



Margaret J. Wheatley

Relationships: The Basic Building Blocks of Life

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The scientific search for the basic building blocks of life has revealed a startling fact: there are none. The deeper that physicists peer into the nature of reality, the only thing they find is relationships. Even sub-atomic particles do not exist alone. One physicist described neutrons, electrons, etc. as “. . . a set of relationships that reach outward to other things.” Although physicists still name them as separate, these particles aren’t ever visible until they’re in relationship with other particles. Everything in the Universe is composed of these “bundles of potentiality” that only manifest their potential in relationship.

We live in a culture that does not acknowledge this scientific fact. We believe wholeheartedly in the individual and build organizations based on this erroneous idea. We create org charts of separate boxes, with lines connecting the boxes that indicate reporting relationships and alleged channels of communication. But our neatly drawn organizations are as fictitious as building blocks are to physicists. The only form of organization used on this planet is the network—webs of interconnected, interdependent relationships. This is true for human organizations as well. Whatever boxes we stuff staff into, people always reach out to those who will give them information, be their allies, offer support or cheer them up. Those lines and boxes are imaginary. The real organization is always a dense network of relationships.

The sad irony of reorganizations

Communities of Practice (CofPs) are a powerful example of such networks. These self-organized, non-mandated relationships are created by people engaged in similar work. Staff form these relationships to become better at what they do. From these self-created networks, new practices and knowledge emerge and often develop into the core competencies of the organization. These skills develop not through training or performance reviews, but because people find each other and form good relationships. In those relationships, just as with elementary particles, potentials manifest and new capabilities are born.

Reorganizations always create a host of unintended consequences because leaders either ignore or are blind to these and other networks. Strategists focus on rearranging the boxes of the organization without realizing that they’re ripping apart the networks of relationships employees constructed to help them perform better. After a high-level corporate reorganization, one senior manager I know went to her CEO and told her she’d need three months to recreate the relationships that were essential to her global team’s performance. Most leaders, however, don’t notice the relationship-havoc they wreak with every reorganization. They blindly tear apart all those networks of relationships that employees

carefully wove together. The sad irony is that capacity is reduced by reorganizations, no matter their stated goal of improving performance.

Many of our frequent and recurring failures in organizations are a consequence of not comprehending the importance of relationships. We approach major organizational issues--mergers, accountability, knowledge management, implementation and change—as if they were engineering issues. If we develop the right plan, work flows, job descriptions and project deadlines, everything will roll out smoothly. This mechanical approach doesn't work with humans, because (big news!) humans are not machines. We've developed quite a robust mythology that humans are machines who can be bossed around, told what to do, given a minor part to play in a large enterprise, and enticed with external rewards. This is becoming ever more common these days. I hear many people asking of their employers: "Why can't they just treat us like human beings?"

What even money can't buy

Since we're not machines, who are we? In my own work in many different cultures, I've discovered that we're a wonderful species. There are common human yearnings: We want to be together; we want to learn; we hope to contribute to others; we want our children to be healthy and have better lives. These desires are inherent, they do not require external motivators. But sadly, in this time of fractured relationships and human horrors, it's difficult to see these traits. However, these positive traits are absolutely necessary if we're to work well together. If we fail to deny them, or provoke other behaviors with external rewards, we'll continue to struggle to motivate employees, worker disengagement (now at historic highs) will continue to escalate, and we'll become more cynical and disgusted with each other.

These basic human qualities are evident every time there's a disaster. While official agencies and government struggle to get their act together, neighbors and strangers rush in to provide assistance and comfort. In moments of tragedy and loss, kindness is our normal response. We reach out to find one another. Is it possible that such powerful relationships are available at work? (I had a client who, after experiencing the Oklahoma City bombing, asked: "Why are we at our best in the worst conditions, and at our worst in the best conditions?")

Human kindness manifests only in relationship. Archbishop Tutu says: "We can be human only together." If we're to evoke kindness, intelligence, accountability and learning in our organizations, we need to promote healthy relationships. So much of what we do as leaders, even actions that are well-intended, works to disrupt relationships. Here's a story I've seen played out many times. A boss decides to reward individual staff for their contributions by giving generous bonuses or pay raises. Yet the employees reject these because they're aware of how individual rewards will impact their relationships with colleagues. I've seen this happen many times, even amongst employees who really needed the money. The most startling example I witnessed was in England, where a leader decided to reward outstanding ideas with up to \$25,000 bonuses. After a few months, his employees asked him to disband the program because it was interfering with their relationships. When he recovered from his shock, he asked them what they wanted instead of the money. They asked for simple things-- a thank you, a night at the pub, a box of chocolates.

The leader's work: Reweaving relationships

I picture you reading this shaking your head in disbelief, or quickly noting how this could never apply to your association. But I've seen this response often enough to realize that employees are far more sensitive to their relationships at work than leaders are. In survey after survey of what people value about their jobs, good relationships with colleagues is always one of the top three motivations. (Pay and money are far down the list. Other top motivators are the ability to learn, and the ability to contribute.)

As leaders, it's important to notice where you reward individual performance, or use competition to drive results, or remain blind to or interfere with the networks that staff weave together. How are you taking advantage of the capacities that develop from good relationships? Have you experienced times when people came together and surprised you with new competencies that didn't exist before they came together?

A simple means to support and develop relationships is to create time to think together as staff. Time to think together has disappeared in most organizations. This loss has devastated relationships and led to increasing distrust and disengagement. Yet when a regular forum exists where staff can share their work challenges, everything improves. People learn from each other, find support, create solutions, and gradually discover new capabilities from this web of trusting relationships. This is no surprise. We're all "bundles of potentiality" that only manifest in relationship.



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