Corporate courage has faltered; organisational expert **Margaret Wheatley** says that leaders must face reality – and maybe abandon e-mail.

Fearlessness: the last organisational change strategy

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If a company is only as good as its people, companies today have much to worry about. The reason: their employees are under unprecedented strain. In an economic environment that demands increased productivity, leaders are tightening control over their organizations and asking employees to do more work in less time. At the same time, employers are paying less attention to their employees' development or satisfaction. Leaders at all levels can cope with this situation with fearlessness – by building a strategy driven by quality and the values of the people in their organisation, rather than by quarterly performance. But regrettably very few public companies are likely to lift themselves above the short-term fray to get this message. Let us see how fearlessness will play a critical role in addressing the problems facing corporations today.

For several years there has seemed to be a deep disappointment and despair growing, even among engaged, capable business leaders. I have spent a lot of time working on large-systems change, helping organizations become more committed and productive, with the full engagement of people at the top. Many of these people were heroes to me. They knew about the value of participative management; they had made great gains in both the traditional measures of profitability and in innovation and viability. But now pressures on leaders have increased dramatically. They no longer have time or flexibility. They feel caged, oppressed, exhausted. The demand for quick results and the pressure from boards of directors and oversight committees has left them no time for development or learning.

I saw these people I worked with withdraw: "Forget about

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values, learning, or participation. We just need to execute." By which they meant: "Drive performance now." This business rhetoric, the notion of execution, is really quite violent: You "execute" people. It gives me the shivers.

Seeing this happen made me start to think about fearlessness: Who, in these organisations, was going to take a stand on behalf of quality and other values? And if people did take a stand, would it make a difference?

That thinking led me to a more radical position than I had ever held before. I gave up on the idea of change led by senior executives. I started looking for people inside the organization who were interested in change, encouraging them to do what they could, but not to wait for people at the top – to just act within their own domain. I believe there's still a possibility of creating beneficial results on these "islands of hope" within larger companies.

I started to see a difference in response to corporate scandals and the end of the dot-com bubble. Once fear set in and risk increased, too many leaders reverted to command and control. This was exacerbated by the impact of technology, globalisation, and constant communication. I speak to a lot of people in corporations: they say there's no time to think; no one has time to learn from experience. If something doesn't work the first time, you pick up the pace the second time; maybe it'll work then. People in project management and training have incredible time-compression demands.

Another factor is the intensifying of communications technology. E-mail has given us a 10-fold increase in our work and a 100-fold decrease in our ability to pay attention. Last

year a study came out which showed that people could tell you when their day began, but not when it ended. We are so overwhelmed by information that we're becoming numb. E-mail also takes away the need to meet face to face, which has caused a lot of misunderstandings and ultimately affects relationships. Today people deal with tough issues by e-mail even if they're down the hall from each other. It's also led to behaviours such as people using their Blackberrys or phones to e-mail or text message under the table at meetings. The most common posture now is the downward glance, whether it's in meetings or elsewhere.

There is also an intense focus on short-term results at the expense of all else. There is pressure to get projects done faster with quicker turnaround times and unreasonable deadlines. We've entered the era of believing that a client or boss can just ask for things sooner, without losing any quality. The thinking today is that you don't have to worry about how a decision will affect long-term success – just think short-term and somehow it will work itself out. Employees are now evaluated on short-term results; these don't really measure anything of value for the longevity of the company. These measures get tied to incentives and rewards and start to transform behaviour in a negative way. All this leads to worse performance in the end.

If leaders took the time to engage people instead of clamping down on them, not only would employees perform better, they'd also be more innovative and focused. It would lead to less stress, less illness, and more productivity. All the actions right now are pushing the workforce toward increasing levels of disengagement. People show up to work to collect a pay check. The Gallup Organisation did a survey in the USA that indicated how people are feeling about their workplace. Last year, more than 70 per cent of the American workforce felt disengaged, up from around 33 per cent in 2000. That's what happens if you squeeze fewer people to do more work, give them shorter deadlines, measure their work using meaningless reports, and, to top it off, treat them with profound levels of disrespect.

The main factor for these kinds of behaviours persisting is that the leaders themselves don't know how to relate to uncertainty. They don't know how to deal with a future that they can't plan for. They can't even plan for their own future: in the past few years, there have been record levels of CEO firings. Meanwhile, the people who recruit and select chief executives cling to the belief that one person should have the answer. And when the new CEO doesn't have it – because no one person does – they just go for another, more heroic leader. These are very powerful dynamics that reinforce one another and push organisations in the wrong direction.

This is where fearlessness comes in. To be fearless is to face the reality of your situation – to recognise what you can actually achieve, given these very powerful cultural and systemic dynamics, without deluding yourself that you can, through your own act of will, be more powerful than you are. And then, at the same time, decide who you want to be, so that you can stand firm for the practices you believe in most deeply, and so that you can accept criticism. This type of fearlessness can be found in anyone – senior leaders, mid-level leaders, supervisors, or workers.

If you're a leader, you have to be thoughtful about this. Even a senior leader from a major corporation, someone who is extremely successful and uses very high engagement strategies, probably won't be able to convert the whole company. I've

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given up on large-scale transformation, but smaller measures can still effect change – for example, helping a few people realise their competence, value, talents, or creativity. But it's difficult for leaders to accept this kind of thinking.

For once you accept that, you open yourself to accepting other ideas, such as the belief that human beings aren't the masters of the universe; that we can't make our own rules, no matter how powerful our technology is. That's not how the planet works. Or recognising the ways in which the pursuit of material goods and consumer comforts, even as this pursuit makes people healthier and live longer, can also deaden people in other ways. This destroys the essence of culture, community, and family. One thing I've felt deeply working with a number of indigenous communities in Africa, Australia, and North America, is that the lure of acquiring material goods is stronger than any other lure in the world right now, especially to teenagers. A lot of them leave home to support their families and experience a better life; we have huge migrations occurring all over the planet. And a society whose practices are based only on economic growth is going to self-destruct, because materialism, if left unchecked, destroys the best aspects of being human and brings out our baser qualities.

It's not a pretty world right now. Inside and outside organizations, things people thought were protected are falling apart. Within organisations, many people are left to their own resources. To break away from this situation, fearlessness is called for.