In “Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time”, Margaret Wheatley provides an edited collection of essays on what she terms the “new science” or “new paradigm” in relation to leadership, organizations, management and change. The following review provides a summary of the book, discusses particularly interesting themes in the context of performance measurement and management, highlights perceived strengths and weaknesses, and offers a final recommendation.

**Summary**
The majority of the book’s chapters are practice-focused articles, where Wheatley discusses the organizational practices and behaviors that drive effective organizational change. The ideas addressed in the book tend to be theoretical rather than technical, and the writing is more poetic than prosaic.

The book begins with a description of the new paradigm, which is best described as a collection of principles and themes from fields as diverse as systems theory, quantum mechanics, organizational psychology, indigenous and ancient wisdom, and postmodernism. The most prevalent themes of Wheatley’s new paradigm are its rejection of the mechanistic, materialistic scientific paradigm, an anti-hierarchical nature, and the recognition that an inherent organizational intelligence is present in both people and the systems that form around people. This includes concepts such as: living systems form from shared interests; all change results from a change in meaning; every living system is free to choose whether it changes; and, systems contain their own solutions. 

Wheatley challenges many of the dominant views of western science and its impact on leadership and management. She argues that accumulating failures at organizational change are attributed to the mistaken assumption that organizations are machines. To Wheatley, this is an outdated seventeenth-century notion, and an unfortunate byproduct of the Western worldview. Her vision is one in which organizations are adaptive, flexible, self-renewing, resilient, learning, and intelligent – all of which are features found only in living systems. The main problem, in Wheatley’s mind, is that while we want our organizations to behave as living systems, we only know how to treat them like machines.

She lays out four core principles for change to truly happen: 1) Participation is not a choice – we must invite people to rethink, redesign and restructure the organization. 2) Life always reacts to directives, but it never obeys them. Therefore, we must expect reactions as varied as the individuals who hear the directives. 3) We do not see “reality”; rather, we each create our
own interpretation of what’s real. The paradox of this assertion is that we don’t have to agree on something or hold identical values, but if we come together and listen to different perspectives we become open to new ways of thinking. 4) In order to create better health in a living system, we need to connect it to more of itself. In other words, solutions are actually found within a system if more and better connections are created.

Wheatley concludes the book with reflections on her years of experience witnessing life’s dynamics for self-organization and change. She writes about her hopes, fears, experiences, and need to accept and embrace the paradoxical nature of reality.

**Particularly Interesting Themes**

In the context of performance measurement and management, Wheatley provides intriguing sections about the downside of command and control leadership, the importance of personal responsibility and knowledge management, and the uses and abuses of performance measurement.

**Command and Control**

Wheatley provides a critique of traditional modes of leadership and management, and is worried that most leaders try to “engineer” change in their organizations, creating features designed from the outside and then building them in. Command and control is criticized as leading to worker disengagement, an inability to solve problems, and leaders being scapegoated and fired. She believes organizations are living systems that require creativity, participation, experimentation, and freedom. Wheatley thinks we must engage everyone’s intelligence in solving organizational challenges and crises as they arise. While she agrees there is a place for standards, measures, values, organizational structure and plans, in a living system these things are generated through the work of people who determine what works for that particular situation.

**Personal Responsibility and Knowledge Management**

The importance of the paradox of personal responsibility and interdependence is a reoccurring theme in the book. Meaning plays a central role in Wheatley’s new paradigm, as does identity and relationships. We are also called to see that life is uncontrollable, unpredictable, surprising and erratic. This requires a willingness to experiment, and allow things to get chaotic, and take time to develop.

Wheatley stresses the importance of knowledge management and the limiting beliefs that prevent it. Knowledge management is not about technology (relationships, not technology, connect us) — “knowledge is created by human beings, and the most important work we can undertake is recognizing the human dimension.”

**Performance Measurement**

There is an interesting chapter on the uses and abuses of measurement. Wheatley thinks we are too concerned with quantitative data, and use measures to control systems and people. “Most managers want reliable, quality work and people to perform better, as well as accountability, focus, teamwork, and quality.” The question is whether you can find measures that sustain these behaviors? Wheatley’s answer is no. The behaviors listed are actually performance capabilities that can only emerge if a shared sense of work and connection to each other is developed. In fact, she thinks many organizations are actually hurting themselves with too many
measures - trying to satisfy bosses instead of getting better at their job. This fixation on measures is said to lead people to disconnect from a larger purpose, focus only on meeting measurements, and to play the “numbers game” while losing motivation to do good work.

At the same time, Wheatley thinks measurement is critical in the sense that it provides feedback. She differentiates feedback from measurement in that feedback is self-generated, dependent on context, open to change, and life sustaining. If we want measures that more resemble feedback, it is important to ask questions like: Who gets to create the measures? How will we measure our measures? Are we designing measures that are permeable rather than rigid? Will these measures create information that increases our capacity to develop, to grow the purposes of this organization? What measures will inform us about critical capacities – accountability, learning, teamwork, quality and innovation? These questions, like most of Wheatley’s ideas, require extensive participation, creativity, and experimentation. And while they appear to have strong potential in producing better outcomes for organizations, it is almost assuredly at more time and cost. Unfortunately, Wheatley does not give the reader a clear benefit/cost assessment of adopting her methods.

**Strengths**

For a practitioner who feels disillusioned about their current state of affairs, this book may provide a fresh perspective. The writing is poetic, inspirational, and philosophical. Wheatley’s work builds off existing literature on performance measurement and management, but also offers a new approach. Her contribution is quite unique in the way she applies wisdom from such diverse fields to inform her understanding of leadership. While she does not cite any other scholars or practitioners in the book, her ideas regarding systems thinking and learning organizations have parallels with people like Peter Senge, Donella Meadows, and Dee Hock.

In the same vein as “Reinventing Government”, her book covers a lot of ground, and provides a broad set of themes, frameworks, and ideas rather than specific steps one could take to make change. It does not provide an explicit approach to performance measurement, like “The Balanced Scorecard” or United Way’s “Measuring Program Outcomes.” Rather, the book presents an entirely new philosophy of leadership and organizations, one that is built on connection, diversity, relationships, meaning and community.

**Weaknesses**

Those familiar with Margaret Wheatley know there is no denying her expertise. She is a highly respected management consultant, with many years of experience transforming organizations, teaching, publishing and applying the principles laid out in the book. She has served as full-time graduate management faculty at Cambridge College and Brigham Young University, and her work has appeared in publications such as “Journal for Strategic Performance Measurement”, “Frontiers of Health Service Management” and “IHRIM Journal”. Some of her clients include the US Army Chief of Staff, DuPont, GE, Harley Davidson, Oracle, Continental Airlines, junior high schools and hospitals.

In the book, however, where Wheatley’s writing excels, her use of specific case studies leaves the reader wondering about her credibility. For example, in the sections on knowledge management
and performance measurement she provides intriguing ideas, but does not detail the extent and type of evidence she bases her findings and conclusions on. There are simply not enough real-life examples to strengthen and reinforce her ideas. This can leave readers wondering about the practicality of actually undertaking the ideas she so eloquently writes about. She espouses ideas like ‘unity-in-diversity’, ‘transforming aggression’, and ‘relying on everyone’s creativity’, but they can come across as dramatically oversimplified and idealistic. She is quick to admit that what she is writing about is not easy to achieve, but does not provide clear examples of the organizations and individuals who fought through their challenges to reap the rewards. Again, a clearer explanation of how things might actually play out would make for a more compelling argument. In her defense, perhaps there are not explicit and mechanistic models that every organization could adapt, but rather, unique approaches required on a case by case basis.

Finally, the concluding section of the book that contains Wheatley’s personal reflections may alienate a more technical rational audience. This is unfortunate, given that this is the group she seems to be trying to reach most. Businesspeople, public administrators and others who are seeking information on performance management may not want to read a collection of essays, and would prefer something more akin to “Performance Management for Dummies”. Those already predisposed to her ways of thinking/feeling/living are much more likely to enjoy this book.

Recommendation
For those interested in Wheatley’s work, her book “Leadership and the New Science” is less philosophical and poetic, and instead provides readers with specific methods to implement the ideas presented in “Finding Our Way.” If readers are more interested in practical tools to improve their organization, “Leadership and the New Science” would be a better choice. However, if you are looking for inspiration, beautiful writing, and new ways of viewing organizations and the dynamics that govern change then I wholeheartedly recommend “Finding Our Way.”