

The Long View
Margaret J. Wheatley
Sundance, Utah

Wheatley is a speaker and consultant on systems thinking, theories of change, leadership, and learning organizations as well as the author of *Leadership and the New Science*. In 1992, she cofounded the Berkana Institute, a global charitable leadership foundation that promotes learning and cooperation between communities in developing countries.

Through your work with the Berkana Institute, what have you learned about leadership around the world?

I have found there to be a generic form of leadership that people independent of culture, age, or ethnicity really want: a leader who is focused on others, has real integrity, walks the talk, is a good listener and enjoyable to be around, and has vision and engages everyone in making that vision real.

In contrast, what I see in our large organizations is that there has been a devastating return to command and control after 9/11. The misconception seems to be that in high-risk times we need high-control leadership. I have done a lot of work with the U.S. Army and heard from soldiers who have been in Iraq and Afghanistan what leadership is really like in high-risk situations such as battle—it's completely self-organized and dependent on the decisions of every soldier. I don't know when we're finally going to understand that people are the ultimate resource, and that the only way to succeed is to engage the intelligence of everyone.

Berkana's role is to find pre-existing, community-based organizations and people who are already leading in a participative way and dealing with the issues that are most relative to their communities. We began from India and southern parts of Africa. Now we're very active in Mexico and Latin America and are looking to expand our efforts to southern Asia. In Brazil, we found a long-term organization that is doing architectural reconstruction in the poorest of poor neighborhoods. In Mexico, one group is grinding chocolate using old bicycles, and another group in India is making solar cookers from thrown-away windshields.

We provide the means for them to learn from one another. We call it trans-local learning, whereby people are deeply embedded in their communities doing local work but come together once a year. This is not about formal leaders but leadership that comes by stepping forward when you realize you must take action. For me, it's also the leadership of the future.

What advice would you offer for women striving to reach leadership positions?

I started working with women's leadership in the 1970s and I'm appalled at the lack of change. American women, I feel, are very oppressed and exhausted and are not really tuned in to how important their leadership is. We are told that it's our fault if we don't make it, and that the system is open and equitable.

I'm involved in the Women's Leadership Revival Tour, in which we try to inspire women of all varieties to understand the role that they play in the world and their

communities. [My advice to them] is not to sell themselves short as the kind of leaders they can be. I think it's important for women to realize that it's not about fitting in and doing it the guys' way. It's about having a strong belief in their feminine aspects and skills, thinking about the future, development, growth, and creation, and having a patient, long-term focus. We have to realize that those traits that have been maligned, criticized, and beaten out of us, are exactly the skills that the whole world needs.

Recently you have written about communities of practice. What role will they play in the future of learning?

They are how the world changes—through small groups that are learning to do things differently. Change always starts at the local level, and for local changes to be powerful they have to be connected.

Take Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for the Green Belt movement in East Africa, which has planted 30 million trees in more than 20 countries. She started by planting seven trees, of which five died. How do you go from two surviving trees to 30 million? By starting from very small beginnings and refining the practices, community by community, until at some point they emerge into monumental change. So we don't have to change the world through our formal leaders, which is a good thing because they are so occupied these days anyway.

What was your first job and what lesson did you take away from it?

My first job was with the Peace Corps in Korea from 1966 to 1968, teaching conversational English at a boys' high school. Learning to live in a completely different culture, in great poverty—it was only 11 years after the war—created a level of confidence in me that I could go anywhere and meet with anyone.

You own horses. With all the traveling you do, when do you find time to ride them?

I used to have good time to ride when I wasn't traveling this much. In fact, my horses are now working with a therapist who uses them to help emotionally disturbed people, so they are being good, useful contributors. I still dream of having a ranch again and having more horses and animals. Now I ride about once every two months—in other words, it's improving.