



# BEYOND CONTROL

**P**icture this: you're running a team coaching session with 12 managers and directors, divided into groups of four. Each must decide on a single rule they all follow in their daily working lives.

Group one says maximising profit is the overall rule that influences behaviour and choice. Everyone nods their head.

Group two says that new product development is the primary driver.

Then the third group's spokesperson stands up and says there is one rule which dictates behaviour in this company and that is to cover the boss's ass. The room erupts with laughter. A truth has been told and a change in the system has occurred. As coach, what do you do next?

Human systems dynamics (HSD) offers a single answer. This emerging coaching field starts at the intersection of chaos and complexity and the social sciences.

An obvious and formidable aspect of coaching is its complexity. HSD doesn't avoid or limit it; it embraces it using tools created by Glenda Eoyang and colleagues at The Human Systems Dynamics Institute for working with Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS).

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Coaching faces huge amounts of complexity. But must we always contain it in a change situation?

Not according to **Glenda Eoyang**, creator of Human Systems Dynamics, and colleague **Sally Gritten**.

They explain why we should embrace the uncertainty

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So what's different about HSD?

Traditional approaches to systems focus only on one level at a time.

Their characteristics are as follows:

- **Interventions** – individual, team, organisation or community.
- **Change as snapshots** – one before and one after the change.
- **Cause and effect** – every effect has an identifiable cause and every cause has predictable effects.
- **Problems** – each problem has a single cause at its root and the root cause can be identified.
- **Change** – driven by pre-determined purposes. Professionals predict the results of change and control action towards results.

In HSD, however, approaches are seen as follows:

- **Interventions** – focus on whole systems and relationships among individuals, teams, organisations and communities. Change is a flow of interactions over time.

- **Causes and effect** – what looks like an effect is also a cause. Every change has many causes and every cause many effects.

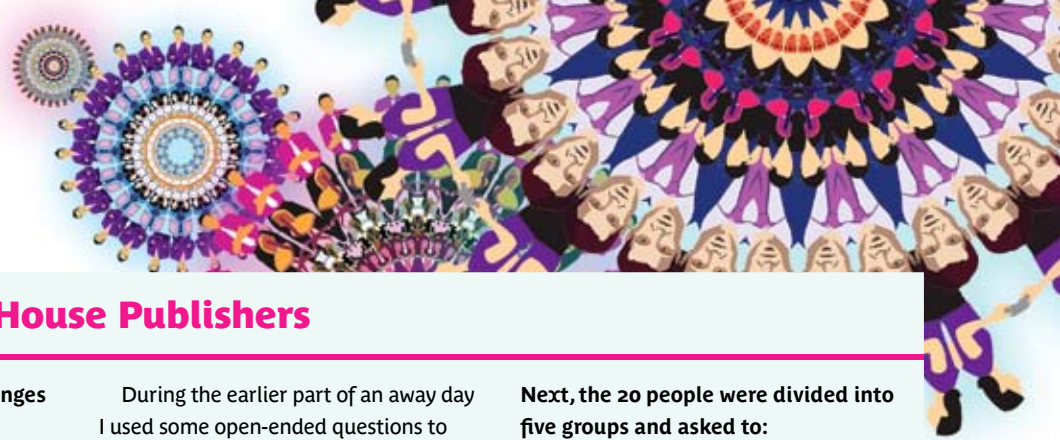
- **Change** – results of change cannot always be predicted. They emerge from complex interactions over time. Unintended consequences are a fact of life. Professionals expect it.

- **Unpredictability** – the future unfolds in unpredictable ways. Professionals adapt to it.

Such differences are key to determining the appropriate intervention in a change situation. As coach, you can assess the change that's happening. Then you and the client can examine the source of uncertainty and its possible consequences in each change category.







## Case study: Hay House Publishers

**Success had brought growth, changes in leadership and an increased number of staff at Hay House Publishers. The managing director needs to move the company towards a new way of working. She has a strong vision and wants to ensure that the employees understand it.**

One of the Adaptive Action Processes found in HSD is called Simple Rules. This tool helps agents in the system make decisions about what they'll do. The rules are not values. They don't tell anyone what to think or feel. They depend on individual freedom to interpret and apply in unique situations.

I used Simple Rules as part of the team process. I'd already worked with one condition of self-organising systems by helping the MD and her deputy create a new reporting structure for the company ('Change the Container'). Predictably, this also changed the significant differences and transactions in the company.

During the earlier part of an away day I used some open-ended questions to help the team articulate who they were, how they believed they were seen by others and how they wanted to be seen. The following is what happened next at a company away day:

### The away day

I told the team that we were about to identify the Hay House DNA after the organisational change and that I would be asking them to create a shortlist of simple rules for the company. However, they needed to follow rules for the rules.

#### These needed to:

- 1 *amplify and reward what is the desired behaviour across the organisation.*
- 2 *be brief, powerful and transferable across the organisation.*
- 3 *form part of a shortlist (five max).*
- 4 *include rules on how people come together and how they are as a group; differences in the group and about how those in the organisation exchange information and other resources.*
- 5 *begin with an action verb.*

**Next, the 20 people were divided into five groups and asked to:**

- 1 *brainstorm list.*
- 2 *ask: What's missing? What's overlapping? What's assumed?*

After 15 minutes each team posted their rules. Then the whole group repeated the process (new 'container').

#### The group agreed on four rules:

- *Ask, don't assume.*
- *Acknowledge excellent performance.*
- *Respond to all enquiries from co-workers, customers, authors, suppliers.*
- *Listen without interrupting.*

Meetings were held with leaders to embed the rules through performance appraisals, continued discussions, rule review over time and even to include the rules in the recruiting process.

Three months on, the MD and her deputy reported back that their objectives were starting to be realised, and indeed were apparent in many places, especially in meetings.

**Sally Gritten**

## Types of change

There are three types of change: static, dynamic and dynamical.

- **Static change** is predictable. The right set of rewards will generate the right kinds of response.
- **Dynamic change** is more or less predictable but requires a sequence of initiated actions to happen as they have done before to create the same change. Stages and phases of development can be predicted over time.
- **Dynamical change**, however, is unpredictable. Growth is an unpredictable sequence of breakthroughs and insights.

The answers of the three groups would change the session. The first

two group's answers were dynamic, and somewhat predictable.

But the third answer was dynamical in that no one saw it coming. The change in the room was unpredictable.

Some coaching theories, methods and tools may be better suited to different types of change. How effectively do your coaching frameworks work in static, dynamic and dynamical change? For example, when using the rep grid tool in Personal Construct Theory, the results are never predictable for the client or coach. It produces dynamical change.

CAS, self-organising systems, often set the context for dynamical change. CAS is defined as a

collection of individual agents who have the freedom to act in unpredictable ways, and whose actions are interconnected such that they produce system-wide patterns. These, in turn, influence future behaviour.

Our managers illustrate a CAS perfectly. The managers are the agents. When asked to state a company rule each group member and the group as a whole as agents entered into interactions and created a pattern of behaviour.

It is the recognition and understanding of these patterns that lead coaches and their clients to understand what's actually happening. They can then offer solutions by examining what new patterns might look like.



“HSD accepts that even though life always reacts to directives, it never obeys them, no matter how important”

### Making patterns

Patterns are similarities, differences and relationships that have meaning across space and/or time. Our managers have a clear pattern. Covering their boss's ass is something they all do, though some do it differently. But this pattern of relationships is one that has existed over space and time.

A self-organising system is like a dance:

- Constantly changing
- Irreducible
- Not replicable
- Emergent
- Interactive
- Familiar whole, and
- Surprising parts.

Because of these traits, it can be influenced but not controlled. This is perhaps one of the strongest factors in HSD and its alignment with coaching.

### Assessing the process

Coaching does not set out to control. It sets out to offer perspectives, ask questions and comment on interactions or behaviours. These interactions, however, are only ever intended to influence. The power to change – or not – lies in the client.

The same is true for CAS. As leaders, coaches or any other change

agent, the most one can hope to do is to influence the agents who act as they will to create the system.

Within CAS there are three conditions to observe so we may assess where an organisation is in its self-organising process:

**1 The container** – this sets the bounds for the self-organising system. It may be physical (offices, location), organisational (reporting structure, departments) or conceptual (identity, purpose).

**2 Significant differences** – these determine the patterns that emerge in self-organising processes, such as power, levels of expertise, gender and education.

**3 Transforming exchanges** – these form the connections between system agents. Information, money and energy are the media for transforming exchanges.

Critically, no one of these conditions stand alone. If one changes, there will be changes in the other two. Thus, in a one-to-one coaching relationship, the behaviour of the client may change due to transforming exchanges. It is important, however, for coach and client to be aware that the client's change will shift the complex system in which the client works.

Thus, seeing the pattern, and understanding the conditions of container,

significant differences and transforming exchanges are not enough. It is through Adaptive Action Process that you, as coach, may influence the system. There are numerous adaptive action tools available to the HSD coach (see *case study, opposite page*).

HSD accepts that even though life always reacts to directives, it never obeys them, no matter how visionary or important. It elicits reactions, not compliance. If we recognise that this principle is at work all the time everywhere, it changes expectations of what can be achieved when we communicate.

We can expect reactions as varied as the individuals who hear them. Therefore, anything we say or write is only an invitation to our clients to become involved with us, to think with us. If we offer our work as an invitation to react, it changes our relationships with clients. It opens us up to the partnering relationships that life craves. Life accepts partners, not bosses. ■

● The first 10-day HSD Institute External Professional Certification programme in Europe will be held in London from 27 September to 1 October and from 25 to 29 October ([www.hsdinstitute.org](http://www.hsdinstitute.org)). For more information contact Sally Gritten at [sgritten@hsdinstitute.org](mailto:sgritten@hsdinstitute.org)

● *Glenda Eoyang is the founding executive director of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute.*

● *Sally Gritten created a successful client centred practice for business leaders. She is establishing the Centre for HSD in Europe.*

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