

# The Essence of Leadership and the Power of Networks: An Interview with Margaret Wheatley

Alexander Schieffer

*The interview took place in November 2002 during the Systems Thinking in Action Conference in San Diego, California.*

**Alexander Schieffer (AS):** Hundreds of experts in human resource management were recently asked what they would describe as the *essence of leadership*. Nearly everybody came up with a different answer. What is the essence of leadership for you?

**Margaret Wheatley (MW):** I would refer to the word *essence*, which in French also means fuel. The question could be asked as, “What is the fuel in leadership?” The real fuel in leadership is understanding and believing in other people. I define a good leader as someone who has great faith in people’s ability and who uses every opportunity to create the means for them to offer their creativity to the organization. The essence of leadership is to inspire people about their own competence and to create an atmosphere of “we can do that.” A good leader is foremost a good teacher—someone who believes in his or her students and helps them to realize their own potential. I do not believe that leaders can be heroes; it is an impossible task for anyone to figure out these days.

**AS:** However, in all problematic and complex situations, you still find most people searching for the *great leader*, someone who comes and fixes the problem.

**MW:** Yes, many still look for the hero. But we don’t need the hero type of leader anymore. What we do need are leaders who are able to bring out the best in all of us. The US is currently suffering from a president who embodies images of *hero*, *cowboy*, and *savior of the world*, but who certainly cannot deliver on that. He can probably drive us to destruction, but he surely can’t create security or a safe world.

**AS:** What is a key lesson for today’s leaders?

**MW:** As a leader, you really have to work on how not to be a big ego and how to inspire people without controlling them. I have encouraged leaders to notice what they really believe about other people’s capacity. Most leaders will tell you that they believe in people and that they rely on people, but when you look at their action, it is all about command and control—forcing people to do things and thinking that one has to motivate people. But noticing one’s own personal beliefs requires a huge amount of self-awareness and self-knowledge. A leader must understand that you really have to be who you say you are and that you really do have to walk your talk. To be a good leader these days, one must be a person of extraordinary integrity and clarity. That includes knowing what you stand for, knowing what you believe in, and coming to the realization that you can’t do it alone.

**AS:** The reaction of most leaders who hear about new leadership, systems thinking, chaos theory, interconnectedness, or the relationship between leadership and the new science



Margaret Wheatley  
President, Berkana Institute  
[www.berkana.org](http://www.berkana.org)



Alexander Schieffer  
Managing Partner  
Center of Excellence and Learning  
Lecturer, University of St. Gallen  
[a.schieffer@c-cell.ch](mailto:a.schieffer@c-cell.ch)

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find these concepts highly impractical and do not understand the relevance to their own business and leadership style. How can a broad audience of leaders embrace this new thinking?

**MW:** I do not understand why everyone can't see the world as a big system. The evidence is so overwhelming: if you plan short term, you are going to fail; if you do not understand systemic consequences, you are going to be surprised terribly by the effects of your actions. However, people are getting more receptive and have started to understand that the world is highly complex and that a lot of it is out of anyone's immediate control. Organizations increasingly understand that you can't just work the numbers. More and more people are getting this message. But I am not sure whether they are willing to slow down and think long term. We are currently going through a tremendous sifting of the chaff from the wheat. Clearly, the only organizations that will survive this process in the long term will have switched to a new understanding of leadership.

**AS:** In chaotic and difficult situations, most people return to the kind of behavior that they know best, even if this behavior has proved to be unsuccessful. What do you advise organizations and leaders to do? How can they develop and apply the new mental and action model?

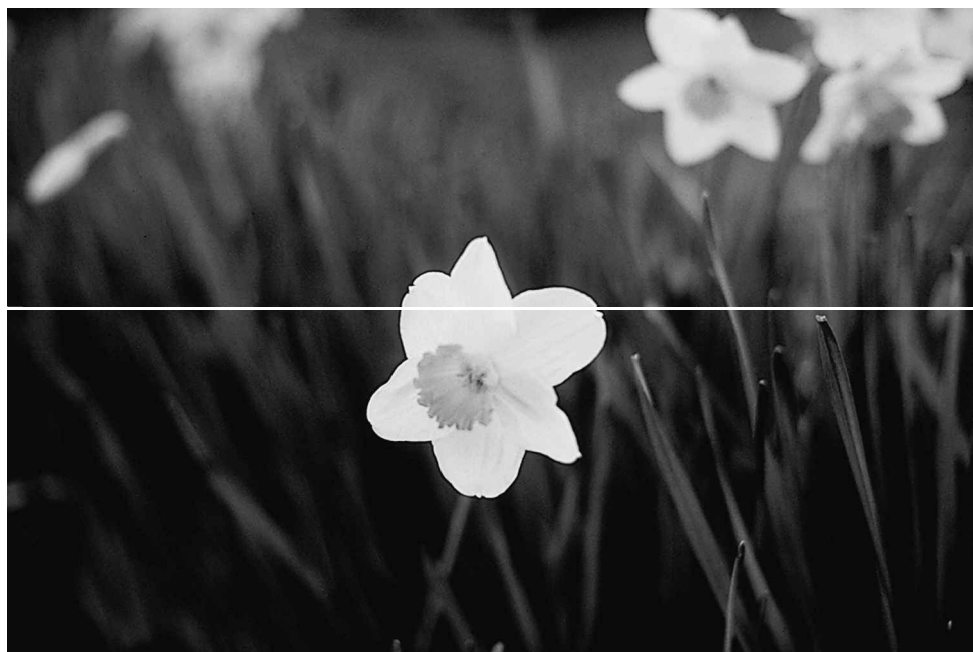
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**MW:** There have been practical applications in the field of leadership and systems thinking for more than 20 years. We have case after case demonstrating how applied systems thinking can improve an organization in terms of saving money, better adaptation to the future, and so on. And still it is not the norm. But we are talking about a profound shift of mind that has to occur. Although the world is hammering

us, saying that humankind has to learn this lesson, we still haven't done it.

**AS:** In *Leadership and the New Science* [Wheatley, 1992], you write that, in order to develop this new mental and action model, in order to be more creative and more adaptive, people need to let go of fear.

**MW:** We've got a lot of fear in the world right now. As you said, during times of fear, we go back to what we know, and all we know is hierarchy and command and control. Unfortunately, that just creates more chaos. We have taken an enormous leap backward because of fear.



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**AS:** What could be the most promising field for development in order to support the fundamental shift of mind that leaders and organizations need?

**MW:** I think that the *network form of organizing* is a very powerful lever. In recent years, enormously good work has been done on networks and network organizations, which is a whole new form of interacting and cooperating. This shift to become a network organization has been very difficult for any hierarchic organization that went through this process, because, in networks, you have to depend on relationships rather than on direct command. Relationships have been ignored for years. Networks rely on whole new levels of openness, trust, honesty, integrity, and communication. This is exactly that kind of behavior that leaders have not been practicing. International terrorist networks (in a very efficient, although evil and destructive, way) have demonstrated the power of network organizations. We are now learning that it is impossible to fight a network with a hierarchy.

**AS:** You mentioned an enormous leap backward by most organizations. What gives you the courage to continue your pledge for a fundamental shift of mind?

**MW:** I became more courageous when I fell in love with life and people and I realized how wondrous the universe is, how truly awesome. It creates a feeling that life is really worth fighting for. Life is not something to take for granted or hope that someone else figures out how to do it. Connecting with the living world and the human spirit are the key sources for my courage to fight.

## Reference

Wheatley, M.J. *Leadership and the New Science*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992).