

# Leadership in a Quantum World

## Reflections from a Coaching Perspective

by Karen Staib Duffy

Our world today is dominated by changes that occur in sudden leaps and bounds, not gradual shifts. Yet most of us are still attempting to cope by using old paradigms that were suited to yesterday's world of slow, steady progressions. How can we as leaders gain the skills necessary to be masters of change in this new quantum world?

We live with an unspoken paradigm of life as “progress” — a series of small changes, steadily moving upward in a straight line. This paradigm feeds the illusion that we have time to get prepared and adjust slowly to changes. Life, on the other hand, is quantum in nature. Changes occur in leaps and bounds, up or down, more often a series of discontinuous quantum leaps than slow steady progressions.

Our world today is fast-paced, constantly changing, and highly competitive — there is so much choice and, with change and choice so abundant, life has reached a fever pitch level of complexity. Our world also places a high value on change — change is presented to us as “the ultimate” and we are expected to embrace it readily and often. Yet, in trying to cope, we exist with information overload and often feel overwhelmed. How does one lead in the midst of all this complexity and quantum leaps of change? What skills are required to be leaders in this quantum world?

Most of us still use old paradigms as a framework to guide us in leadership and life. These paradigms helped past generations of managers cope with yesterday's world — a world in which changes were slower, more steady and predictable — and these unspoken assumptions still lurk in our thought process. We have absorbed them from our “cultural soup,” often without even realizing it. I invite you to consider that a new paradigm, a new perspective, and new ways of learning will enable you to achieve mastery in today's world with its continual flow of change and choice.

In business, we carry embedded expectations based on structures of authority that are hierarchical and concepts of organizations as machine-like. We emphasize measurable numbers and ignore relationships and emotions. As in classical physics (Newtonian, mostly), we operate with a worldview of solid, fixed “things.”

Nature and our world, however, are much more fluid than these old concepts of reality. With our concepts of fixed things and a slow steady progression of change, we are frequently ill prepared for the sudden jumps. And, because we are not prepared for change, we resist change.

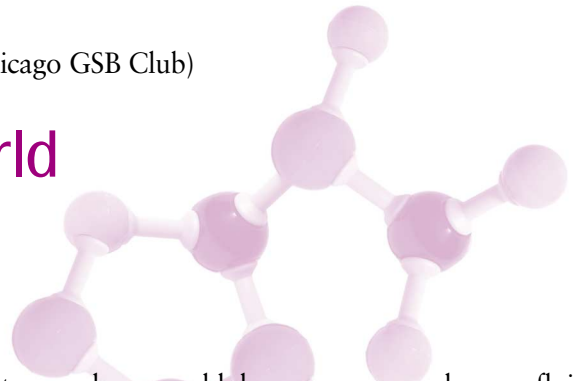
Research in quantum physics has been turning our old paradigms upside down and inside out. Exploring this topic in greater depth, Margaret J. Wheatley has written a powerful book called “Leadership and the New Science,” in which she explores the fascinating implications of research results in quantum physics for our organizations and ourselves.

One of our very common misconceptions is that our physical world is made of things. A key finding from quantum physics is that the subatomic particles at the core of the physical world do not actually exist as things. There is, in fact, no particle. Instead, each “particle” is actually a network of relationships! This means that the building blocks, upon which our entire “solid” physical universe is created, are relationships, not things.

We are like these subatomic particles, with networks of relationships in our organizations, communities, and lives. Although our organizations are fluid networks of relationships, we tend to think of them as things, static and machine-like. We design organization charts defining roles and responsibilities based on hierarchies of authority. When we look at how the work actually gets done, however, we see that there are power points of real influence and action within the networks of relationships that are sharing information — fluid, flexible, ebbing, flowing, and continuously changing.

Research has also shown that this is a participative universe. Wheatley writes: “Nothing lives alone. Everything comes into form because of relationships... Even reality is created through our participation in relationships. We choose what to notice; we relate to certain things and ignore others. Through the chosen relationships, we co-create our world.”

Further, unlike the machine concept, systems and their environments co-create themselves. Rather than staying the same indefinitely, systems are self-organizing, with negative and positive feedback loops. Systems use self-reference to maintain themselves, i.e., a system will change in a way in which it remains consistent with itself.



Wheatley points out: “Stasis, balance, equilibrium, these are temporary states. What endures is process — dynamic, adaptive, creative.”

What does this mean for us? It means that we live and work in organizations built on relationships. Our organizations are not machine-like, pre-existing things. As each of us does our job, we co-create our organizations. Our work initiatives are self-organizing, with positive and negative feedback loops. These structures are constantly in flux — there are moments of temporary balance and equilibrium, then we are back to process and change.

Wheatley notes a new way to look at organizations: “In quantum physics, a homologous process is described as relational holism, where whole systems are created by the relationships among subatomic particles. In this process, the particles do not remain as parts; they are drawn together by a process of internal connectedness. Electrons are drawn into these intimate relations as they cross paths with one another, overlapping and merging; their own individual qualities become indistinguishable.... It is not difficult to recognize ourselves as electrons in organizations, moving, merging with others, forming new wholes, being forever changed in the process.”

A comparison can also be made between organizations and biological entities. In this paradigm, each cell is unique and has its role, but is part of a bigger whole. Each cell needs to be aware of what is happening in different parts of the whole system. Each cell influences others and communication within the whole is critical and constant. Each of us can be considered like a cell in a larger being, such as our communities and organizations.

Another finding of modern physics is that when a system is far from equilibrium, small influences can have a huge impact. This means that when your organization is in crisis, there are tremendous opportunities for change, growth, and leadership by each individual who is part of that organization.

As we build our world and our organizations, we move into and out of relationships with each other. Relationships are the building blocks upon which we create our lives. We are not leaders in isolation, but in context. We live and lead in community and relationships at all levels. The power in these relationships resides in you. How do you create and use your network of relationships? What do you chose to focus on or ignore? When do you hold your integrity and when do you lose it?

Relationships require self-awareness and communication — we observe ourselves and our world using our language. We live in conversations — the link to our relationships and the world. Indeed, from an ontological coaching perspective, we are our conversations, both with ourselves and with others. By thoroughly understanding how you are using your language to create relationships

and possibilities for action for yourself and your organization, you move into a position to respond sooner and more effectively as rapid developments unfold.

Leadership in this framework is far different from the hierarchical, authoritarian, machine-like worldview.

Leadership within this paradigm comes in the form of personal initiative, innovation, influence, and integrity in relationships with others. It is not about waiting for someone to tell you what to do. It is about looking inside for your own compass and leading from within.

Our leadership in the new paradigm requires maintaining balance and a sense of control within the flow. In order to learn smoothly, you must deliberately suspend certainty and consider information that may contradict what you thought you knew for sure. This information may even indicate that entirely new practices are required. It necessitates confronting any blocks that are standing in your way and uncovering your own enemies to learning. It requires being able to shift your observer at will.

The faster and more effectively that you can learn, the more masterful you will be in the flow of change. This mastery is acquired by focusing on the soft skills of life that have often been ignored in favor of hard facts and measurable numbers. The ability to learn more efficiently and respond more quickly is better served with a perspective that more accurately reflects the world in which we shrivel or thrive.

Wheatley comments: “All life lives off-balance in a world that is open to change. And all of life is self-organizing. We do not have to fear disequilibrium, nor do we have to approach change so fearfully. Instead, we can realize that, like all life, we know how to grow and evolve in the midst of constant flux.”

As you observe the structures around you and reconsider the way organizations operate, keep these new paradigms in mind. The world is not static. It is built on relationships. It is constantly changing and you are part of the change. This approach to learning will enable you to embrace change with mastery and exercise leadership.

Going forward, observe how you are in relationship with others. Observe your thoughts and how you use your words in communication with others. Observe the stories you tell yourself. Observe how you learn and when you don't. Observe what is blocking you from being different and taking new actions.

*“We do not have to fear disequilibrium, nor do we have to approach change so fearfully. Instead, we can realize that, like all life, we know how to grow and evolve in the midst of constant flux.”*

“What endures is process — dynamic, adaptive, creative.” The insight from your observations and the power of your conversation will open up for you an ability to respond fluidly to the rapid changes of life. This is the path for finding your own stride in the flow of quantum

leaps of change. These are the skills by which we become leaders in our own lives and organizations. Self-awareness and communication in relationships are the cornerstones of your leadership in a quantum world. ■

*An alumna, Karen Staib Duffy, MBA '78, is an executive coach and founder of Quantum Development Coaching. She honed her skills as a manager and strategic coach in the corporate arena. An innovative leader and people developer, her experience includes over 25 years in management, capital markets, sales and marketing, risk management, and business and product development. Karen is certified as an Ontological Coach through Newfield Network – Coaching for Professional and Personal Mastery, and is a Professional Certified Coach with the International Coach Federation. Karen has been a*

*featured speaker on emotional intelligence, language and leadership, and the competitive advantages of corporate coaching. She has a B.A. from Northwestern University. Karen is also the Regional Managing Director for Illinois with Korn/Ferry Coaching and Development. She coaches both individual and corporate clients. Karen may be contacted directly at 312-664-6979 or kesduffy@hotmail.com, or see the web site at [www.qdcoaching.com](http://www.qdcoaching.com).*

