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

FROM CONFLICT TO COHERENCE

Sometimes it is nice not to be needed!

Last month I received a call from Mary. She was wrestling with personal conflicts in her small, but rather zippy, family foundation. I facilitated a board retreat for her a couple of years ago, so she knew how HSD integrates diverse perspectives to address complex challenges. Mary thought I might be able to help resolve acute and chronic conflict in the office.

Mary, founder and chair of the board, is an intense, bright, creative, and committed leader. She knows her passion and takes responsibility for making a difference. Sue, her management consultant, brings her own intensity and commitment to organizational effectiveness and administrative innovation. On most days, Mary's and Sue's skills and passions merge into a powerful force for growth and change. Some days, however, they find it difficult to share goals and walk along the same road. After a particularly uncomfortable board meeting, the two decided they needed some help turning their conflict into coherence. They called me.

I told them about a simple and extremely powerful protocol we've developed to help individuals and groups move beyond an either/or understanding of conflict and generate new options for shared action. We call the process ***From Chaos to Coherence: A Tool to Manage Conflict***. This protocol emerged from three assumptions we make about conflict in human systems.

Assumption 1: Objective and subjective realities get mixed up.

Each of us observes and influences events that lie outside ourselves. We might call this evidence-based world an “objective reality.” We also carry experiences, assumptions, perspectives, and feelings that help us interpret the meaning of the things we see and hear. This subjective meaning-making is a different kind of “reality” that functions as the stories we tell ourselves. Unless we take time to unbraided these two realities, we forget that they are different.

Assumption 2: Authentic inquiry opens new possibilities. It is easy in the busy-ness of life to focus on the things we know (or think we know) for sure. As long as that knowledge serves us well, this habit isn’t a problem. Often, however, what we know leads us into familiar dead ends or habitual conflicts. When that happens, questions can open new doors. Why? Opportunities lie in the blind spots created by what we don’t know and what we do know that isn’t so. Questions shine light onto those blind spots and let us create opportunities for action.

Assumption 3: Patterns of human systems dynamics self-organize. A pattern consists of “similarities, differences, and relationships that have meaning across space and time.” Patterns of relationship shape and are shaped by human interaction. Interacting agents—thoughts, individuals, or groups—constantly generate new patterns in emergent and self-organizing dynamical processes.

The ***Chaos to Coherence*** protocol embeds these three assumptions into a process that involves guided personal reflection, individual preparation, and facilitated mutual inquiry. This easy-to-use method helps people explore and shift the objective and subjective realities that motivate their conflicts.

Mary and Sue agreed that the protocol would help them move forward. The protocol involves a facilitator, so we put our calendars together to find a date for a meeting. The earliest date we could find was out three weeks. Sue and Mary were feeling some urgency because a big meeting was coming up in the next week, and both really wanted to go into that meeting with their “stuff” resolved.

I suggested that they begin the reflection process individually and together—without me. They could see how far they got. We would work through particularly thorny issues together when we could meet. It was a bit like First Aid or emergency room treatment for their acute conflict with plans to treat the chronic problem at a later date.

When time came for our meeting, they called to cancel. As they told me the story of how the protocol guided their interaction, I realized that it had helped them structure their personal and shared reflection. The first aid intervention had built their capacity to manage the chronic problem. They didn't need to talk with me because they were turning their own conflict into coherence!

I consider this a successful intervention in spite of the fact that I didn't get a paying project. I wasn't disappointed to lose the business—there are plenty of other things for me to do. In fact, I was pleased that they'd found a way to manage their own challenging interactions and find a more productive way to work together.

Do you face complex conflicts that you would like to transform into coherent action? If so, you can get a copy of the protocol on the OD Network website at <http://www.odnetwork.org/resources/HSD/products.php>. If you'd like to talk with me the about the protocol and how you might use it, give me a call or drop me an email. I'm always pleased to invest in the coherence of complex human systems dynamics.

Glenda Eoyang