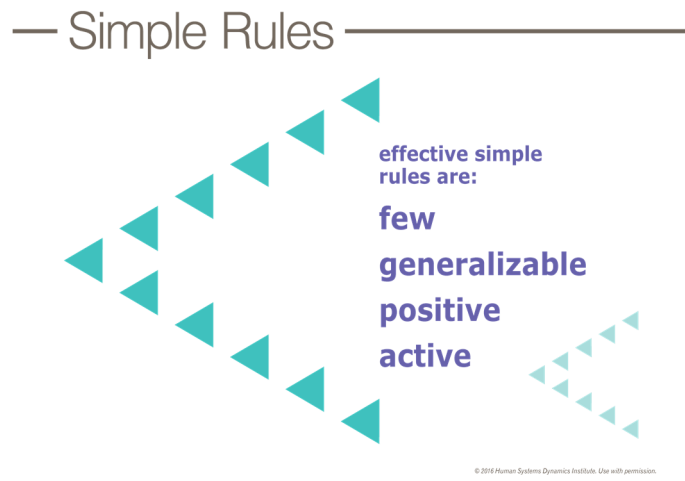# Simple Rules

Description of Simple Rules

Simple Rules are the agreed-upon guides that inform behavior and interactions among members of a Complex Adaptive System.*****
Whether by conscious agreement or by unspoken assent, members of a CAS appear to engage with each other according to a short list of simple rules. Those Simple Rules shape the conditions that characterize the dominant patterns of the system.

— Simple Rules ——

effective simple rules are:

few
generalizable
positive
active

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What?

Simple Rules can be overt agreements about behavior in a system or they can be covert understandings. They can guide the behavior of an individual or a team or a family or a community. Together the Simple Rules act in interdependent ways to influence the conditions that shape the speed, path, and direction of emergent patterns in the system.

So What?

Because they shape the dominant patterns among the agents, Simple Rules shape the culture of a complex system. They can emerge from history of interactions and decisions, or Simple Rules can emerge in a short session of intentional planning and decision making.

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* For more information, see www.hsdinstitute.org.

Nothing is intractable.

Now What?

Teams can use Simple Rules in a number of ways.

► They can come together and agree on the patterns they want and establish Simple Rules they believe will shape those patterns.

► They can review their work together retrospectively to identify the unspoken Simple Rules that may be in effect. Then the team can choose to continue with the Rules that shape patterns they want, and find new Rules to shape patterns they want to improve.
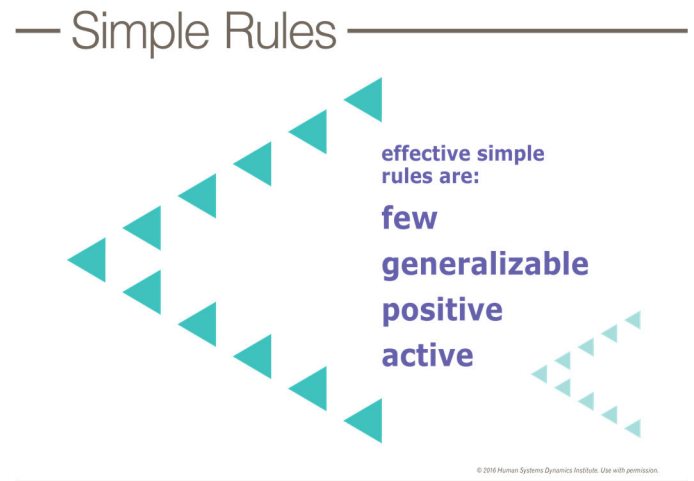
Nothing is intractable.

Simple Rules

What is the Purpose of Simple Rules?

Simple Rules are agreements that inform behavior, so a diverse group can function as one. They set conditions that shape the emergent patterns as a group self-organizes. The rules may emerge from covert or overt agreements among the players, and they inform decisions and actions to create coherence across the whole.

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Families, organizations, and communities establish Simple Rules as they learn to live, work, and play together. Sometimes Simple Rules are codified through laws, regulations, contracts, or other formal means. At the same time Simple Rules can be unspoken, passing from person to person and generation to generation by the traditions and expectations that help people know how to belong and fit within the Simple Rules' cultural patterns.

The Human Systems Dynamics Institute uses a set of Simple Rules to define our culture—one that is aimed at ensuring resilience and coherence for individuals, groups, and our network as a whole. Employees, board members, network Associates, and interested colleagues around the globe experience these Simple Rules to shape the core patterns of the Institute. Our Simple Rules and their definitions appear below.

▶ **Teach and learn in every interaction** Stand together in inquiry, exploring ideas, building shared meaning, and learning from and with others. Share what you know and remain open to new ideas, deeper insights, and broader perspectives.

▶ **Give and get value for value** Build balanced relationships where each individual or group gets what is needed, and each is allowed to contribute as they can. Negotiate differences with questions that increase individual and collective resilience.

▶ **Search for the true and the useful** Ensure that solutions and questions address real-world complexity. Check for truth in what you see and hear; seek

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usefulness in what you learn. Question assumptions and subjective truths at all scales.

► **Attend to the whole, part, and greater whole** See linkages and connections across systems. Recognize forces and influences in all areas. While global issues shape conditions in your world, know that change is driven by person-to-person interactions.

► **Engage in joyful practice** Recognize the value of engagement and commitment. Understand how joyful practice emerges when individuals and groups engage in work they love, know their contribution to success of the greater whole, and know their contributions are valued.

► **Share your HSD story** Be explicit in your use of Pattern Logic to see, understand, and influence patterns. Use what you know to contribute to adaptive capacity in the systems where you live, work, and play. Share what you learn as you explore the options and opportunities of using HSD.

So What Can You Do to Use Simple Rules?

Simple Rules establish the conditions that give rise to patterns in the system. They can be covert agreements that emerge over time in a system, creating its culture. Often new leaders come into a system and state their intention to change the culture and "create a new world" for the workers, stakeholders, and customers. The problem is that unless intentional steps are taken to uncover and change the existing Simple Rules that hold those patterns in place, no amount of leadership command will change the system-wide patterns. Simple Rules can be used retrospectively to understand what shaped the conditions to generate whatever patterns are currently in the system.

On the other hand, Simple Rules can be used prospectively to shape a desired future. Groups can identify patterns they want to generate and define Simple Rules that seem most likely to help them generate those patterns. What is critical in establishing system-wide patterns is that everyone has to use a shared set of Simple Rules at all levels of decision making and action. This requires a shared understanding of what the Rules mean and agreements to use the Rules to make decisions.

Simple Rules are different from the norms we name for meetings and short-term interactions because they are intended to be more generally applied and not time bound. They are also different from values and beliefs because they are about action. They start with a verb, so they inform action.

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Now What Can You Do to Create Simple Rules Do in Your System?

You can use Simple Rules in your system to shape the future.

► Name the dominant patterns in your system. Identify those you want to maintain and those you want to change.

► Work with others to develop a set of Simple Rules that will help to shape those patterns you want. Remember the rules about Simple Rules. They are:

▷ Few in number (never more than about 5-9)

▷ General statements that apply in any situation

▷ Always stated in the positive

▷ Always stated with with action verbs.

► Find ways to embed Simple Rules in your own system. The following suggestions can help you do that.

▷ Describe together among yourselves about what the Rules look like and what they do not look like. *In systems where they have adopted Simple Rules, we work with different departments to explore what the Rules look like in their areas. We encourage individuals to consider what the Simple Rules mean to them personally and professionally.*

▷ Take one each week to focus on in meetings and conversations.

☐ *One CEO we worked with put one Simple Rule as a footer in her executive team agenda format. They talked about their work using that as a lens for that week. After having worked through the list, they used all five of their Simple Rules to asses and inform their work together.*

☐ *A department head formulates a question about the Simple Rules in every meeting, and each of the participants answers them.*

▷ Write the Simple Rules on the wall. *One of our clients has their list of Simple Rules painted as a mural on the wall in their Board Room.*

▷ Put them in pictures, use them to tell the story of your system. Make sure they are shared across the organization. *One kindergarten teacher we work with helped her students learn and use simple rules by using pictures, songs, and children's literature to help them understand patterns of behavior.*

▷ Revisit the list often. As patterns become set in the system you may be able to shift to other areas to establish new Simple Rules.

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▷ Don't call them "Simple Rules" if there are people who are bothered by the idea of more rules. *One group we worked with called them "Seed Behaviors" and people were very comfortable stepping into their use.*

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