



October 2021

REPORT

**LIFE-AFFIRMING LEADERSHIP:
DEVELOPING THE SKILLS OF
INSIGHT AND COMPASSION**

www.collectiveleadershipscotland.com



Over the last two years, Collective Leadership for Scotland has been working with Margaret (Meg) Wheatley, world-renowned writer and practitioner in systems thinking and leadership, on the skills leaders truly need to work in the relentless, deeply complex world we now live and work in.

This work has taken many forms: from a two day event open to all those interested in public service, to training a cohort of 24 systems leaders from across Scotland to develop deeper, life affirming leadership practices. This training is an adaptation of Meg's warrior training and was the first in the world to be conducted at a national level.

MEG WHEATLEY



PERSEVERANCE

On 1 & 2 Oct 2019, over 130 leaders from across public service and beyond explored what it takes to persevere in times like ours – and (likewise importantly) – what does not deserve our perseverance. Over the course of two days filled with insightful teachings, inspirational stories and collaborative group exercises we worked on the skills needed to stand our ground and keep leading with clarity.

Specialising in Organisational Behaviour, Meg's approach includes Systems Thinking, Theories of Change, Leadership and the Learning Organisation and believes in the idea that "real social change comes from the ageless process of people thinking together in conversation." Her expertise therefore perfectly complements Collective Leadership's vision and mission of initiating positive system changes through collaboration across public services and the wider society.

Perseverance is the persistence and effort required to do something and keep doing it till the end, even if it's hard. It is to keep going with clarity about why you are doing what you are doing. Perseverance is not giving up. Yet, Meg reminded us, Perseverance differs from Resilience. Whilst resilient people can withstand pressure and bounce back over and over again, persevering people know what they stand for and who they serve.

"People who Persevere learn how to deal with Fear, Aggression, Failure, Criticism, Betrayal, Exhaustion & Despair"

- Meg Wheatley



In the event, we learned that vital skills to develop are the ability to face reality, remain faithful to our purpose, work ethically together, and restore sanity where we can by maintaining an “unshakeable confidence that people can be generous, creative and kind”. We have to learn to take nothing personally, even though we experience the feelings associated with our work personally. As a leader we have to ask ourselves the question:

“who do we choose to be – and who do we choose to be when things come undone?”

Some of the practices we then worked with individually, and together, centred around:

- **Paying exquisite attention to relationships:** critique everything based on its impact on relationships and when things get harder, bring in more connections.
- **Looking at how we respond when things go wrong:** if through blame, we can miss our contribution to the issue. How can we hold each other to account ethically rather than blaming?
- **Restoring proper thinking time:** how much time do we give to thinking, reflecting and learning from experiences? We need to make and protect the time regularly which could mean saying no to taking on more at the expense of good work.

Meg left us with three questions to contemplate on that are at the heart of this work:

- What is the work I am currently doing that deserves my perseverance?
- What is the work that needs doing? This work might not necessarily be the work that I feel called to or passionate about.
- Am I the one to be doing it? Do I have the skills and allies to meaningfully contribute to it? Is the timing and other conditions right in my life?

Life-Affirming Leadership Training Programme

Following the Perseverance event in Oct 2019, the Collective Leadership for Scotland team felt there was an appetite to work more deeply with a smaller cohort of people working across Scotland. This led to a 5-day residential programme on 2-6 March 2020, a series of evening online calls between April and Oct 2020 and then two, 1-day online training sessions in Nov 2020 and April 2021.

When the CLS team invited a group of people from across public service to join the Life Affirming Leadership programme in early March 2020, little did we know how much the world would change within weeks of being together, nor how true Margaret's words above would be.

Even before the current COVID crisis, leaders were confronted with complex change in the internal and external environment. In response to these increasing pressures, the majority of which are beyond any individual's control, good leaders face

both personal and organisational challenges. As a result, they can feel exhausted, overwhelmed and, at times, faced with a sense of meaninglessness. In order to be effective in today's increasingly complex and uncertain world, there is a clear recognition that leaders need a new set of skills.

We need leaders who put service over self, who can be steadfast in crises & failures, who want to stay present & make a difference to the people, situations & causes they care about.

- Margaret Wheatley

For a number of years now, Meg has been training people all around the world in the skills leaders now need to willingly step forward to serve in these turbulent times, to do good work maintaining the best of humanity – treating people with compassion and dignity.

Meg refers to these leaders as “Warriors for the Human Spirit”; people “dedicated to serving people without adding to the aggression and fear of this time” and who train in order to:

- Refrain from using fear and aggression to accomplish our ends
- Maintain a stable mind even in situations of contention and conflict
- Use direct perception to see more clearly so we may act more wisely
- Stay aware of our biases, judgments, and triggers in order to diminish their influence on us
- Focus our efforts on the work that needs doing, not the work we want to do
- Endeavour to create Islands of Sanity (see below for Kirsty's interpretation of this) wherever possible
- Maintain a keen sense of humour
- Rely on moments of grace and joy
- Offer and receive support from the community of Persevering Leaders

Shortly after the residential programme, we invited three participants, Penelope, Colin and Kirsty to share their reflections on what they had learned and how it has influenced their actions particularly during the COVID crisis which followed quickly after the 5 day programme ended.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS



Penelope Cooper

Deputy Director in Scottish Government
(then Chief Executive of the
Scottish Public Pensions Agency)

“So how did a week spent with an amazing woman, supported by a great team, prepare me and a bunch of strangers for the mayhem that I returned to? The job I returned to was managing my organisation through an unprecedented crisis a fortnight before COVID-19 lock down became the reality, ensuring the safety of my colleagues and the continued service to our customers.

The focus on Leadership as Service had changed my way of thinking and prepared me really well for this situation. I approached the task from a different standpoint. Rather than thinking I had to have all the answers, I was able to support my team in allowing them to develop these together. I was more able to take a longer perspective, and to appreciate the contribution everyone had to make. I am certain that I had a more motivated team who delivered a better overall response as a result.

I was able to contribute better as I didn't feel the weight of having to come up with all the answers. This was a difficult change for some in the organisation as they were used to the

previous way of working, reliant on the top for the decisions. Instead they got the overall direction and expectation that they could exercise their judgement. This needed some support and is still a work in progress for some.

The question I found myself asking repeatedly was 'Is this kind?'. As a guiding principle from the programme, this served me very well. For example, when considering how we would expect colleagues to work from home, asking that question helped formulate our response with respect to working patterns, equipment and expectations.

In all the stress of the lockdown and the response, the meditation and self-care techniques I am now practicing really helped me to maintain my resilience and cope with the difficult situation we are living through, including the grief at the immense loss of life and ways of living. Overall I would say that this has changed me as a person and a leader and I consider myself to have been fortunate to have had the experience when I did.”



Colin Convery

from the National Safer Communities
Division in Police Scotland

“Through a series of interactive and theoretical inputs/discussions I became aware of the importance of self-regulation and the fundamental need to have a much greater appreciation of other people, where they were approaching challenges from, their intentions and to do so while NOT judging. I gained an understanding that being curious, compassionate and willing to 'have a go', or more importantly allow others to have a go, is vitally important to overall success.

I appreciated after the week's activities that I was not alone, unique, or indeed a failure because I had limited control over things. That is life and it is what we must accept as a starting point. Things I always looked for from family, friends, colleagues were not necessarily going to come along e.g. praise & applause, but again I was not the only one with the same desire to know I was doing the right thing. We all feel the same – we are just not good at sharing the reality.

So, has it changed me and my approach?..... absolutely. I would never have contemplated researching, let alone practicing, mindfulness. How I wish I had done so much earlier in my career. This has been the single most significant training I have engaged on in 20 years, it provided me a lot reassurances that I was not unique in my thoughts and also gave me some invaluable tools to help me cope with the pressures of day to day life, to lead people both at home and in the workplace by being friendly to myself, doing the right thing and appreciating people, their feelings and their beliefs & perspectives. Putting the theory to practice has been very beneficial. I genuinely wish I had been exposed to the principles many years ago and would advocate them to colleagues, especially those working in a multi-agency or cross-sector environment.”



Kirsty Lewin

“For me, the essence of the programme seems to be that we behave with decency and dignity in the service of others. So in lockdown, I have taken the opportunity to observe myself. Warriors, we were told, don’t expect applause. Expecting applause and not getting it results in anger, disappointment and pain. Focusing on the work, or the service that needs done, without needing praise, is a selfless act. And I have found that I am generally able to do it with my voluntary work. Staying in the background, and getting pleasure from something I’ve worked on with other people, turns out to be enough for my self-esteem.

Warriors create islands of sanity. We can all imagine these. Swinging in a hammock under a Coconut Palm or a Caledonian Pine. Everybody respects everybody else. Compassion and trust are the cocktails of the day. Warriors put the qualities of relationships at the heart of their leadership on these islands. And learning and reflection are the conditions required for our survival.

I had struggled to see the relevance for my own situation at first. In my previous paid work, yes. But my voluntary effort would surely be too small for island creation? And, on top of that, I know I’m not a particularly calming person. Island building would be too hard for me.

In the COVID-19 crisis my local fellow activists were juggling home schooling, working from home, and enduring the mental fatigue of lockdown. The people that we were working with (the Council, stakeholders, other communities) had the same challenges. So I attempted to create an island of

sanity. Sometimes I get side tracked. I forget about the coconut oil and pick up a jack hammer (for this I apologise). But then I take my seat and get back to the serious business of focusing on the quality of the relationships, rather than the transactional elements. Not just between ourselves in our small clan, but between all the people that are working with on the projects we’d like delivered. We can all create islands of sanity.

Hope, according to Meg, is an addiction we cling to. As I understand it, she asks us to replace hope with being present. Being present prevents us from toppling into despair when our hopes are not realised. I was resistant at first. But I was also relieved. We all know it’s the hope that kills you.

Working in climate change involved so much hope for me. Hope that it would be prioritised across the globe. Hope that every organisation would do the right thing. Hope that if I could just be better at my job I’d get better results. All those hopes dashed, despite the efforts and successes of so many, by the interminable height climbed by those lines on the graphs. Letting that hope go feels lighter. On our island we might use the word hope. Hope your folks are okay. Hope it works out for you. But we won’t be hopeful, we’ll be present instead.

Now I watch and listen to other leaders with my warrior hat by my side. Senior politicians leading their countries with humanity and integrity. Chief executives working with their staff on the collective transformation of their businesses as they adapt to pandemic life. Team leaders providing a space each morning for colleagues to express their fears and concerns. Women keeping calm order in panicky supermarket queues. Bus drivers reassuring anxious passengers; and cleaners, everywhere, keeping the show on the road. We can all be leaders now.”

Penelope, Colin and Kirsty all refer to the principles they learned to put into practice from the programme.

These are:

- First, be friendly to yourself
- Don’t fix, don’t avoid, just be present
- Don’t expect applause
- Abandon any hope of fruition (i.e. “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worth doing, no matter how it turns out” Václav Havel)
- Come back again and again
- Everything has a beginning, a middle and an end
- Nothing means what you think it means
- Be grateful to everyone
- Savour the uncertainty
- Maintain your sense of humour
- Is it kind?
- What do these mean to you and how might they be useful in your daily practice and interactions?

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

We were curious how helpful participants were finding the training a year later and so in March 2021, we invited the cohort of systems leaders or “warriors” to take part in a short survey. Below is a summary of their reflections.

Participants valued the respite from their busy lives and the space to make sense of what was happening in the world, particularly given the timing of the programme right before the first COVID national lockdown. For many, it was about tuning into what their work really was and what that meant for them, to reconnect with both themselves and others:

**“What is needed?
How can I help?
That cuts away a lot
of stuff”**

**“Do not expect ap-
plause - and behave
with dignity and de-
cency in the service
of others.”**

**“Making a differ-
ence on a small
scale, where I am in
the world”**

**“Tune into the work
that needs to be
done and identify if
that is my work.”**

When asked about what they learned about themselves, there were some deep reflections:

“The depth of my anger and powerlessness”

“Despite being with a wonderful group of people I had my guard up because I felt very vulnerable. I tell myself I’m not vulnerable but I was/am. On reflection, this is a pattern that plays out in my life and it took this event for me to see it in a way that I could start to do something about it.”

Many noted the ability to be kinder and cultivating compassion for self and others; as well as the practices to cultivate the ability to see what is really going on in any given situation rather than what they expected to be happening based on the past.

“The ability to savour uncertainty and recognise that not everything is always what it seems - this has made me more tolerant of and patient with individuals and situations”

“A greater appreciation of the many ways of knowing that are important to incorporate in our work, including knowing myself better, to be better present for others.”

Others spoke about the programme also helping them to develop the self-discipline required to strengthen these skills in the future by keeping up with the practices e.g. mindfulness, reflection space, deep listening practice.

“My commitment to relationships and networks, my ability to connect with myself and therefore work better with others. I am constantly working on maintaining this mind set, as it is so easy to slip back into old ways.”

Due to the depth of this kind of personal work, it can sometimes be difficult for participants to pin point concrete ways training like this has impacted on them. However, participants shared many examples of how the work was showing up in their day to day lives. Many now feel better equipped to pause which led to wiser actions, and to pay attention to relationships at home and at work which has enabled them to face complex, difficult situations in a more considered and grounded way.

“When the work-load of self-imposed projects threatens to feel depleting, remain present, listen to the body’s energy and find a sane balance.”

“To be with what is rather than what I want it to be”

“I am more positive, I am more curious and balanced in my responses. Generally I feel I am a better citizen of the world. It’s hard to describe but I feel more content with myself, whilst at the same time not complacent. Being more contented, feeling more able to be present, listen better and think differently has made a huge difference in my life and in those around me.”

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Participants also mentioned how welcome the connections and support of the cohort was to them during and since the programme. Other ways the training impacted participants were:

“The simple injunction to do what is yours to do in your context. This counsels me to stay present during Covid when feeling out of sorts with the world”

“It gave me an increased impetus to live differently and support others to see that there are alternatives to what we all think are givens”

“In my personal life I have managed to let go of a number of things in an easier way and focussed on understanding the reasons for the issue/problem/change rather than just wanting to solve”

“Being more direct in asking for what I need and in making decisions to try things rather than keeping all options open. Speaking up when I feel it’s needed.”

“Accepting my informal role as a leader in a community of interest.”

“I reassessed the work I was involved with and made changes so that I could do the work that makes best use of my talents and skills”

When asked if others had seen a change in them, the most common insight was that participants were seen as calmer, patient and more supportive of others:

“My ability to stay calm under pressure”

“I am more focused and calm and dedicated to specific areas of work”

“Calmer, easier going and more time to be present for those who need me.”

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

The programme wasn't without its challenges for some however, with comments particularly around there being less space for discussion and challenge than had been expected and the difficulties with the concept that hope can be a trap.

As warrior work is a constant learning process, participants noted the questions they were continuing to work on:

**“What is the Work that needs doing?
Am I the person to be doing it?”**

“What’s needed ? How can I help ?”

**“What is my work?
How can I create an island of sanity given
my informal community setting?
How can I teach myself not to be triggered,
and remember that teaching?
How can I start afresh each time with
people that have triggered me in the past?”**



**“How do I stay present to what is,
while sustaining energy to do the work?”**

**“How can I not despair to the point of
impotence and failure?”**

**“Where do I focus my creativity
and energy?”**

**“I questioned everything I had been doing
and how I understood my life”**

And some final reflections:

**“I am glad I went on the training, I believe
it gave me a framework to understand
what happened to me personally when the
pandemic hit and enabled me to go deeper
into some of the darker stuff that arose for
me in the face of the global issues that at
times felt so overwhelming”**

**“I was surprised at the extent to which
the experience together felt like much
more than a training programme,
instead offering a doorway into a range of
practices and learning that have the
potential to be genuinely life-changing.”**

**“The following line swirling its way into my
consciousness:**

**“Warrior work requires me to be brave.
To not act in a way that is driven by my
need to be accepted, valued, enough or
better. Warrior work is work of the heart
that is undertaken with conviction and
kindness””**

LEADING INTO THE FUTURE

In going forward, participants were keen to continue to learn together and support each other, particularly when things get difficult. Since the end of the programme, the cohort have organised ways to ensure this, for example learning together through a book club and regular dialogue walks in pairs around the warrior lessons.

Influenced partly through the success of the Scotland programme, Meg's next step is to take the warrior programme more firmly into communities, in a number of countries around the world. Cohorts are forming in the U.S., Canada, U.K., European nations, South Africa and Zimbabwe. There will be opportunities to learn together as a global community during the six months of training.

Each cohort is regionally based and brings together people from a broad variety of organizations and activists from that specific region. As leaders from the whole system, it is intended that participants will learn a great deal from one another, understand the complexity of issues and challenges, and work together to create new possibilities for the region as well as for their own organisation.

Every month from January to June 2022, the cohorts will meet in their own locale for a full day of teachings and practices, hosted by the Partner organization and with live teachings and interactions (via Zoom) with Margaret (Meg) Wheatley and other faculty.

We are currently exploring a range of possibilities for further Warrior cohorts to be formed in Scotland.

We will host a Reflection and Information Session on Wednesday 27 October from 10 am until 12 noon, which will be an opportunity to share what has been learned through the Warrior Training and the difference this has made, as well as signaling the future possibility to be involved in the work from January 2022.

Sign up to the session [here](#).

Stay in touch!

You can find more information about our work on our web-pages at:

www.collectiveleadershipscotland.com

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