Berrett-Koehler Discussion Guide for
Leadership and The New Science
Discovering Order in a Chaotic World
by Margaret J. Wheatley

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   * Wheatley writes that she no longer believes:

   "...organizations are inherently unmanageable in this world of constant flux and unpredictability. Rather, I believe that our present ways of organizing are outmoded, and that the longer we remain entrenched in our old ways, the further we move form those wonderful breakthroughs in understanding that the world of science calls 'elegant'."

   * Identify two ways your immediate work has become unpredictable or in constant flux. Be specific. Is your experience of unpredictability common to others in your organization? How are you each coping with this?

   * Can you think of one process in your organization you would name as "outmoded"? Why is it outmoded?

   * Have you experienced new ways of identifying and addressing problems in the organization? Can you describe what those new ways were? How successful were they?

   * Wheatley explains that process structures are "things that sustain their identity over time yet are not locked rigidly into any one physical form." Another way to say this is that the end or goal stays clear, but the means to reach it keep changing. Can you identify a process structure in your organization.? What is it like to work in that way?

   * How do you explain the distinction between order and control? It may be helpful to brainstorm several examples of each (from your home life and/or your organizational life), then focus on one at a time, asking: What are the features of this example that make it an example of order or of control?

   * Wheatley writes:

   What is critical is the relationship created between two or more elements. Systems influence individuals, and individuals call forth systems. It is the relationship that evokes the present reality. Which potential becomes real depends on the people, the events, and the moment.

Prediction and replication are, therefore, impossible. While this is no doubt unsettling, it certainly makes for a more interesting world. People stop being predictable and become surprising. Each of us is a different person in different places. This doesn't make us inauthentic; it merely makes us quantum. Not only are we fuzzy; the whole universe is.

What do you think about this idea? How does the notion that "people stop being predictable and become surprising" relate to a contrary understanding that people need predictability in order to trust one another? What does trust look and feel like in a quantum world? What might be required for trust to be achieved in a quantum world?

* Who do you know (in your organization. or community) that is already working from this new perspective described by Wheatley: working within a network of relationships, in flexible structures, and in temporary forms? What do they say about this approach? What is it like to interact with her/him?

* What are the positive feedback loops in your organization? What kind of disequilibrium do they create? What is the response to this disequilibrium. Can you envision other responses?

* Select a passage (1 or 2 sentences) from pages 88-90 and talk about your response to the passage. Ask others from your organization what they think?

* What is information in your organization? Can you think of a metaphor that describes how it is treated? Where and when is it shared? Protected? Which kinds of information are valued? not valued?

* Wheatley writes:

Life uses information to organize matter into form, resulting in all the physical structures that we see. The role of information is revealed in the word itself: in-formation. We haven't noticed information as integral to the process of formation because all around us are physical forms that we can see and touch. These things beguile us: we confuse the system's physical manifestation with the processes that gave birth to it. Yet, the real system, that which endures and evolves, is a set of processes. When a new structure materializes, we know that the system has in-formed itself differently. . . .We need, therefore, to develop new approaches to information-not management but encouragement, not control, but genesis.

What would it mean to encourage information in your organization? What would encouragement look like? What do the risks look like as information flow is opened up?

* What makes your organization intelligent, as Wheatley describes it? What do you believe will increase your organization's level of intelligence?

* Can you identify one or two organizational experiences where open access to information contributed to people being able to self-organize effectively? How do the people involved with that experience talk about it?

* Wheatley writes:

Chaos is always partnered with order-a concept that contradicts our common definition of chaos-but until we could see it with computers, we saw only turbulence, energy without predictable form. Chaos is the last state before a system plunges into random behavior where no order exists. Not all systems move into chaos, but if system becomes unstable, it will move first into a period of oscillation, swinging back and forth between two different states. After this oscillating stage, the next state is chaos, and it is then that the wild gyrations begin. However, in the realm of chaos, where everything should fall apart, the strange attractor emerges, and we observe order, not chaos.

Consider the above paragraph carefully and then write your own response to it. Next, talk about it with another colleague. Finally, open up the group discussion: How might a collective understanding that chaos is partnered with order impact the organization?

* What are some of the challenges, pressing forces, that keep your organization or yourself from standing back to see the order, rather than the chaos? What would it take to make the order discernible to yourselves and to all members of your organization?

* What is it that would be so attractive that it would hold our behavior within a boundary and keep us from wandering into formlessness? It seems clear to me now that values create such attractors. But by far the most powerful force of attraction in organizations and in our individual lives is meaning (p.132).

Reflect personally on the following two questions: What called you here? What were you dreaming you might accomplish when you first came to work here? Share your reflections with another colleague and then open up the group discussion of meaning-full work. Notice the quality of the conversation you have with colleagues. Does it feel the same or different to talk about issues that are truly meaningful to us? And did any of your colleagues surprise you with their statements?

* Look at any planning, strategy or organizational design process you've engaged in as a process rather than as a product. How did the process you use affect your relationships, your understanding, and your teamwork? Aside from the product you created, did the process support and strengthen your organization, or did it weaken it in some way?

* How would you describe to a new learner what new science is? Do you believe that new science has helped you see anything differently?

* What are one or two key implications for your leadership that you've learned from reading Leadership and the New Science?