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

This is the time of year when leadership teams come together to prepare for the future. Last week I supported two different groups—one from government and one from industry—as they reviewed the past year and considered options for action in the year to come. We used to call this process “strategic planning,” and some still do. Whatever you call it, this periodic time of conversation and shared reflection is a critical success factor in today’s world of hyper-change.

Why is periodic planning so important?

- The day-to-day busy-ness of the leader’s life leaves little time for individual—to say nothing of group—reflection. Good decision making requires an occasional view from 30,000 feet.
- Urgent issues demand reactive solutions, so leaders feel tied to fire-fighting and short-term strategies. Unless they are freed from the immediate and urgent, leaders will not be able to move to the long-term and the important issues that will affect success in future.
- Tensions and conflicts develop in the usual course of organizational life. A retreat setting gives a chance for people to “build a bridge and get over it.”
- With shrinking resources and expanding demands, managers feel overworked and under appreciated. Good food and pleasant surroundings say “thank you” in a concrete way.
- Individuals collect bits and pieces of valuable competitive and organizational intelligence. In the normal course of the day, they don’t have time to share what they know. A retreat begins to build a picture out of the puzzle pieces.

You will notice I do not include one of the historical reasons for strategic planning: Create a list of strategies, goals, objectives, and tasks to drive the work of employees in the next twelve months. Why? Because my clients don’t have time these days for such a front-loaded planning process. Besides, strategies to match the environment today may be useless as the future unfolds.

If planning sessions don’t generate a long list of action items, then what are they for? What was going on as my clients met together last week? In human systems dynamics it is called **stretching and folding**. **Stretching** brings in new energy and ideas. **Folding** reinforces patterns and lets change settle in. Differences emerge in stretching. Communication may be difficult, but growth and opportunity arise. Folding finds the value in commonality to see where we agree and to give us a rest from the tension of the stretch.

The formal name of the process is the Baker Transform. The name comes from what my grandmother called “working the dough.” When she kneaded bread dough, she would stretch it out toward the edge of the floured board then fold it over on itself, press it down, then begin again. I watched my Granny work the dough with great tenderness and care. Unfortunately by the time I got strong enough to push and pull, I was not very interested in kitchen dynamics.

What complexity scholars know today, however, is that the process of stretching and folding establishes complex structures and textures. Stretching builds tension and incorporates diversity. Folding consolidates as it brings together sections that were far apart. If there were no stretching, the substance would be like a brick—without variety or resiliency. If there were no folding, the substance would be fragile and diffuse. The intricate structures of complex adaptive systems require both stretching and folding.

That is what my clients do when they come together to plan. Their commitment to show up at the same place and time is a kind of folding. Even if they did nothing but play golf, they would still benefit from being together. My role, as a guide, is to help them make the most of their folding time by embedding within it stretches and folds within stretches and folds. The agendas for the two planning sessions will demonstrate what I mean.

Planning Session I

- Review and revise mission, vision, values from 2006. (fold)
- Reflect on challenges to be expected in 2007. (stretch)
- Develop a new mission statement to adapt to change. (fold)
- Invite middle managers for the second half day. (stretch)
- Commit to three high-level objectives for 2007. (fold)
- Define realistic metrics to track progress. (stretch)

Planning Session II

- Review/confirm foundations of strategy from 2006. (fold)
- Share insights from recent research. (stretch)
- Consider department-level objectives for 2007. (stretch)
- Explore generalizations, contradictions, exceptions, surprises, and puzzles that emerged across the whole. (fold)
- Define major client focus areas (five) for 2007. (fold)
- Determine investment plans for 2007. (stretch)

Both of these sessions included pre-work, individual, small group, whole group reflection, and structured decision making. During each stretching and folding process the group repeatedly stretched to discover new information and folded to integrate diverse insights and relationships. At every turn, the relationships grew stronger, information was transformed into knowledge, and the texture of the human system became more resilient. Stretching and folding encompass the learning organization at its best. Every meeting, intervention, training session, or communication can move these powerful dynamics forward and build adaptive capacity for individuals and for organizations as a whole.

Consider how you interact with your human systems. When and how do you stretch yourself and others? What stretching and folding do you detect in your team or organization? When and how do you fold? What more can you do to use stretching and folding to collect, integrate, and amplify information and energy in your organization?

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