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## The Thought Leader Interview: Meg Wheatley

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BY ART KLEINER

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**W**ith her first book, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe* (Berrett-Koehler, 1992), Margaret J. (Meg) Wheatley began developing a body of work around the links between organizational learning, innovative leadership, and such fields of thought as chaos theory, quantum physics, and neuroscience. Around the same time, she co-founded the Berkana Institute, a U.S.-based not-for-profit organization, dedicated to experimental ef-

forts to build healthy communities around the world, often in highly impoverished areas with many serious challenges. During the next 15 years, Wheatley's views on communities, and her experience with innovative management practice, made her a central figure in a wide network of pioneers in organizational learning and change.

Then, starting in the mid-2000s and accelerating with the economic crisis of 2008, Wheatley noticed new levels of anxiety among her friends, clients, and business ac-

quaintances. Even the most performance-oriented innovative leaders, when confronted with the harshness of global competition or other severe business pressures, felt compelled to cut back their participative management practices — often at the expense of profitability and growth.

Wheatley responded by turning simultaneously inward and outward. During a 15-month period, she produced two very different books. The first, *Perseverance* (Berrett-Koehler, 2010), is a small, personal book, a meditation on tenacity in the face of adversity. It is written explicitly for people dedicated to organizational change, who have suddenly found their work much more difficult, and who are looking for ways to sustain their effort and their peace of mind.

*Walk Out Walk On*, coauthored with Deborah Frieze (a former co-president of the Berkana Institute), is subtitled *A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* (Berrett-Koehler, 2011). It describes seven innovative leadership and community-building initiatives: a self-organizing university in a highland Mexican village, where students build small-scale technologies such as bicycle-pow-

ered water pumps as a means of local empowerment; a Brazilian institute that sets up “30-day games” in which players come together to improve conditions in debilitated neighborhoods; a Zimbabwean village dedicated to self-sustaining agriculture in the midst of politically created famine; a remarkable network of people transforming health-care, education, and social service institutions in Columbus, Ohio; and similarly groundbreaking initiatives in South Africa, India, and Greece. The organizers of all these endeavors walked out of restrictive or confining ways of thinking, and Wheatley argues that anyone can do the same — which might mean changing jobs in some cases, but always means shifting perspective within one’s current situation.

We conducted this interview on several occasions in 2011: first by telephone, then at the annual summer workshops of the Authentic Leadership in Action (ALIA) Institute (where we both teach), and finally at the Cape Cod Institute (where Wheatley leads a seminar each summer). Wheatley’s theme, the value of conscious perseverance, may particularly resonate with *strategy+business* readers — many of

whom face the challenge of managing high-commitment, high-performance enterprises in the face of intensive competitive pressure and rising uncertainty.

**S+B: Why is perseverance important right now?**

**WHEATLEY:** Because so many innovative leaders are struggling to do good, meaningful work in a time of overbearing bureaucracy and failing solutions. Everyone is working harder, and in most cases, in greater isolation. The current pace of work and life, along with increasing fear and anxiety, make it more difficult to have the energy and enthusiasm to keep going. Years of good efforts have been swept away by events beyond anyone’s control, such as the economic crisis or the natural disasters of the past decade.

And decisions made by politicians and senior executives have been very damaging to those long-term efforts: They capriciously eliminate or withdraw funding for programs and processes that have proven successful. It is a very difficult time for innovative leaders.

I notice that when I ask people how much time they spend thinking together with colleagues, reflecting

on what they’ve learned from their most recent efforts, they just stare back blankly at me. It’s getting hard to remember what it felt like to manage reflectively — to take time to figure things out together and to learn from experience. With our frantic pace, we’re screaming past one another (and more easily provoked and angered by each other), so we’re losing the one resource, community, that gets humans through hard times. For me, community — people working together and knowing that others are there to support them — is a critically important but largely invisible resource. In most situations (think of natural disasters, family crises, wars, and dislocations), community is the only thing that gets us through. In a time like this, of economic and emotional distress, every organization needs leaders who can help people regain their capacity, energy, and desire to contribute. And this is only accomplished when people work together in community, not in isolation.

But community is hard to find in most organizations. Not only do many leaders deny that this capacity is important, but they’re actually destroying it through their current management approaches.

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**S+B:** For example...?

**WHEATLEY:** I have worked with many forward-thinking business leaders over the years. Now, I notice they're increasingly frustrated. They can no longer motivate people in ways that they know will work. Instead, they're being driven by imperatives from their boards and bosses. They find themselves doing things that feel meaningless or that waste time — or that they know from experience won't lead anywhere good. They have to implement continuous cutbacks, and to produce more results with fewer resources. They feel terribly pressured yet believe they have no choice but to respond to these demands.

One of my good friends led the turnaround of his company, one of the world's top brands. He did it by engaging people: inculcating a strong sense of values, giving people latitude to make decisions and design projects, ensuring that learning was prevalent. Now that he's retired, that's all been destroyed. The new leadership is highly restrictive and controlling, using fear as a primary motivator. As a result, the company has been struggling in this current economic climate. And of course it becomes a reinforcing cycle:

The worse the financials, the stricter the controls become.

In most companies, we do not have (and I believe won't have for the foreseeable future) the money to fund the work that we have to do. Leaders have two choices. One, they can tap the invisible resource of people who become self-motivated when invited to engage together. This approach has well-documented results in higher productivity, innovation, and motivation, but it requires a shift from a fear-based approach to a belief in the capacity of most people to contribute, to be creative, and to be motivated internally. Alternatively, they can continue to slash and burn, tightening controls, and using coercive methods to enforce the cuts. This destroys capacity, yet it is the more common approach these days.

**S+B:** Some might argue that these cuts are reshaping the organization back down to what it should have been in the first place.

**WHEATLEY:** I would love it if that were true. Executives could be using this turbulence to shift their business models, redesign their HR systems, change how they motivate people, and rethink their own lead-

ership. But I don't see that happening. Instead, too many people report that mean-spiritedness is on the rise in their companies. And there seems to be a growing climate of disrespect for individual experience and competence — hiring and firing decisions are made on the basis of finding the cheapest source of labor (and I include executives here). If someone can be found to do the job for less money, because they have less experience and fewer skills, that person gets hired.

What makes one salesperson more successful than another? It's not the reward and motivation system. It has much more to do with complex factors, like the relationships each person has, the ways they listen, their ability to be self-motivated. Instead of paying attention to these factors, companies are simplifying the criteria and acting as if anybody can do any job, that people are easily replaceable.

If you look at job satisfaction surveys, or you listen to people talk, you realize how this business climate has affected most organizations. Management has gone backward from the 1980s and '90s, when people routinely talked about workforce engagement and intrinsic

motivators. Instead, people are demoralized, disaffected, disillusioned. They're afraid to talk openly about how they feel, because they want to hold on to their jobs. There's a

ronment. Nothing is working as it should. A friend of mine quoted a highly placed oil executive, who whispered to her after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill: "None of us can figure out how this happened." And I often hear descriptions of complex problems and crises described as, "We're in new territory here. We've never been here before."

Around the time I began writing *Perseverance*, I read a book by Laurence Gonzales called *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and*

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lot less freedom to walk out in this economy.

**S+B:** Where does the fear and anxiety come from? Does it have to do with uncertainty, fear of failure, losing jobs?

**WHEATLEY:** It's all of that. People are anxious because these times warrant anxiety. They feel pushed aside and powerless. And then there's a more personal fear, not as easy to name. Leaders are afraid that they don't know how to solve the problems they face. The old models of command and control — budgeting, strategy setting, forecasting, incentives, evaluations — are not effective in a changing, volatile envi-

*Why: True Stories of Miraculous Endurance and Sudden Death* [W.W. Norton, 2003]. Gonzalez says that when people are truly lost in the wilderness, they go through predictable stages. First, they deny they're lost; they keep doing what they've always done but with a greater sense of urgency. Then, when they begin to realize that they're lost, they search frantically for any shred of evidence that would indicate that they're not. Next they deteriorate, both physically and mentally. Their frantic search for the familiar, and their inability to recognize that their current maps aren't working, leads to the ultimate moment when they realize they are close to death. If

they don't acknowledge that they're lost and that they need new information to construct an accurate read on their situation, they will die.

When I read this, I thought, "That's exactly what I see in organizations (and in our political leaders)." Too many leaders fail to realize that the old ways, their mental maps, aren't giving them the information they need. But instead of acknowledging that, they push on more frantically, desperate to have the old ways work. When human beings work from fear and panic, we lose nearly all of our best reasoning capacities. We can't see patterns, think about the future, or make moral judgments.

This leads to a terrible cycle, a death spiral. People in fear look for someone to blame; so leaders blame their staff, and staff blame their leaders. A climate of blame leads to self-protective behaviors. People take fewer risks; creativity and participation disappear. New rules and regulations appear, with unintended but predictable consequences: more staff disengagement, more wasted time, more chaos. People spend all their time trying to cope or writing reports to confirm that they aren't to blame. When I'm speaking with a

group and comment about the number of reports people have to write today, or the number of measures they have to track, the audience members roll their eyes and groan.

In addition, the opportunity is lost to cultivate the intelligence, contribution, and engagement of people throughout the organization. When the next crisis comes, people will be less prepared; they'll leave it to the leader to solve it. When that doesn't happen, they'll kick out the leader for not being heroic enough as an individual. This pattern is visible in the statistics on CEO churn that *strategy+business* publishes. Over the

that it's their job to keep things in control, but when they use fear as a motivator, they shut down people's brains and, as leaders, create the conditions for everyone to fail.

**S+B: What's the alternative?**

**WHEATLEY:** When you're lost in the wilderness, the only way to survive is to admit that you're lost — and to stop looking for signs that might confirm that you know where you are. Your old ways of doing things won't get you out of this situation. Once you realize this, you can look clearly around you, and seek information that will help you rethink

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**"When leaders use fear as a motivator, they shut down people's brains and create the conditions for everyone to fail."**

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past 10 years, the average tenure of CEOs has gotten shorter. [See "CEO Succession 2010: The Four Types of CEOs," by Ken Favaro, Per-Ola Karlsson, and Gary L. Neilson, *s+b*, Summer 2011.] I have a lot of sympathy for leaders who think

what to do. You don't have to change the situation you're in; you have to change your mind about it.

For any situation where the old maps are failing, you need to call together everyone who might have information that's needed to construct

a new map. This includes people at all levels of the system — anyone who plays a role that's relevant. Especially as you face increasingly complex problems that have no easy answers, you need to be brave enough to seek out perspectives from all parts of the system. It takes a lot of courage for a leader to say, "Our problems were caused by complex interactions. I don't know what to do, but I know we can figure it out together."

**S+B:** Isn't this problem limited to the U.S., Europe, and Japan?

**WHEATLEY:** Even in other countries, uncertainty is rearing its ugly head. A colleague in Australia invited me to speak at a forum for CEOs, built around reflection and long-term issues. I said, "You know, in the U.S., you wouldn't get anyone to attend." He said that Australia was different; they had survived the global financial crisis pretty well and didn't share our despair or cynicism. Then came the floods, hurricanes, fires, and more economic turbulence. He wrote me back and canceled, saying that in this new, crisis-stricken environment, none of the CEOs he knew had any time for reflection, either. They were now

in panic mode and resorting to command-and-control-style management. A very forward-thinking Australian CEO told me that he's never experienced such fear-based

century Sufi mystic Rumi: "Sit down and be quiet. You are drunk, and this is the edge of the roof."

There are always choices. Everything in our world — what we

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**"We are at a turning point. Either we continue to descend into incompetence or we see new ways of thinking and acting."**

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and risk-averse behaviors as those that now characterize Australian leadership, in both business and government.

**S+B:** If the situation is this grim and pressured, how can you expect people to rethink the way they operate?

**WHEATLEY:** It's more interesting to reverse that question. Because the situation is so grim and pressured, why aren't we rethinking how we operate? We are at a turning point. Either we continue to descend into incompetence and failing solutions or we realize where we are and see new ways of thinking and acting. One of my favorite quotes, applicable to this moment, is from the 13th

do, who we like, what we dislike — is a choice. When we realize this, and start to act on it, we regain our freedom and control. That doesn't mean quitting your job out of frustration. It means thinking more deeply about the choices you have made, the choices you will make in the future, what you stand for, and your choice to persevere.

Months after Hurricane Ike devastated Houston in September 2008, I received a text message from a friend who is CEO of a large nonprofit there. She was sitting in a meeting with government officials from FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency]. The level of bureaucracy was heartbreaking



and infuriating; people whose homes had been hit hard by the storm were still living with nothing, and nobody knew when the aid that was promised would come (it didn't arrive for 16 months). Her text message said: "Every day I make a choice not to give up."

For me, that's the essence of perseverance. Day by day, situation by situation, you become more conscious of your choices. Sometimes the best response is to keep going, as my friend did. Other times the best choice is to withdraw for a while, reassess the complexity of the situation, and see what will serve your cause, your people, and yourself. You don't persevere by constantly pushing your head against a wall or by burning out.

It's also comforting to remember that perseverance is the story of humankind. We all come from ancestors who persevered. We wouldn't be here without them. It's our turn now.

**S+B:** If *Perseverance* is about being lost, then *Walk Out Walk On* is about being found — the community-building efforts that you and your co-author, Deborah Frieze, have worked with. Where did the title come from?

**WHEATLEY:** It was coined by a group of students who left high school in India. The school officials had called them "dropouts." They responded, "No, we're not failures. The education system is the failure. We know we can contribute more and learn more if we leave this school." They called themselves "walk-outs." A bit later, they added "walk on" — meaning that after you walk out, you have to move forward and find a place where you can make a difference. The full phrase is a declaration of commitment to your own potential.

Often, when people walk out of a difficult job or position, they're full of fear. They don't know where they're going. But they know that if they stay, they'll continue to lose their self-confidence; they'll continue to shrink and wither. I met a woman who worked for one of the large pharma companies; they'd been through three major mergers during her 12-year tenure. One day she noticed that her job title was now listed as "income-generating unit" on a budget sheet. In other words, she was regarded as a commodity. She thought, "This isn't the same company I was working for before the mergers." When she re-



signed, she told her boss that these transactional values were the reason. He responded, “Don’t leave; we’ll pay you more.”

Walking out of a limiting situation doesn’t necessarily mean leaving the company — or even leaving your position. It means discarding some of the prevailing beliefs that blind you to the capacity that’s in yourself and other people. And opening yourself up to more contribution, intelligence, and capability.

**S+B:** Can you give an example?

**WHEATLEY:** In Columbus, Ohio, several years ago, a group of leaders of local healthcare institutions came together, along with some community members, with the idea that they could rethink their purpose — from the zero-sum game of treating the sick, to a system that would promote optimal health. The convener was Phil Cass, the CEO of the Columbus Medical Association, which is a physicians’ professional group that includes a medical foundation and a free clinic. To bring all these people together, he had to shift his own internal construct of what it meant to be an effective leader. He was already a skilled, traditional heroic leader; now he became the kind

of leader whose first responsibility is not to command others, but to ensure that they feel invited and welcome, so they can participate in making something happen that none of them could do alone.

Under his leadership, more and more people in Columbus became trained in productive conversational processes that include all relevant stakeholders in figuring out problems and solutions. This form of leadership continued to spread into many types of institutions — the Ohio Food Bank, hospitals, Ohio State University, even to a federal initiative on homelessness.

Another example is the “Warriors Without Weapons” program that the Elos Institute initiated in Brazil and has spread around the world. In most aid efforts for people on the margins of society, there’s an assumption that their poverty includes a lack of capacity to help themselves. But Elos gathers people together to “play a game,” as they call it. The game is actually an experience of people coming together for days or weeks, outsiders working side by side with residents, to do extraordinarily difficult work, such as cleaning up and rebuilding neighborhoods. They invoke the spirit of

play (which is different from fun) to get people past their fear and preconceptions. The participants take risks because it’s “just a game”; they compete with one another; there’s an engaged quality to their relationships. In this way, very difficult work gets done that would otherwise be overwhelming.

In *Walk Out Walk On* we tell the story of the cleanup of a large, waste-ridden, abandoned warehouse that people in the neighborhood wanted to convert to a community space. Those engaged in the cleanup could spend only 15 minutes each day inside this hellhole; they had no idea if that would be enough to accomplish their goal, but they did realize that had they worked any longer in such terrible conditions, they would have been overwhelmed and given up. And they did accomplish their goal within 30 days!

**S+B:** These sound like glimpses of a very engaged way of taking initiative and conducting work. But you would be unlikely to see it within the walls of, say, a major consumer products or energy company.

**WHEATLEY:** No, I disagree. Good leadership can be found in pockets within any large organization. I’ve

dubbed them islands of possibility in some of my past work. The leaders of these pockets routinely meet goals, motivate employees, and achieve high levels of safety and productivity. But, ironically, they never change the behavior of the majority of the organization — even though these few islands reach or exceed the goals set by senior management. There's a lot of evidence that innovators get pushed to the margins. You'd expect that they would be rewarded, promoted, and given the responsibility of teaching everyone else how to do the same. But instead, they're ignored or invisible. Sometimes their bosses acknowledge their success, but offhandedly say: "I don't know how you got these results." And they don't show any interest in learning about it. I think of this as an autoimmune response. Bosses don't want to know how you achieved your results if it's contrary to the way the system works (or doesn't work). If they became genuinely interested in these innovative approaches, they'd have to change themselves.

At the same time, most of us know from our own experience what kind of leadership works best. I've asked people of many ages, in many cultures, to talk about a leader they were happy to follow and what made that leader memorable. Several factors, such as integrity, a sense of humor, and a clear direction and vision, often come up. But the most common characteristic of good, memorable leaders is that they create the conditions for people to be en-

couraged, challenged, and supported, to become stronger and more capable as they do their work. The descriptions are always the same: "The leader thought about me and trusted me (just as I trusted him or her). He or she believed that I was capable and supported and encouraged me to stretch and excel; the leader was not focused on making himself or herself look good."

I've heard this in so many different cultures that it's convinced me that there's only one type of leadership that people respond to positively. If we want people to contribute; if we want them to get smarter as they solve each problem or go through each crisis; if we want to develop our organizations to be responsive, smart, and enduring, then we have to change the way we lead. We cannot continue to lead from fear and control. People will step up to today's challenges only if they are led with encouragement and support, and trusted to contribute.

Islands of possibility are important because leaders have to intentionally create places where people can contribute. Part of a leader's work is to create firewalls to keep out the bureaucratic, change-resistant forces of the larger organization, so that staff feels free enough to innovate and create. It's no surprise to me that inside these islands, people meet plan, become more intelligent and responsive to demands and crises, and generally become more capable.

And sadly, it's no longer surprising to me that the larger organiza-

tion ignores these islands of possibility. It's a terrible waste but it's just the way it is. I wrote *Perseverance* so people who are doing things right and making a real contribution could keep going in the face of this dynamic of being pushed to the margins, ignored, or misunderstood.

Those of us who are in that position have to expect that we will encounter a lot of difficulties. We'll feel a lot of strong emotions such as anger or grief; our good work will go unrewarded. Once we know that these things will happen, we can more consciously choose our responses. We can choose to keep going, to influence where we can, to make a difference in the lives of our staff, and to be the kind of leader that people remember with gratitude. We can become skilled at negotiating within those large, frightened bureaucracies so that people can still do good, meaningful work inside them.

**S+B:** In a talk at the ALIA Institute last summer, you said that the only leaders who succeed are those who have some kind of personal spiritual discipline.

**WHEATLEY:** Yes, I'm convinced of this. By discipline, I don't mean meaningless, repetitive, boring practice. That disables people. Nor do I mean religious practice per se. I mean some regular activity that leads you to reflect on your struggles and challenges in a larger context. For one of my friends, Alcoholics Anonymous serves that role. For others, it can be prayer, meditation,

or time in nature. I'm not sure about running or other physical exercise, because I think a practice has to connect you to the rest of life — to take you out of the false perception that you are the center of the universe.

Without that discipline, I don't see how leaders can maintain their integrity and focus. The prevailing mass culture has schooled a lot of people to follow their passion, find their calling in life, and do what they love. Then they encounter setbacks, failures, disappointments, and very subtle impediments — for instance, their loved ones say, "Why are you working so hard here?" Many people quit. That's what's essential about discipline. You do it day after day, even when it's boring, because you believe ultimately it will lead to a good outcome. The fruit of all this effort becomes apparent only after a long time when it seems not to be going anywhere. Work can begin with passion, but it's only through discipline that people can persevere.

Brain research is also clear on why we need quiet time, especially when under stress. This spring, I went on a long, solo retreat. I didn't interact with anyone except my teacher. I witnessed my own mental capacities coming back in full flower. I regained great powers of memory and concentration. I could understand complex ancient texts. I was so mentally alive. Now that I've returned to my overly distracted life, I am back to old ways; I'll walk across a room and not remember

what I went looking for. But now I know that my memory loss isn't caused by aging or deterioration. The cause is distraction, and working in an anxious world. I can regain my mental capacities if I regularly take the time to slow down and focus.

**S+B:** Not everyone is willing to make that kind of commitment.

**WHEATLEY:** One question I ask everyone is, Who do you choose to be as a leader? What is the contribution you hope to make?

It turns out that very few people answer that they care most about success and personal survival. They talk about doing the right thing for the people around them and helping them get through this time.

This question, Who do we choose to be as leaders? is important because it acknowledges the historical moment we're in. We have to become conscious and make choices about what we value; is it just our quarterly P&L or short-term results? It would be easier to articulate the more noble contributions we want to make if we were in a more dramatic crisis, like another world war. But in this crisis, we have to find the deeper meaning ourselves. I am finding that many people want to be called on to contribute to something larger than themselves right now, to walk out of fear-based leadership practices — and for me, that's the best motivation possible. +

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