring out thinking. They are just very mechanical processes that we go through. They are quite deadening both to the people who are participating and also in the kind of outcomes that are generated.

"They are not creative and they are not inspiring and we don't want to be doing them." Wheatley also explains how she has modified her message.

"I think when I first started to outline this message I expressed the view that that there was a need to just talk to colleagues. Well, I think I have tempered that message.

"We need time when we are in unstructured meetings together and we need meetings without agendas that allow time for reflection. There are different processes that we can use and they are all much more open ended than our current high tech collaborative processes.

"For example, I was discussing the use of email and how impersonal it can be, how people will now email someone across the room rather than go and talk to them. But I don't think this is laziness, I think it is a conscious decision people are making to save time. People are concerned that if you start a face-to-face conversation it will take longer and that's where we see the time pressure affecting us."

Another key subject close to Margaret Wheatley's heart is the impact of change on society and business.

"Organisations are now confronted with two sources of change: the traditional type that is initiated and managed; and external changes over which no one has control. We are just beginning to experience what it is like to operate in a global environment of increasing chaos, of events beyond our control that have a devastating impact on our internal operations and culture.

"The business news is filled with stories of the perils of interconnectedness. One country suffers economic problems, and analysts are quick to say that their problems will not affect other countries. Then we watch as an entire continent and those beyond are pulled into economic recession by the web of interdependence. Or we read how the actions of a few corrupt executives bring down an entire company (and industry), even though tens of thousands of people work there with integrity.

"Interconnected systems are always this sensitive. Activities occurring in one part of the system always affect many other parts of the system. The nature of the global business environment guarantees that no matter how hard we work to create a stable and healthy organisation, our organisation will continue to experience dramatic changes far beyond our control."

She says that in an era of increasing uncertainty, new organisational dynamics appear and old ones intensify at all levels of the organisation and it is important to notice how these new dynamics affect employees, leaders, and core-operating functions. Her examples are:

- Employee behaviours: Uncertainty leads to increased fear. As fear levels rise, it is normal for people to focus on personal security and safety. We tend to withdraw, become more self-serving, and more defensive. We focus on smaller and smaller details, those things we can control.
- Pressure on leaders: Because of increased fear, many people turn to leaders with unreasonable demands. We want someone to rescue us, to save us, to provide answers, to give us firm ground or strong life rafts. But not even the strongest of leaders can deliver on the promise of stability and security.
- Core functions: It wasn't long ago that companies engaged in five-year strategic planning. Those sweet, slow days seem very distant now. Many of the primary functions of business, and of human resources-planning, forecasting, budgeting, staffing, individual development plans – only worked because we could bring the future into focus, because the future felt within our control. When people know they can rely on each other, when there is a true sense of community, it is amazing how well people perform.
- New organisational capabilities: In order to counter the negative organisational dynamics stimulated by stress and uncertainty, we must give full attention to the quality of our relationships. Nothing else works, no new tools or technical applications, no redesigned organisational chart. The solution is each other. If we can rely on one another, we can cope with almost anything. Without each other, we retreat into fear.

There is one core principle for developing these relationships. People must be engaged in meaningful work together if they are to transcend individual concerns and develop new capacities. Here are several ways to put this principle into practices –

- Nourish a clear organisational identity: As confusion and fear swirls about the organisation, people find stability and security in purpose, not in plans. When chaos wipes the ground from beneath us, the organisation's identity gives us some place to stand.
- Focus people on the bigger picture: People who are stressed lose the ability to recognise patterns, to see the bigger picture. And as people become overloaded and overwhelmed with their tasks, they have no time or interest to look beyond the demands of the moment.
- Demand honest, forthright communication: In a crisis, the continuous flow of information gives people the capacity to respond intelligently as they seek to rescue or save people and property. People deal far better with uncertainty and stress when they know what's going on.
- Prepare for the unknown: The US military has invested large sums of money in the development and use of complex simulations that prepare troops for different battle scenarios. Yet it is surprising how few companies engage in any type of simulation or scenario work.
- Keep meaning at the forefront: Often in organisations we forget that meaning is the most powerful motivator of human behavior. People gain energy and resolve if they understand how their work contributes to something beyond themselves.
- Pay attention to individuals: There is no substitute for direct, personal contact with employees. Even though managers are more stressed and have less time, it is crucial to pick up the phone and connect with those you want to retain. When people feel cared for, their stress is reduced and they contribute more to the organisation.

What does Berkana mean?

The Berkana Foundation was created by Margaret Wheatley a decade ago. Berkana is an ancient Norse word for birch tree, and symbolically stands as the Norse rune for growth and rebirth.

The Berkana Institute supports life-affirming leaders around the globe, those who are giving birth to the new forms, processes, and leadership that will restore hope to the future. Since 1991, Berkana has gradually expanded its work to reach pioneering leaders and communities in all types of organisations and in dozens of nations. They define a leader as anyone who wants to help, who is willing to step forward to create change in their world.

According to Margaret Wheatley: "We at Berkana know that the leaders we need are already here, emerging everywhere, among thousands of people who are stepping forward to create a future of possibility and hope. We do everything we can to support their pioneering efforts."



ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: margaretwheatley.com. For more biographical information, see margaretwheatley.com/bio