



ATTRACTORS
THE INFO-LETTER OF THE
HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE
VOLUME 3.11
NOVEMBER, 2006

*Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics. In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang reflects on the path toward emergent patterns.*

ON THE PATH

Organizations want system-wide, emergent outcomes. Productivity, trust, performance, a sense of community, profitability, adaptability, innovation—all of these require coherent behavior by many different people over an extended period of time. They are outcomes that involve system-wide patterns. We consider them to be worthy goals. The question is, “How do we get out of the current systemic patterns that we don’t want, so that we can move into the wonderful patterns that we can imagine?”

One of our clients had a breakthrough last week that taught us all a lesson or two about how to set the conditions that encourage positive system-wide patterns to emerge.

The story begins almost a year ago when a student in one of our classes recognized that her new project depended on the complex dynamics of human systems. She invited HSD associates to work with her team to track, analyze, and evaluate the dynamical patterns that they expected to generate over the course of a two-year project. We designed an evaluation process and have been collecting data for three months. Indeed, systemic patterns have begun to emerge—some expected and some not; some productive and some not. Periodically we share our reflections with the project team and explore ways to see and influence the patterns as they form and transform over time.

The purpose of the project is to encourage professionals to improve their practice by working across disciplinary lines. The project is based on a simple assumption: When a customer service rep, an instructional designer, an electrical engineer, and an accountant communicate about a client’s needs, all of them are more prepared to provide effective and efficient services. The initial project plan included four closely related concepts: Interdisciplinary communication, lateral mentorship, communities of practice, and customer focus. Each of these captured one facet of what the client understood to be a complex process of self-organizing.

At the beginning of the project, all four concepts were equally important. They were used interchangeably in our first conversations with the team. Distinctions were not clear, but the project design and the project team believed that all four were important aspects of the patterns they wanted to encourage.

In the next phase of development, the team talked almost exclusively about communities of practice. It was the concept they used to frame the project as they enlisted participants who would engage with the project and invest energy in the outcomes. It was a challenging process. Potential participants didn’t understand the benefits of the project; they wanted to know what the outcomes would be; they wanted to know how they and their clients would benefit; they wanted to have clearer expectations; they wanted . . .

The conversation was not a very productive one. The promise of an ill-defined, yet-to-be-determined, emergent outcome—community of practice—did not satisfy the needs for people to know what they would be expected to contribute and what they could expect to gain.

It was a tough road, but last week the breakthrough came. One member of the project team made a presentation and talked more about lateral mentorship than about communities of practice. People perked up, got engaged, and committed to participate over the life of the project. What was the difference that made a difference?

As we talked about the shift in energy, we realized that “lateral mentorship” is about the here and now. It is about what individuals can DO. It is concrete. It is operational. It is something one can put into a daily action plan and know when it is accomplished.

“Community of practice,” on the other hand, is about a pattern that will emerge in the future. It is about what we want to see as a result. It is abstract. It is conceptual. It is a possibility in the future, but it doesn’t chart the path for today.

“Community of practice” is an emergent outcome for which “lateral mentorship” is a walkable path. Though they are closely related and each contributes to the presence of the other, they are not equivalent. One speaks to individual action today, and the other speaks to group action in the future. One shapes today’s choice, while the other shapes tomorrow’s hope.

Vygotsky, a Russian educational philosopher, talked about the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It is the difference between where students are and where the teachers expect them to be at any given moment. If the ZPD is too large—expectations are too high—then the student becomes frustrated and dispirited. If the ZPD is too small—expectations are too low—then the student is bored and loses interest. When the ZPD is optimal, the student is stretched, but not beyond his or her limit.

We now think that the concrete action orientation of “lateral mentorship” is within the grasp of project participants, while the emergent systemic pattern of “communities of practice” is not. That’s why the one drew enthusiastic commitment, and the second tested the limits of trust.

How can you use this principle to find the concrete, actionable pathways to the systemic patterns you desire for yourself, your community, or your organization? Look for simple rules and concrete expectations that are within the immediate range of understanding and action for all the agents in your network. Use those rules to shape individual, immediate behavior, then wait for the self-organizing power of human systems to establish system-wide coherence. Call us if you want help moving toward your own emergent, system-wide outcomes.

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