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*EVERY MONTH **ATTRACTORS** SHARES TIPS AND TOOLS FROM HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS. IN THIS MONTH'S EDITION, GLENDA EOYANG EXPLORES THE RULES FOR WINNING THE EMERGING GAME.*

**WINNING THE INFINITE GAME**

It is easy to think of organizational change as a finite game with beginning, middle, and end. Organization development professionals talk about stages from beginning to end of a successful intervention. Clients expect complex change projects to be predictable.

All of these expectations are reasonable when change is a **finite** game. In a finite game, the goal is clear and unwavering, someone wins and others lose, the playing field is bounded, and the number and roles of players are constant from the opening to the closing bell. When organizations meet these criteria, then organizational change will be predictable and under control.

For our clients, things are seldom so neat and tidy. We help them play and win a different game, an **infinite** game where uncertainty and adaptation are the only constants.

Goals shift to meet emerging demands of the marketplace and technical capacity. Even though overall direction, vision, and identity are constant, specific goals adjust as new information becomes available. As the landscape of competitors and customers evolves, a successful organization moves with it to focus on new goals and opportunities. For example, we are helping one client restructure a measurement and evaluation system to reflect the ways in which their goals have shifted from process optimization, to outcome improvement, to systemic transformation. The need to improve performance is constant, but the definition of top-notch performance changes over time.

Partners look for win-win solutions in which each one contributes to the success of others. In complex and fast-changing situations, today's competitor might be tomorrow's client, owner, or partner. A healthy business ecology supports the success of all as each finds its own unique niche for sustainability and success. In one recent example, HSD Associates redesign service delivery by focusing on the differences among and unique contributions of groups that have seen themselves as competitors for decades.

The playing field is expanding in many ways. Our clients are working in global contexts. They are developing new products and services to expand their customer base. They reach beyond traditional resource constraints and cultural expectations to broaden their capacities and markets. Even the 40-hour work week is no longer a reasonable boundary as 24/7 service delivery becomes the norm. They build

technology and infrastructure that reach across traditional boundaries of space and time to play on an ever-expanding field.

New players enter the game and others shift roles to adapt to shifting demands and opportunities. One of our clients talks about holding meetings “at a bus stop.” Each time the group meets, new constituents appear. Even the most committed of the group have powerful conflicting commitments, so they are not always available at the same time and place. Virtual teams, global responsibilities, and changing performance expectations bring different people to the table. A successful game plan includes strategies to sustain continuity in the midst of disruption.

Under circumstances like these, our clients play to win the infinite game. In *Finite and Infinite Games* (Free Press, 1986), James P. Carse describes in detail the different paradigms behind finite games of the past and the infinite games of our complex future. One of the most fundamental differences is that a finite game ends with winners and losers. The purpose of an infinite game, on the other hand, is for everyone to keep playing.

To succeed in their emergent and unpredictable environments, our clients follow new rules and develop new capabilities to:

- Collect and analyze data continually to anticipate change as it emerges.
- Build agility and expect to develop new strategies and tactics as old ones become obsolete.
- Stay connected with constituencies near and far.
- Collect and tell stories that describe history and opportunity; hope and informative error.
- Hold to a short list of simple rules that provide stability in the midst of learning and adaptation.
- Value questions more than answers, because inquiry opens them to learning and growth.
- Plan and plan again in iterative cycles of observation, decision, and action.

Do you find yourself playing the new game by the old rules? Are you working harder and harder and seeing less and less success? Perhaps you are in the middle of an infinite game and need new skills and perspectives to keep the game going. If so, join us on our journey of discovery.

- Visit our web site at [www.hsdinstitute.org](http://www.hsdinstitute.org)
- Join us at the Organization Development Network Conference
- Look for our emerging presence on the ODN web site (October, 2006)
- Consider becoming a Human Systems Dynamics Professional and Associate in the HSD Network

We would like to play the infinite game with you!

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