

Life is attracted to order but uses messes to get there

Rich Heffern | Jan. 5, 2010 NCR Today

It has always impressed me how different workplaces, communities, parishes and organizations look depending on whether one is on "top" looking "down," or seeing from the "bottom up."

In the mid-1990s we did a two day-long discernment process here, facilitated from outside and designed to improve the ways in which we worked together. First, we workers met for a day, then the next day we met with management. Our two perspectives were alike as Bugs Bunny and his carrot. For one thing, workers agreed that gossip, so disparaged from the "top," was essential to the health, vitality and information transfer of the company. Gossip can sometimes be caring creativity seething out from under "top down" efforts to manage a bubbling cauldron of life. Put another way, from the "top," gossip looks like chaos; from the "bottom," a nutrient.

Margaret Wheatley in her popular book, *Leadership and the New Science*, discusses fractal geometry, new mathematics describing the forms nature uses as building blocks. Clouds, river meanders, circulatory systems, cell membranes, galactic spiral arms can all be described fractally. It is impossible, she points out, to answer this simple question? How long is the coastline of Britain? When you start to measure, you encounter ever-increasing detail, with never an end to it. Science now tells us, in fact, that nature and systems in general cannot be described at all in terms of quantities. One can only make statements about quality. There is true wholeness everywhere that stubbornly resists being broken down into discrete parts, one separated from another.

In short, we are rediscovering that our world is not a machine, that organizations and workplaces are not contraptions that can be all figured out, oiled and controlled with solutions to problems imposed from the "top." Within a mechanistic view, of course, questions about workers' efforts, motivation, commitment and quality are answered mechanistically. The only way to motivate us is from outside with perks, picnics, free tickets, motivational posters and videos. Leaders make us work by finding the right benefit, salary or threat. Without these coercions, we're assumed dead in the water; we, like the world, are machine parts, incapable of creating anything from within ourselves.

But we are rediscovering that the world is alive. We welcome back our creativity, passion and spirit. Machine model gone, we see that life processes are fuzzy, redundant and often chaotic. Information is available from all directions. The best way to solve problems is probably by tinkering together, by distributed discovery. Fear of confrontation, disturbance, disorder is always the bugaboo from on "top." The new science's view on life offers reassurance, pointing out that disturbance is the necessary condition for growth.

"Life is attracted to order," says Wheatley, "but it uses messes to get there."