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Leadership Lessons for The Real World

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People often comment that the new leadership I propose couldn't possibly work in "the real world." This "real world" demands efficiency and obedience and is managed by bureaucracy and governed by policies and laws. It is filled with people who do what they're told, who sit passively waiting for instructions and it relies on standard operating procedures for every situation, even when chaos erupts and things are out of control.

This real world was invented by Western thought. We believe that people, organizations and the world are machines, and we can organize massive systems to run like clockwork in a steady-state world. The leader's job is to create stability and control, because without human intervention, there is no hope for order. It is assumed that most people are dull, not creative, that people need to be bossed around, that new skills only develop through training. People are motivated using fear and rewards; internal motivators such as compassion and generosity are discounted.

This is not the real world. The *real* real world demands that we learn to cope with chaos, that we understand what motivates humans, that we adopt strategies and behaviors that lead to order, not more chaos.

Here is the real world described by new science. It is a world of interconnected networks, where slight disturbances in one part of the system create major impacts far from where they originate. In this highly sensitive system, the most minute actions can blow up into massive disruptions and chaos. But it is also a world that seeks order. When chaos erupts, it not only destroys the current structure, it also creates the conditions for new order to emerge. Change always involves a dark night when everything falls apart. Yet if this period of dissolution is used to create new meaning, then chaos ends and new order emerges.

This is a world that knows how to organize itself without command and control or charisma. Everywhere, life self-organizes as networks of relationships. When individuals discover a common interest or passion, they organize themselves and figure out how to make things happen. Self-organizing evokes creativity and leads to results, creating strong, adaptive systems. Surprising new strengths and capacities emerge.

In this world, the 'basic building blocks' of life are relationships, not individuals. Nothing exists on its own or has a final, fixed identity. We are all 'bundles of potential' (as one scientist described quantum particles.) Relationships evoke these potentials. We change as we meet different people or are in different circumstances.

In this historic moment, we live caught between the mechanical worldview that no longer works and a new paradigm that we fear to embrace. But this new paradigm comes with the promise that it can provide solutions to our most unsolvable challenges. To demonstrate this promise, I want to apply the lens of the new science to one of society's most compelling, real world challenges: How well we deal with natural and manmade disasters.

Leadership in Disasters: Learning from Katrina

Following any disaster, we see the best of human nature and the worst of bureaucracy. Headlines convey our frustration: "Poor Nations Say Much Charity Fails to Reach Victims," "System Failure: An investigation into what went so wrong in New Orleans," "Red Cross Under Investigation," "Congress probe examines what went wrong."

Other headlines speak to the valiancy of individuals and unofficial relief efforts: "Real-life Heroes," "Organized Churches are not an oxymoron," "No Red Cross, No Salvation Army or Federal Funds ... Just Friends."

Time Magazine relayed this story in September 2005 just weeks after hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. It illustrates the conflict between willing volunteers and government bureaucracy.

As flames blazed 400 miles away in New Orleans on Labor Day, about 600 firefighters from across the nation sat in an Atlanta hotel listening to a FEMA lecture on equal opportunity, sexual harassment and customer service. "Your job is going to be community relations," a FEMA official told them. . . "You'll be passing out FEMA pamphlets and our phone number."

The room, filled with many fire fighters who, at FEMA's request had arrived equipped with rescue gear, erupted in anger. "This is ridiculous," one yelled back. "Our fire departments and mayors sent us down here to save people, and you've got us doing this?" The FEMA official climbed atop a chair. . .and tried to restore order. "You are now employees of FEMA, and you will follow orders and do what you're told," he said, sounding more like the leader of an invading army than a rescue squad. . . .

[The firefighters] got tired of hanging around their hotel and returned home (*Time*, 2005, 39).

Although this story is appalling, it happens all the time in disasters. The first response of people is to do anything they possibly can to help, rescue and save other people. They gather resources, invent solutions on the spot, and work tirelessly for days on end. They don't think about risk or reward—these are spontaneous outpourings of compassion focused creatively and purposefully. A group of mid-level managers for Southwest Bell described how they felt responding to the Oklahoma City bombing: "There was no risk. It was already a disaster."

Yet these self-organized efforts are often hindered by officials who refuse their offers or who cite regulations or who insist that protocols and procedures be followed. This is not a criticism of individual officials—they themselves are imprisoned by their role and can't act independently. As *Time* Magazine described what happened with Katrina: ". . . at every level

of government there was uncertainty about who was in charge at crucial moments. Leaders were afraid to actually lead, reluctant to cost businesses money, break jurisdictional rules or spawn lawsuits. They were afraid, in other words, of ending up in an article just like this one."

As people argued about their roles and authority, no one saw the pattern of destruction and chaos that was unfolding. Officials responded only to disconnected bits of information that related to their office. No one seemed to understand the information they were getting or to notice that they were only seeing a small portion of what was happening. There were many instances when terrified, suffering people filled T.V. screens while on another screen government officials denied there were any serious problems.

Even before Katrina hit, key decision-makers at all levels of government displayed a curious blindness. Years of simulations and analyses had created clear descriptions of the damage that would result from a category 3 or 4 hurricane. The destruction of New Orleans was one of the top three potential catastrophes on FEMA's list. How is it possible that officials were blindsided and failed to prepare adequately for this eventuality? And why were they so slow to respond even as the National Weather Service mapped Katrina's approach with unerring accuracy? It was as if government officials at all levels could not comprehend the reality of what was about to happen. Either they discounted the information, failed to interpret it correctly, or duped themselves into believing "it can't happen here." This is a familiar yet troubling example of paradigm blindness, where people are unable to see information that threatens and disconfirms their worldview.

In the days after Katrina, this blindness was coupled with bureaucratic conditioning and cumbersome chains of command. Missteps, misperceptions and inaction cascaded through organizations, only creating more chaos.

However, all along the Gulf Coast, people self-organized with neighbors and strangers to help, save, and rescue people. The efforts of ham radio operators created an immediate and effective communication network that saved many lives. In one case, according to *Sky* magazine, a desperate family in New Orleans could not get any response from their local 911. They did, however, reach a relative a thousand miles away. He called *his* local 911, who then contacted a New Orleans ham operator, who then relayed the information to local people who then rescued the family.

Unlike official agencies, many of these operators prepared themselves ahead of time. They established themselves in safe, dry places before the storm struck. Acting independently, each with their own generator and transmitter, they wove a powerful network of communications. Their independence is what made them extremely resilient. If one person could no longer transmit, another picked it up quickly. They acted freely but from a clear shared intent. These are always the conditions that make it possible to bring order out of chaos.

Senior leaders find it difficult to act this spontaneously or independently. Any independent response is constrained by the need to maintain the power and policies of the organization. Paralyzed by formal operating procedures, it takes courage to forego these controls and do what you think might help. The Southwest Bell employees in Oklahoma leapt into action immediately after the bombing in large part because their leaders were out of town. When the

leaders returned, their staff told them: "It's good you weren't here. We could just take action." Although this is never what a leader wants to hear, these leaders were wise enough to know this was true and that their absence had created value.

Leaders who respond quickly ignore standard operating procedures. In the state of West Virginia, the governor didn't wait to be asked but immediately mobilized six C-130 cargo planes from the National Guard to go and pick up those needing evacuation. The planes were sent filled with supplies and were expected to return filled with people. The governor was there to welcome them when they arrived, but only three planes came back with people. FEMA had refused to let more people board the planes. About 400 evacuees benefited from this quickly mobilized relief effort. Even though West Virginia is one of the poorest states, they outdid their more affluent neighbors in providing help.

In contrast to the terrible failures of government, it was communities, individuals, and small groups who responded immediately to Katrina. One commentator writing in *The Nation* describes these responses as "acts of love in times of danger." The community of Ville Platte exemplified the generous self-organizing capacity that always appears in disasters. They organized their "home-made rescue and relief efforts" around the slogan "If not us, then who?" A community of 11,000 people, with an average yearly income of only \$5300 for the majority of its residents, was able to serve 5000 displaced and traumatized victims of Katrina, inviting them to share their homes and community not as refugees or evacuees, but as "company." Those with boats went to New Orleans to join "The Cajun Navy." They rescued people from rooftops, picked up the dead, transported the injured to trauma centers. They saw people from other communities doing the same thing. FEMA wasn't around, "That was it. Just us volunteers."

Ville Platte helped thousands without any Federal or Red Cross aid (they did try to reach the Red Cross, but gave up after 13 days of calling and no response.) Their success cannot be explained by the old mechanical paradigm, but is easily understood by the dynamics described in new science. We live in a world of relationships, where each event or person evokes new capacities. We live in a world where order emerges out of chaos if people are free to make their own decisions based on shared meaning and values. We live in a world where effective response doesn't require top-down leadership or an organization plan drawn up ahead of time. People self-organize in order to accomplish something that matters to them. As one community member said: "All of us know how to spontaneously cooperate. My God, we're always organizing christenings or family gatherings. So why do we need a lot of formal leadership?"

In a disaster, where quick response is demanded, formal organizations are incapacitated by the very means they normally use to get things done -- chains of command, designated leaders, policies, procedures, plans, regulations and laws. We *can* rely on human compassion, but we need to develop the means for official agencies to support and work with rather than resist the self-organizing capacity of people that always emerges in a disaster. Leaders need to have the freedom to make intelligent decisions based on their comprehension of the situation, not their understanding of policies and procedures. The formal leader's job is to ensure that the resources they control get to local groups as fast as possible. Leaders need to trust that people will invent their own solutions, that they'll make good use of the resources they provide. And leaders need to expect and value the unique and inventive responses

created in each community, rather than enforcing compliance to one-size-fits-all.

These radically different behaviors require that we free official leaders to act wisely and that they trust people to self-organize effective responses. How much more sad history do we have to repeat before we understand this? Let us hope we learn from Katrina that the only way to restore order out of chaos is to rely on people's intelligence, love, and capacity to self-organize to accomplish what they care about.

We also need to entrust local people with the official resources of money and materials for the rebuilding. When rebuilding is left to governments, outside contractors, and large non-profit organizations, progress gets mired down in regulations, time drags on, people's needs aren't served, and no one from the local community is satisfied with the results. Supporting initiatives where local people do the work sustains local cultures, recreates community cohesion, and is accomplished at amazing speed. The clean-up of Ground Zero was accomplished in record time, with no traditional New York and contractor politics; people worked overtime and risked their health to remove the debris of their shared tragedy.

This capacity to create solutions without traditional hierarchies or formal leadership is found in communities everywhere, not just those facing disasters. At The Berkana Institute, (which I co-founded in 1992) we work with the assumption that "the leaders we need are already here." We have discovered that even in the most economically poor communities in the world there is an abundance of leaders. These leaders work to strengthen their community's ability to be self-reliant by working with the wisdom and wealth already present in its people, traditions and environment (see www.berkana.org). A 2002 Ford Foundation report on leadership notes the same thing. "There is a sense among some in our country today that we are lacking inspirational leaders....Yet a closer look reveals that all over the nation groups of concerned citizens are working together, often at the local level, to solve tough social problems. These are the new leaders in America today."

We need to carefully consider what we are learning about leadership in these disaster-laden times. I hope we learn that we *can* rely on human caring, creativity, and compassion. We *can* rely on us 'bundles of potential' figuring out solutions, learning quickly, and surprising ourselves with new capacities. We *can* rely on people to self-organize quickly to achieve results important to them. Together, people act creatively, take risks, invent, console, inspire and produce. This is how life works. We can learn this from new science, or we can learn it from what happens everyday somewhere in the real world.



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