

How Is Your Leadership Changing by Margaret Wheatley

I'm sad to report that in the past few years, ever since uncertainty became our insistent 21st century companion, leadership has taken a great leap backwards to the familiar territory of command and control. Some of this was to be expected, because humans usually default to the known when confronted with the unknown. Some of it was a surprise, because so many organizations had focused on innovation, quality, learning organizations, and human motivation. How did they fail to learn that whenever you impose control on people and situations, you only succeed in turning people into non-creative, shut-down and cynical workers?

The destructive impact of command and control

The dominance of command and control is having devastating impacts. There has been a dramatic increase in worker disengagement, few organizations are succeeding at solving problems, and leaders are being scapegoated and fired.

Most people associate command and control leadership with the military. Years ago, I worked for the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. I, like most people, thought I'd see command and control leadership there. The great irony is that the military learned long ago that, if you want to win, you have to engage the intelligence of everyone involved in the battle. The Army had a visual reminder of this when, years ago, they developed new tanks and armored vehicles that traveled at unprecedented speeds of fifty miles an hour. When first used in battle during the first Gulf War, several times troops took off on their own, speeding across the desert at high speed. However, according to Army doctrine, tanks and armored vehicles must be accompanied by a third vehicle that literally is called the Command and Control vehicle. This vehicle could only travel at twenty miles an hour. (They corrected this problem.)

For me, this is a familiar image—people in the organization ready and willing to do good work, wanting to contribute their ideas, ready to take responsibility, and leaders holding them back, insisting that they wait for decisions or instructions. The result is dispirited employees and leaders wondering why no one takes responsibility or gets engaged anymore. In these troubled, uncertain times, we don't need more command and control; we need better means to engage everyone's intelligence in solving challenges and crises as they arise.

We know how to create smart, resilient organizations

We do know how to create workplaces that are flexible, smart, and resilient. We have known for more than half a century that engaging people, and relying on self-managed teams, are far more productive than any other form of organizing. In fact, productivity gains in self-managed work environments are at minimum thirty-five percent higher than

in traditionally managed organizations. And workers know this to be true when they insist that they can make smarter decisions than those delivered from on high.

With so much evidence supporting the benefits of participation, why isn't every organization using self-managed teams to cope with turbulence? Instead, organizations increasingly are cluttered with control mechanisms that paralyze employees and leaders alike. Where have all these policies, procedures, protocols, laws, and regulations come from? And why do we keep creating more, even as we suffer from the terrible consequences of over-control?

Even though worker capacity and motivation are destroyed when leaders choose power over productivity, it appears that bosses would rather be in control than have the organization work well. And this drive for power is supported by the belief that the higher the risk, the more necessary it is to hold power tightly. What's so dangerous about this belief is that just the opposite is true. Successful organizations, including the Military, have learned that the higher the risk, the more necessary it is to engage everyone's commitment and intelligence. When leaders hold onto power and refuse to distribute decision-making, they create slow, unwieldy, Byzantine systems that only increase risk and irresponsibility. We never effectively control people or situations by these means, we only succeed in preventing intelligent, fast responses.

The personal impact on leaders' morale and health is also devastating. When leaders take back power, when they act as heroes and saviors, they end up exhausted, overwhelmed, and deeply stressed. It is simply not possible to solve singlehandedly the organization's problems; there are just too many of them! One leader who led a high risk chemical plant spent three years creating a highly motivated, self-organizing workforce. He described it this way: "Instead of just me worrying about the plant, I now have nine hundred people worrying. And coming up with solutions I never could have imagined."

Sometimes leaders fail to involve staff out of some warped notion of kindness. They don't include people, they don't share their worries, because they don't want to add to their stress. But such well-meaning leaders only create more problems. When leaders fail to engage people in finding solutions to problems that effect them, staff don't thank the leader for not sharing the burden. Instead, they withdraw, criticize, worry and gossip. They interpret the leader's exercise of power as a sign that he/she doesn't trust them or their capacities.

Assessing changes in your leadership

With no time to reflect on how they might be changing, with no time to contemplate whether their present leadership is creating an effective and resilient organization, too many leaders drift into command and control, wondering why nothing seems to be working, angry that no one seems motivated any more.

If you are feeling stressed and pressured, please know that this is how most leaders feel these days. Yet it is important that you take time to notice how your own leadership style has changed in response to the pressures of this uncertain time. Otherwise you may end up disappointed and frustrated, leaving a legacy of failure rather than of real results.

Some questions to think about

Here are questions to help you notice if your leadership is slipping into command and

control. If you feel courageous, circulate these questions and talk about them with staff.

- 1) What's changed in the way you make decisions? Have you come to rely on the same group of advisors? Do you try to engage those who have a stake in the decision?
- 2) What's happening to staff motivation? How does it compare to a few years ago?
- 3) How often do you find yourself invoking rules, policies or regulations to get staff to do something?
- 4) How often do you respond to a problem by developing a new policy?
- 5) What information are you no longer sharing with staff? Where are you more transparent?
- 6) What's the level of trust in your organization right now? How does this compare to two to three years ago?
- 7) When people make mistakes, what happens? Are staff encouraged to learn from their experience? Or is there a search for someone to blame?
- 8) What's the level of risk-taking in the organization? How does this compare to two to three years ago?
- 9) How often have you reorganized in the past few years? What have you learned from that?
- 10) How's your personal energy and motivation these days? How does this compare to a few years ago?