Adaptive Action:
Taking Action in an Uncertain World

by Royce Holladay

I worked in strategic planning most of my life, so I appreciate the coherence and sense of movement that a well-executed plan brings to an organization. I also recognize that in real life, you can’t always plan for all that might happen in the next three to five years. Over time, I adapted the process, trying to solve challenges I felt in traditional planning models, but there were two things that kept me stuck. First, what to do when your actions don’t bring about your desired outcomes? Second, what do you do when you hit the wall and see no options for action? Whenever my clients and I got stuck by either of these challenges, I did everything I could think of, but nothing worked completely. Frankly I began to shy away when clients acted like they wanted a strategic plan. And then I found Adaptive Action—or it found me. In my work with Glenda Eoyang, we developed this process of iterative planning to help us deal with the challenges of traditional planning.

Adaptive Action is a planning model that provides quick feedback in cycles of work and observation that can be as short as a heartbeat, as long as a year, and span across a lifetime. It’s accessible enough that everyone in an organization can use it to solve problems, plan for the future, and make more effective decisions. It’s a simple and elegant way of moving a system toward long-range goals as it allows for the day-to-day realities and uncertainties along the way. It’s a process that takes you to a deeper level to see, understand, and influence the underlying dynamics that shape the challenges you face. In Adaptive Action, you ask three questions: **What? So what? Now what?**

In the **What?** stage, you simply describe current reality. What’s happening in the system? What’s happening in your world? What are you seeing, feeling, experiencing? In this stage, you name and describe, as thoroughly as you can, the current status, focusing on the challenge you need to address. What seems certain? Where are you uncertain?

In the **So what?** stage, you ask, “So what does all this mean?” You explore the implications of your work, identifying current rationales, new research and forces that may be shaping your world. You consider risks and benefits that go along with the uncertainty of the situation. You explore the underlying dynamics of the challenges, using HSD tools to understand and to identify new options for action.

In the **Now what?** stage, you take action and then assess your impact. Did the situation change? In what ways? What were the unintended consequences that might have emerged? What’s happening now? What am I uncertain about now? If you are paying attention, you recognize that you are back to the **What?** stage, describing the patterns as they stand after your action. That’s the iterative nature of Adaptive Action—you always end up at the start of another cycle.

So I realized that Adaptive Action offers new ways to think about the limitations I saw in traditional planning processes. First, it let me name and explore the uncertainty in my system. The nature of Adaptive Action gives me shorter cycles of action and feedback, which allows me to respond to unexpected events and take corrective action more quickly. Second I can see more deeply into the challenges, which gives me more options for taking action to change my world. When I understand a challenge from a new perspective, I can figure out new ways to respond.

The free tool this month is a framework for questions to use in each stage of Adaptive Action. These questions help you see, understand, and influence the dynamics at the heart of your system. They also help you find new ways to take action if you don’t know what to do. Use the tool the next time you feel stuck, and let us know how it works for you. In a few weeks, our next book, *Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty In Your Organization* is set to launch. In it, you will find a wealth of background and understanding about using Adaptive Action as a way to move your organization forward. In the mean time, visit our blog site at Adaptive Action to learn more about how we and others use this model of planning and action to make a difference in our worlds.
Adaptive Action Worksheet

Working through What? So What? and Now What?

**What?**
- What do I know for sure?
- What patterns do I observe in part, whole, greater whole?
- What feelings or reactions do I see?
- What lies on the horizon?
- What data do I have?
- What stories have I heard?
- What has changed?
- What are the gaps in what I know?

**So What?**
- So what doesn’t fit for me? For us?
- So what is the difference between what I want and what I have?
- So what led here? Might lead out?
- So what constraints can I observe?
- So what are the most relevant Boundaries? Differences? Connections?
- So what are my options for action?

**Now What?**
- Now what will I do?
- Now who might I include in action?
- Now what will I expect to see as system change?
- Now what unintended consequences might arise?
- Now what will mark success or failure?
- Now what do I need to communicate to others?