



IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

Debra Thoms

New South Wales Health, North Sydney, Australia. Email: detho@doh.health.nsw.gov.au

Submitted for publication: 29th February 2012

Accepted for publication: 13th March 2012

Keywords: Measurement, feedback, organisations

Margaret J Wheatley (2007) *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

My journey with practice development has been unforeseen and unplanned. I have long had an interest in transformational leadership since reading Burns (1978) work in the late 1980s. It was following conversations with Brendan McCormack on one of his visits to Sydney, and more latterly with Annette Solman, that I started to gain a greater appreciation of what practice development might have to offer the workplace and healthcare more broadly. I then came across the writings of Margaret Wheatley, which encapsulated in many ways my own feelings and thoughts on some of the challenges facing the healthcare system. Her discussion of how these might be addressed aligned with what I knew of practice development, and as time has passed this has been further reinforced. I had embarked on a large scale practice development programme of work prior to discovering Margaret Wheatley, however in doing so I found someone who through their writing, assisted me in clarifying what it was that I found resonated from practice development with my understanding of the world within which I have worked for many years.

Wheatley has written a number of books and papers on various aspects of leadership and management; of particular interest to me has been her book, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times* (2007). In this volume, Wheatley includes a chapter written with Mryon Rogers entitled *The Uses and Abuses of Measurement*. I find this has a resonance with comments from nurses and midwives, my own impressions at times and the way measurement is used to 'ensure' aspects of care. The oft used statement, 'you can only manage what you can measure' is familiar to many and yet as Wheatley says, the priority attention paid to meeting key performance indicators does not always deliver the desired outcomes. She goes on to note that managers 'do want reliable and quality work' and 'they want accountability, focus, teamwork and quality' (p 157). There are times when the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) would suggest that this can be achieved, but it is also not unusual to see performance diminish once the emphasis on KPIs falls away. As Wheatley says, measurement is not the way we get these outcomes – 'They are performance capabilities that emerge as people feel connected to their work and each other' (p 157). Wheatley does not argue that measurement is unnecessary; on the contrary, she argues that measurement is critical but that the focus should be on feedback and having measurement be driven by care rather than care be driven by measurement. Wheatley argues that feedback differs from measurement in a number of ways:

'Feedback:

Context dependent
Self determined – the system chooses what to notice
Information is accepted from anywhere
The system creates own meaning
Newness, surprise are essential
The focus is on adaptability and growth
Meaning evolves
The system co-adapts with its environment' (Wheatley, 2007, p 159)

For me this has been a powerful recognition of what I hear from nurses and midwives, as we have been implementing a transformational practice development approach through a specific programme of work. From a personal perspective, the greatest reward is when I hear nurses and midwives speak of their re connection with their practice. To hear staff speak of how they have rediscovered a deeper purpose that underpins their work and why they entered into practice in the first place is both rewarding and inspiring. This is vital if staff are to be able to provide the best possible care and support to each other in the workplace, amid the many demands and challenges of modern healthcare systems.

In another chapter also written with Myron Rogers (*The Irresistible Future of Organising*), Wheatley critically recognises that organisations are 'living systems' but that modern management tends to treat them as machines (p 33). She writes of the capacity to respond to change as being present in self-organising systems and the creativity that can come through this (p33). Although not well documented at this stage we are hearing of how some wards and units are better able to manage and cope with change when they have been engaged in using the transformational practice development ways of working on their unit. It appears to have helped build a capability to take some level of control, and to critically and actively examine a strategy that may be required to seek an implementation solution that will work for that particular unit, whilst also meeting the overarching aims of the strategy to be implemented. This to me clearly demonstrates the adaptive living organisation that makes up the various wards and units within hospitals and healthcare. Practice development has enabled staff to meet the various demands they are faced with on a daily basis, by building resilience and maintaining a connectedness with the deep purpose of nurses and midwives in their practice. Of particular importance has been the values clarification process, as it is here that the nurses and midwives once again reconnect and allow the 'living system' to come into being and be active. For me as a manager, Wheatley has been able to place that within a management framework that recognises the challenges of modern organisations.

'Those organisations who will succeed are those that evoke our greatest human capacities – our need to be in good relationships, and our desire to contribute to something beyond ourselves.' (p 124)

References

MacGregor Burns, J. (1978) *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.
Wheatley, M.J. (2007) *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Debra Thoms (MNA, BA, Grad Cert Bioethics, Adv Dip Arts, RN, RM), Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officer, NSW Health, North Sydney, New South Wales, Australia; Adjunct Professor, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia; Adjunct Professor, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia.