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

***BLESSING AND CURSE***

Every tragic hero, first grade teacher, CEO, or Nobel laureate knows that your greatest strength can be your greatest weakness. Some call this a fatal flaw; others call it core competency. It is the characteristic of an individual or group that defines identity and presents recurring challenges. Human systems dynamics (HSD) is no exception. We find that the same thing that moves us forward also limits our work.

What is that thing?

Generalizability.

HSD helps us see and influence emergent patterns in all human systems—individuals, teams, families, organizations, and communities. It supports work in any context—personal or professional, for-profit or not, product or service. Besides all of that, HSD is helpful for a wide range of tasks—product development, project management, training, leadership, management, human resources, planning, evaluation, policy development, communication, facilitation, and so on and on. This ability to work across many different boundaries is one of the greatest strengths of HSD. On the other hand . . .

. . . Because we do so many things and because each project is utterly unique, it is hard for potential clients and colleagues to know exactly what we do and how we do it. That is the “curse” part of being helpful in so many different ways.

Stories can help us jump over the chasm between hearing about the power of HSD and imagining ways it might be useful for your challenges and those of your clients. Here are a few stories about how HSD Associates are using their insights to support change and sustainability.

**Evaluate complex initiatives.** How do you judge performance in a complex adaptive system (CAS)? A CAS is unpredictable and emergent, so traditional outcome and process evaluations don't tell you what you need to know. BP is writing a workbook to help people design and implement evaluations that inform practice in complex human systems.

**Plan for education.** How do you make decisions and prepare for the future when everything is in flux? RH is leading a large school district as they take adaptive action on a shifting landscape. She helps them focus on children, understand systemic issues, and plan for action that will align their meager resources toward shared goals.

**Facilitate mergers and acquisitions.** How can a merger increase the capacity and productivity of all? Often we see acquisitions and mergers degrade individual and group performance. HSD helps all the players see and influence patterns toward performance and away from wasted internal conflict. GE is facilitating a management retreat with a skyrocketing business to help them absorb the acquisitions of the past and prepare for those of the future.

**Strengthen assets for youth.** How can we increase assets for our children and youth? HSD acknowledges that the future options for action emerge from past experience in the context of today's action. Three HSD Associates help others see opportunities and take powerful action to strengthen assets of youth around the world.

**Manage adaptive capacity.** In times of radical and rapid change, how can an organization build its internal capacity to cope? A large public utility depends on MDF to shape policies, procedures, training, and decision-making practices to support on-going adaptation, growth, and learning for individuals and the organization as a whole.

**Support product design and development.** In a complex and competitive market, how can a product design team optimize innovation and productivity? Disciplines like Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma push an organization toward reliability and stability. HSD recognizes these as good things, but it also sees that reliability can be the enemy of innovation. BF is helping software and mechanical engineers rethink their product development lifecycles to improve stability and creativity at the same time.

**Manage projects.** How does one move beyond the theory of project management and adapt its lessons to the messy, real world? Expert project managers know when and how to bend the rules, but neophytes often over- or under-manage projects. Three Associates are working together to develop HSD-based project management methodologies and training to find that sweet spot between theory and practice of project management.

**Support technical innovation.** How does a loose collaborative network accomplish a massive technical development task? In this networked age, innovation often emerges from complex interactions in massively entangled systems. International and cross-disciplinary action will build the technical infrastructure of the future. ML is convener, participant, and conscious agent for conversations that will shape global capacity for technology in the future.

**Encourage cultural transformation.** What can an organization do to transform conflict and bias into creative engagement? MT teaches and consults to help people use their diverse voices productively.

This is just a sampling of the wide range of HSD projects that Associates are engaged in now, and today's challenges are just a slice of all the ones that are possible. So, it is easy to see how the general applicability of HSD constitutes both its greatest strength and its greatest potential threat.

We manage this paradox using lessons we've learned from human systems dynamics. Real opportunities for learning and growth lie in specific places, with specific contexts, and at specific times. We practice HSD in real-world environments with urgent challenges. We will avoid the generalizability curse when we talk about and build theory for HSD in the same concrete and practical ways.

If you are interested in exploring how HSD might relate to your challenges, please be in touch. We will be happy to explore the possibilities with you. Send Julia Wolter ([jwolter@hsdinstitute.org](mailto:jwolter@hsdinstitute.org)) or me a note for more information.

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