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*Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics. In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang presents a **Radical Inquiry Protocol** to build adaptive capacity for agents of change.*

Agents of Change: Radical Inquiry

Our clients are agents of change.

- Mary consults with teachers and school administrators as they reform their institutions and methods to meet the needs of children and youth.
- Jamie leads a team of mental health professionals who assess and respond to families in crisis.
- Bob manages resources and processes to deliver a range of human services in a rural community.
- Esther administers a project to build interprofessional communities of practice to improve education for health care professionals.
- Pam supervises direct service providers.
- Mary develops and implements a strategic plan for information technology in a complex service environment.

Each of these talented professionals has discovered that, in times of rapid change, prediction and control aren't possible. They see that learning is a core competency for success. Their learning is not a traditional process where an expert transmits information and tests performance. Rather it is an emergent process in which experience challenges expectation, and each agent of change must observe, decide, and act with intention and integrity.

That is why the Associates of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute commit to "teach and learn in every interaction." Together, we form a community of learning where experience is the teacher, and shared reflection is the mode of mutual instruction.

We shared our process of Radical Inquiry at the OD Network Conference in San Francisco last week. It is a simple and powerful way to embed learning into day-to-day practice. One participant commented, "It was so simple, I didn't think that it could be so robust!"

The process is based on several assumptions.

- Human systems of all sizes and in all environments are in a constant state of self-organizing. Multiple players and many different variables influence individual behaviors and emergent, systemic patterns.
- Change agents function as self-organizing systems themselves as they collect data, make meaning, and take action.
- Engagement involves three distinguishable but highly interactive processes: observation, decision making, and action.

- The capacity of the change agent to observe, decide, and act is shaped by a wide range of tools and techniques.

An effective change agent is in continual connection with the emerging environment through observation. He or she makes conscious decisions about observations and options for action then takes decisive action to influence individual behaviors and the systemic patterns that emerge over time. And, as each action shifts the patterns, the change agent begins the process again to observe, decide, and act. Sometimes, this process is successful when it is intuitive and automatic, but most of us find ourselves in situations where our automatic reactions don't bring desired outcomes. In those situations, we need an alternative—a way to make our learning and action explicit. That is where the Radical Inquiry Protocol comes in.

The Protocol includes three questions:

- **What?** What is happening? What do I observe? What do I see, hear, feel? What do the individual behaviors and systemic patterns tell me about opportunities for future action?
- **So what?** What do my observations mean? How do I interpret what I see in terms of past performance, current intentions, and future possibilities? What are my options for action and what are likely consequences of each?
- **Now what?** Given my current understanding of the dynamical nature of the system as a whole, which option for action will I choose? What will I do? How will I plan to observe the effects and begin the cycle of radical inquiry again?

Our Associates and change agent clients can practice this inquiry alone, but they find it helpful to share the process with others. The process, like the questions, is quite simple.

1. Reflect on the questions alone and document your insights, options, and expectations for action.
2. Share your answers to the three questions with at least one colleague.
3. Engage while the colleague asks you questions (no advice allowed) to clarify and deepen your insights about your observations, decisions, and plans for action.
4. Revisit your answers as you plan for and take action.

The process works best if you repeat it periodically over time with the same partner or team of colleagues. You and they will build increasing comfort and competence in the reflective and analytical processes. Experience has proven that everyone engaged in the process—tellers and questioners—find the experience enlightening.

The final step is for the local conversation and processes of learning and inquiry to inform a wider conversation. Associates in the network and their clients and colleagues can share their stories of Radical Inquiry on the HSD Institute web site, where others can share in the inquiry. Over time, we hope to accumulate enough stories that patterns will emerge. Those patterns will then spark new cycles of adaptive learning and action across the entire field.

We urge you to join us and our clients as we learn our ways into effective action as change agents in complex human systems. Send your Radical Inquiry stories to Julia Wolter at jwolter@hdsinstitute.org.

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