

Reflections on academic libraries as self-organizing systems

Ways leaders can support staff

by Maureen Sullivan

Every living thing seeks to create a world in which it can thrive. It does this by creating systems of relationships where all members of the system benefit from their connections. This movement toward organization, called self-organization in the sciences, is everywhere, from microbes to galaxies. . . . Organization is a naturally occurring phenomenon. The world seeks organization, seeks its own effectiveness. And so do the people in our organizations.”—Margaret Wheatley “Goodbye,” *Command and Control in Leader to Leader* (Summer 1997)

Margaret J. Wheatley is the author of *Leadership and the New Science* and a co-founder of the Berkana Institute, a nonprofit research foundation supporting organizational change. She discusses this and other views on how the principles of new science apply to organizations and the experiences of the people who work in them.

I believe the people who work in academic and research libraries seek the connections, the relationships, and a shared understanding of what is and what is not important. In every one of these libraries, people come to work every day with a desire to contribute to the organization by performing work activities that are meaningful to them.

I agree with Wheatley’s assertion that organization occurs from the inside out, as people see what needs to happen, apply their experience and perceptions to the issue, find those who can help them, and use their own creativ-

ity to invent solutions. What can leaders in our libraries do to support and nurture the natural inclinations staff at all levels have to take initiative, to help solve complex problems, to do what needs to be done to deliver the best possible service to students and faculty, to find ways to improve work processes, and to apply their creative ideas to the many difficult challenges we face?

See the library as the organizational system it is

Libraries, like other organizations, are more than their structure, hierarchy, and reporting relationships. They are living organisms: complex, social and technical systems in which the whole is composed of many parts. The parts are interdependent and interact with each other.

To see the whole system and to understand its various parts and how they interact, we must look beyond our individual role, our own unit or department and consider the interrelationships and interdependencies among work units, work processes, and everyone who contributes to achieving the library’s purpose.

Recognize your leadership role and contribution

Everyone is a leader. Leadership is best understood as a dynamic part of the organizational system and a process to which each of us can and will contribute. Seek opportunities to contribute your ideas. Observe what students and

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faculty on your campus are doing. How do they carry out their work? How might you and your colleagues help students to learn and to assist students and faculty in their search for information and resources? What experiences and best practices can you share with others in the profession? What contributions can you make to the improvement of learning and the quality of life in the campus community?

Believe in the people with whom you work

As human beings, we all have the capacity to contribute beyond what our position descriptions and current organizational roles demand. Each of us has an inherent desire to achieve. Learn what motivates you and your colleagues. Discover the hidden talents and real interests of your colleagues. Develop and nurture trust in your relationships. Recognize the contributions and achievements of others.

Accept change as a natural and important part of organizational life

Organizations and the individuals who work in them are in a continual process of change. Yet, we often see change as something to be avoided or controlled in some way. Once we recognize change as a natural and critical process for growth and development, we can focus on how to help everyone to accept change as a way of life. This acceptance of change then frees everyone to find the work that is meaningful and has value for the community served.

Attend the 1999 President's Program

Margaret J. Wheatley, co-founder of the Berkana Institute, a nonprofit research foundation supporting organizational change, will give the keynote address at the ACRL President's Program in New Orleans. The program will be held in the New Orleans Convention Center, 2:00–4:00 p.m., on Monday, June 28, 1999. Wheatley is an engaging and dynamic speaker who will help us explore how we can recognize academic and research libraries as self-organizing systems. She will offer ideas about how libraries can become effective organizations; how librarians can become more effective leaders; and how all of us can learn to thrive in the ever-changing world in which we live.

Focus on personal change

Take time to assess your strengths and to identify areas for your development. Identify what you do well and what you enjoy. Prepare a personal mission and vision statement to clarify your purpose, goals, and desired changes. Consider your feelings and attitude toward change. Discover the benefits of embracing change rather than fearing it. Seek support from others as you pursue your personal plan for change.

Prepare to change the organizational systems

The work we perform has changed significantly. Technology and integrated library systems; changing needs and expectations of students, faculty, and administrators; changes in scholarly and commercial publications; increasing costs; the availability of information in new formats; the global economy: these are but some of the forces that have led to fundamental changes in the work we do and the ways in which we perform this work.

Wheatley to speak at ACRL President's Program

Spend an afternoon with Margaret Wheatley, the keynote speaker at this year's ACRL President's Program. See sidebar for details. ■

("Cyberplagiarism" cont. from page 373)

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