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Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics.

This month, Glenda Eoyang reflects on “Butterfly Effects”. You can learn more about this and other HSD tools in Glenda’s book, *Coping with Chaos: Seven Simple Tools*, along with the webinar of the same title.

Please visit our page on the “Resources” section of the OD Network website:

<http://www.odnetwork.org/resources/HSD/products.php#tme>.

Also, from now until July 31, we present you with a unique opportunity to participate with Glenda in a virtual Chautauqua. A Chautauqua is a community conversation, a way to learn together in community, which dates back to the turn of the century. Go to <http://www.virtualchautauqua.com/>, click on “create a new account”, and follow the prompts. Then, join us in the Main Tent for a conversation with Glenda about *Coping with Chaos: Seven Simple Tools*.

Butterfly Effects

Glenda H. Eoyang

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The “tipping point” and stories about the “hundredth monkey” have become commonplace since the mid-90s when I first wrote about the butterfly effect. Focus has turned to that critical point when a complex system breaks through old, stable patterns as it jumps into new structures and relationships. Examples in human systems abound:

- Shift from non-violent to violent conflict
- BFO—blinding flash of the obvious—when teams experience breakthrough
- The last straw in a troubled relationship
- Precipitous shift from chronic to acute illness
- AHA moment when insight replaces confusion

These fast and sometimes violent system transformations are all too familiar, yet they seem to catch us by surprise every time. Why? How can we understand this phenomenon in ways that will inform our individual and collective action? I don’t pretend to have the whole answer, but here are five perspectives that help my clients and me cope with this particular kind of chaos.

One: don’t think it only happens in the moment. The butterfly effect has less to do with the butterfly than it does with the tension that accumulated in the system before the critical flap of the wing. Unless there were stored potential for change, the butterfly would have been no more than a pretty picture. A team of talented technicians only ignite innovation when they’ve stored up enough fuel in the form of shared purpose, information and trust.

Two: use your peripheral vision. One of the most difficult challenges in complex situations is to distinguish signal from noise. Of all the things you’re observing, which are worth attention and which are merely

distractions? No individual or group has the capacity to pay attention to everything. Some things are in focus and others are relegated to your peripheral vision. At any moment, though, you may catch an unexpected shift out of the corner of your eye so you can respond quickly to either damp or amplify the emerging signal. Sports stars and politically astute managers have highly developed peripheral vision, and they know how to use it.

Three: depend on your network. Butterfly effects move quickly. The broader your network, the more likely you'll be to see the effects of a butterfly event coming toward you. People in your network—near neighbors as well as far—can be your early warning system that a critical shift is on its way. When you have the early heads-up, then you can choose whether to encourage, discourage or ignore the disruptions in the butterfly's wake.

Four: don't take it too literally. Fast Company and others have pooh-pooed the butterfly effect and other metaphors that business draws from chaos and complexity. I don't blame them. If you come to these ideas looking for answers and absolutes (or presenting them as answers and absolutes) you deserve to be challenged. On the other hand, one good explanation is better than one thousand descriptions. If "butterfly effect" helps you think in coherent and actionable ways about the craziness in your world, then use it for what it is worth, but don't waste time and energy arguing about whether or not it is "true." If it is useful to you, it is true enough.

Five: keep a sense of humor. Surprise will come, and it will come often. You can choose to respond to a surprise with anxiety and anger; or you can take a deep breath, have a laugh and consider your options for adaptive action. One of my clients calls it his TOOT—time out of time. Another client practices telling the story in the most humorous way she can imagine. Another responds, "Oh, that old thing! We've seen that surprise before!" In every case, they find that it helps to back off, see a bigger picture, and not take themselves or the immediate situation too seriously.

It is only a butterfly after all.