



Stronger Smarter Institute Research & Impact Footprinting Reading Review

“Leadership and the New Science”

Stronger Smarter Meta-Strategy links:

→ 2. Acknowledging and embracing Indigenous leadership → 3. High Expectations Leadership to ensure high expectations classrooms → 4. Innovative and dynamic school staffing models

In the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP), we use the provocation from Margaret Wheatley that “What organisations need is leadership – not leaders.” In this reading review of Wheatley’s book, *Leadership and the New Science*, we delve into what this means, and how it links to the Stronger Smarter view of leadership.

Margaret Wheatley is an American consultant who has worked globally in many roles as a speaker, teacher, community worker, consultant, advisor, and formal leader ([Bio – Margaret J. Wheatley \(margaretwheatley.com\)](https://margaretwheatley.com)). Drawing on these experiences, she has written nine books. *Leadership and the New Science* was originally released in 1992, and the third edition (reviewed here) was released in 2006.

In this review we have also drawn on a 2005 interview with Margaret Wheatley, published in the *Journal of Management Inquiry*.

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A changing view of leadership

In her book *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley looks at how Western thinking about science and the related views of how we see the world have impacted on how we run our organisations. As scientific thinking has moved into the world of quantum mechanics, forcing us to see the world differently, Wheatley suggests that it is time to also apply this new thinking to leadership and organisational structures. As Wheatley says, this is not just about new approaches to leadership, it is about changing our world view.

Traditional Western science breaks knowledge into separate disciplines. It uses analytical techniques to study 'parts' in order to understand the collective whole.

This is a 'machine' view of the world described by boundaries, where everything is made of 'things' that can be measured. Wheatley suggests these Western world views have set leaders up as a 'special group of people' who have the traits of leadership. In our organisations, this Western way of thinking has led to leadership being defined by control, limits of responsibilities, and chains of command that all leave workers disengaged.

Wheatley describes how quantum mechanics' search for 'elementary particles' challenged the basic assumptions that 'things' could be measured. Quantum mechanics found that 'things' change their form or their properties as they respond both to each other and to the scientist observing them. In the quantum world, elementary particles are a set of relationships.

As Wheatley says, this is a realisation that we participate in a world of 'exquisite interconnectedness'. The results we observe of whatever we seek to explore and understand will be impacted by our own ideas, assumptions, and world views. While this might be a new realisation for the Western world of science, Wheatley does recognise that this is also an 'ancient realisation'.

Wheatley suggests that the mechanistic world view based on individualism and competition is no longer helpful and it is time to look at leadership differently. We need to create a different lens through which to interpret the world and prepare ourselves to



work in the world of relationships. We need to leave behind the idea of the organisation based on boxes and roles and view our organisations as a dense network of independent relationships. We also need to leave behind the notion of leadership as a role or hierarchy, and instead view leadership as a behaviour. Wheatley describes a leader as ‘anyone who wants to help or is willing to step forward to create change’.

As Wheatley suggests, leadership is an act of the heart. Leadership is noticing that something needs to be changed and having the courage to step forward and make something happen. She describes ‘life-affirming’ leaders as those who have faith in people and see their responsibility to create the circumstances that will bring out the commitment and creativity of people and give people opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways.

In this view, leadership is about relationships, not roles, hierarchies or control, and organisations need leadership, not leaders.

Self-reference – knowing our visions and values

Wheatley uses the quantum world to show that reality is created by the decisions made by the observers – the participation in the observation or measurement of quantum particles influences the outcome.

In the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, we draw on Edgar Schein’s work and Steve Mam’s coconut tree to show how our perceptions of the world are based on the underlying assumptions of our cultures and world views. As Wheatley says, we create our own realities through a lens of our own making that we use to filter, select, and interpret events. We participate in creating our own reality. We choose what we want to notice or worry about.

Wheatley explains that this ‘self-reference’ explains why any living system is motivated to change. We choose what to change using the lens of self. We only accept change when we take the time to discover whether it is worthy of our attention and decide to change only if the change is meaningful to who we are and what we value. If we



are to embrace any new insight or idea, it must help us become more of who we are. We won't accept change in our organisations just because a leader tells us we need to change. Wheatley explains, "We can't talk people into our version of reality because truly nothing is real for them if they haven't created it".

Wheatley explains that for an organisation, this means becoming more self-aware. She suggests that we need to be curious and reflect on what is happening in the organisation. As an organisation we need to have a clear sense of who we are and understand our patterns of behaviour, our values, our intentions and what we are trying to achieve. In any change strategy, the organisation needs to learn more about itself through the domains of identity, information and relationships. We need to explore who we are, who we aspire to be, and how we want to be together.


Schools or organisations can only bring staff along on any journey of change if everyone is an integral part of the planning process. We need to see strategic plans as processes rather than objects. These are processes that help the group by clarifying intent and giving people time to explore ideas and decide whether new meaning is available. People only experience a proposed plan by interacting with it. If we want people to be motivated to change, then they have to be part of creating that change.

In the same way that we describe in the Stronger Smarter Approach, Wheatley emphasises that the solutions to any problem and the leadership needed are usually present within the organisation itself. We cannot expect to understand everything ourselves, and different perspectives are necessary to gain a full understanding. The search for new meaning at an organisational level has to be a collective inquiry. As Wheatley says, you solve problems by bringing more voices into the room.

She describes life-affirming leaders as patiently insisting on participation and engagement as a way to encourage people to discover their overall potential.

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When dealing with complex challenges, the question of truth is irrelevant... multiple perspectives are all we have to work with.



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Facilitating the energy flows

Wheatley describes how, in the Western view of science, we've treated information as 'bits and bytes' that can be managed, transmitted and stored. In contrast, the quantum way of thinking sees information as dynamic. In organisations, this means creating better access to the information that everyone needs to be able to do their work.

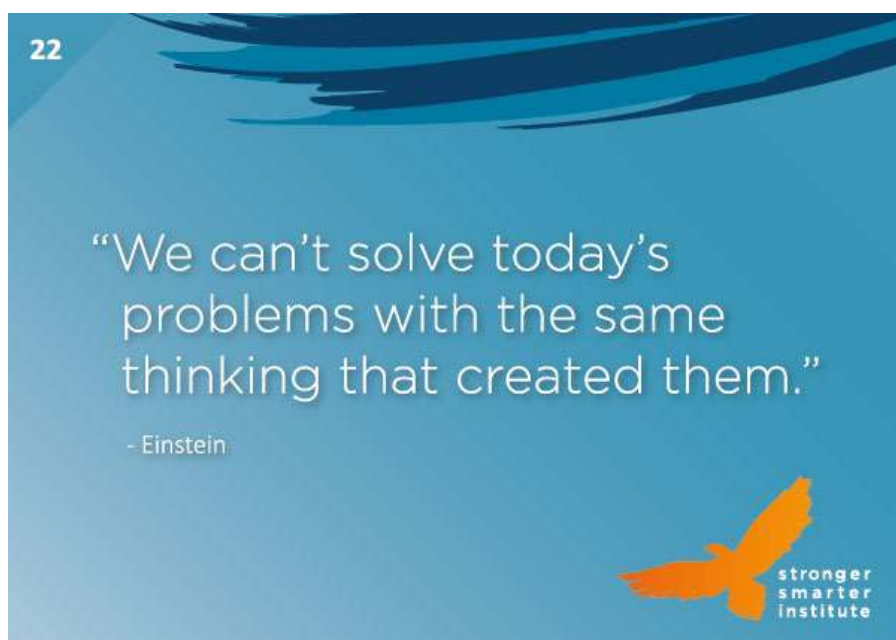
Wheatley uses the ideas of 'fields' (for instance, magnetic fields) to explore how information moves within an organisation. When everyone in the organisation works together with a shared understanding of the vision and values of the organisation, then a powerful field develops. The behaviours associated with those values permeate through the whole organisation and it self-organises into a capable, coherent form. In a school, this might be evident as a 'feeling' when you walk through the door that all students and families from all cultures are welcome in the school.

This 'field' will only occur when there is a leader who has a clear and consistent message, where the information can flow in the organisation, and staff are given the freedom to reflect, clarify and interpret the messages.

People will work more intelligently if they have information, and Wheatley suggests we move from 'information is power' to 'information is nourishment'.

Wheatley describes how the relationships between the elements and individuals in the organisation create reality. She visualises the lines in the organisational charts between individuals or divisions as places where "energy meets other energy to create new possibilities".

The role of the leader then becomes that of facilitating energy flows and ensuring information can move along the pathways in the organisation. It means creating an organisation of processes and relationships and giving staff the freedom to interpret the information. So long as the lens of the organisation's visions and values is clear, and has been co-created, then that is the lens that staff will use to interpret information.



This is a change from a chain of command where we determine which roles are needed to solve the problem, to a ‘web of influence’ that looks at what energy, influence and wisdom are available to contribute to the solution.

Learning from chaos

In our western view of the world, we view chaos as something to be avoided and controlled. We decide that we can define ‘normal’ and then judge everything against this ‘fictional’ standard. We treat our organisations as a machine and think we can fix it by ‘mending a broken part.’ Wheatley suggests that we need a shift in thinking to move from the traditional ways of analysing parts and work with the dynamics of the whole system.

She suggests that we can examine the whole by looking at the parts, but, using the idea of fractals in nature, she views each part as a miniature version of the whole. We have to understand that the part we are looking at, or the local behaviours in a particular staff member or group, are influenced by the whole. We need to look for how something feels and the patterns that emerge. We can only change the local behaviours when the whole group is involved to look at the overall organisational culture, and then people can see how their personal behaviours contribute to that whole.

Newness will only show as difference, and for change, she suggests that we need to open ourselves to more information and seek out that which is ambiguous and complex. She suggests that the system will sometimes fall out of balance, and it is necessary to accept chaos as a ‘great destructive energy that releases us from the past and offers a wild ride into newness.’

Changing our world view

Wheatley describes the following recommendations to change our world view for leaders and organisations:

- ▶ *Facilitate process* – move from descriptions of tasks and control to facilitating process, looking at patterns, directions, and feel of the organisation.
- ▶ *Facilitate energy flow* - ensure information is moving through the organisation and create positive energy.
- ▶ *Strategic thinking replaces planning* – a process where you create the environment, be aware of what’s happening now and reflect and learn.
- ▶ *Foster relationships* – if power is the capacity created by relationships, then we need to attend to the quality of the relationship.

- ▶ *Become a better listener* – respect each other’s uniqueness and expect that others will see things differently to the way we see things.
- ▶ *Collaboration* – trust people with open information, make sure people have access to one another, ensure people can speak truthfully, give people the freedom to interpret information for themselves.
- ▶ *Nurture growth and development* – create the circumstances to bring out creativity and commitment in people.
- ▶ *Shared power* – use with participative management and self-managed teams. Use a ‘web of influence’ to look at the energy, influence and wisdom available to contribute to the solution, rather than who is in a particular role.

Stronger Smarter Discussion and Provocations

Indigenous world views

While quantum mechanics might be a new understanding for the Western scientific world, Indigenous Knowledge (IK) systems have always been based on connectedness and relationships. In Australia, IK systems are based on collective inquiry, valuing knowledge, deep listening, and understanding other points of views. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scientists and thinkers came to this understanding long before quantum mechanics was recognised or understood, or before Western thinking was brought to Australia.

In the Stronger Smarter Approach (SSA), we support Wheatley’s calls to reject old western world views see the world differently. We strongly believe that using Indigenous world views and ways of working across our schools and school leadership will benefit all students. The Stronger Smarter Metastrategy of embracing Indigenous leadership supports this notion that we need to think differently about leadership and embrace different ways of thinking.

High-Expectations Relationships

Some critics of Wheatley’s work have suggested that it is too theoretical and lacks the practical component. At the Institute, we believe that framing the way of thinking first is important. The SSA then adds the practical component – the ‘how’. Like Wheatley, we believe that it is all about building relationships. Our Stronger Smarter Meta-strategies of High-Expectations Leadership and High-Expectations Relationships describe how to do this. We also provide the tools for self-analysis in organisations and bringing everyone together to understand the visions and values of the organisation.

Individual Journeys

Many of Wheatley's views align with those of the SSA when she says that we need to work with complexity and chaos and be prepared sometimes to sit in space of not knowing. She describes how we need to recognise that what is developed in one context will not necessarily work in another and suggests that we can't sit and wait for the right solution, but we need to begin individual journeys. In the SSA we recognise that, while we can share ideas and learn from each other about what is possible, we will never be able to provide a single model that will work in every context. The SSA is about providing schools and organisations with the tools for self-analysis and building relationships so that each individual and each organisation can move along their individual journey.

The leaders we need are already here

As Wheatley discusses, we know that systems can solve their own problems. She says that we always need to work on the assumption that the leaders we need are already there. At the Institute, we believe this applies to schools, organisations, and communities. We don't claim to have the answers for every situation, and we recognise that no single person will ever have the answer. Instead, we provide the channels and the flows to move the energy in the right direction. We provide the tools and strategies to build the places for collective inquiry.

Why the Stronger Smarter Approach works

Wheatley's explanations of how individuals are motivated to change are important to understand. As she says, we won't accept change just because a leader or a professional development program tells us we must change. We only accept change when we take the time to discover whether it is worthy of our attention. We only decide to change if the change is meaningful to what we value and helps us become more of who we are. This is why the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program works. We provide the time for self-reflection and buy-in so that participants can decide whether what we are saying really reflects who they are. Our program participants then decide for themselves the changes they want to see in their personal leadership or in their organisations.

People are more likely to accept change when they have been involved in creating it. For school leaders to bring the local community and their school staff along with them on any change journey, they need to build relationships. If the whole school community are involved in the decision around what outcomes they want to see for the students and the school, and in co-creating the strategies and plans to get there, they are also more likely to be a part of that change. In the SSA and Stronger Smarter Metastrategies, we

describe building a collegiate staff and embracing Indigenous leadership. Parents, staff, and students will only join the journey of transformation if they have been involved in creating it in the first place.

References

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