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

Often I ask learners to describe a particularly sticky issue they are dealing with in terms of human systems dynamics. It is always an interesting exercise, and usually students see options for action that were invisible to them when they looked through other lenses. Situations that seemed stuck before open themselves to real possibilities for action. For example:

- Customer complaints become opportunities for learning.
- Personal conflict transforms into creative tension.
- Dissatisfaction of the individual becomes increased potential for the group.
- Apparent resistance to change becomes loyal commitment to important values.

In a recent class, Mary stunned me with her reflection after sharing her re-thought sticky issue with a partner. She said, "I didn't have to tell the whole story, and she got it anyway!" I have since come to think of this as one of the most powerful benefits of HSD. More of this person's story will help you understand why.

Both she and her partner work in community projects that support youth development. The similarities end there. One is urban, the other rural. One works with young adults, the other with pre-teens. One leads a school-based program; the other focuses on family. One has a long-standing tradition; the other has an innovative approach and a new organization.

The differences between the two situations were many and quite important. When they tried to work across programs before, they'd found it necessary to "tell the whole story" to be sure the other one understood their unique challenges. By the time all the details were out, and all the side-stories told, it was difficult for either to see the other's world clearly or to trust the other to see their own. As a result, they would tell each other stories, share an empathetic ear, and come away convinced that their situations were entirely too complicated to be influenced by their meager efforts. They felt more overwhelmed and hopeless and less capable after the stories were told than before.

One, simple HSD principle shifted their conversation, so that they could understand and be understood without telling the whole story. That principle is about *patterns*. A pattern is a fundamental unit of analysis in human systems dynamics. In HSD, a pattern is defined as:

## **Similarities, differences, and relationships that have meaning across space and time.**

You see examples of patterns all around you. Polka dot cloth makes you smile and think of spring dances or clown costumes because the colors and shapes have recognizable similarities, differences, and relationships. Your favorite breed of dog matches a pattern of similarities, differences, and relationships that carry meaning for you. Standard operating procedures or company policies articulate similarities, differences, and relationships that carry particular meaning in your place of business. A team, family, friendship, work of art, piece of music, wonderful meal embody patterns that attract or repel you, increase or decrease your productivity, enhance your motivation or reduce it.

We use patterns to understand and influence the complex changes that swirl around us every day. We look for (or encourage) differences to leverage creativity. We focus on similarities to provide stability and continuity. We discover or create relationships to strengthen connections. Together, the components of the pattern help us navigate the complex and fast-changing worlds of work and play.

When Mary reflected on her complicated situation she recognized key patterns. She described her sticky issue in those terms. The patterns carried the essence of the situation as Mary knew it, without introducing extraneous details. Her partner heard the core of the sticky issue through the pattern and was able to compare and contrast it to the pattern that emerged from her own situation.

The pair used their new pattern-spotting ability to reflect on their own experience, hear about the experiences of others, and explore options for action that might shift the pattern in the future.

Patterns don't always tell the whole story. Detailed descriptions can be satisfying. Pattern-inspired action cannot predict or control what will happen in a given situation. Pattern descriptions are not definitive—there may be multiple ways a situation can be described. Points of view affect what patterns appear, so conversation becomes a necessary part of the pattern-spotting process.

But when you need to focus, communicate with clarity, and see the whole system simply, the language and practice of patterns are powerful tools.

Associates of the HSD Institute have created many tools to help you see and influence patterns in human systems. Some of those tools are available from the HSD Products and Services portal on the Organization Development Network website. For more information and to develop your own pattern-spotting capacity, visit <http://odnetwork.org/resources/HSD>. You can contact me to explore opportunities to learn more about HSD or to find a qualified HSD Associate to help you address your own sticky issues.

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