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

*LEADING CHANGE*

It is easy to find advice about how to be a good leader. Everywhere you look there are books, classes, blogs, and coaches talking about the theory and practice of leadership. Sometimes they focus on leaders through the ages and sometimes on those who will lead us into a successful future.

It is also easy to find information about change. Tips and traps of personal, organizational, community change fill volumes. Our experience tells us that change is the way of the future, and many pundits are vying for our attention to tell us how to use change to our advantage.

These resources are certainly available, but they aren't much help to my colleagues and clients who spend every day leading change. How is it that there is so much change leadership stuff available and so little real help?

I believe part of the problem is that our real-world experiences of leadership and change have evolved faster than our conceptual models. My clients talk about their lived experience of leading in situations that are messy, complex, global, and totally surprising. Their language and the conceptual models they use to try to explain their experiences are also messy, complex, global, and totally surprising. From their descriptions, I learn that:

- Every moment brings with it a unique mix of challenges and opportunities.
- Each place lends its own history and traditions that shape options for action.
- Any group of individuals contributes an array of surprises that can delight or dismay a leader of change.
- Even though the old descriptions sound true, they do not inform productive action.

At the same time that the world is becoming more complex and less predictable, our hunger for simple solutions expands. The problem is that many of the books and pundits give simple categories and descriptions that are intended to capture the complex and distill it down into knowable and doable lists of dos and don'ts. Understanding how to categorize and describe can be helpful, but it doesn't necessarily inform action when one is face-to-face with a challenge that is (or at least seems at the moment to be) messy and unique. In the moment, experience often defies categorization.

So, what is a leader of change to do? I think the answer is easy: Stop looking for answers, and start asking better questions.

In complex systems, each situation is unique. Many factors affect how the future unfolds. History embeds constraints on options for action. Relationships (both visible and invisible) influence and confuse causes and effects. In the midst of such change, answers have a very short shelf life. A perfect response at one place and time may be really damaging somewhere or some-when else.

Questions, on the other hand . . .

- Open options for understanding and action
- Connect the leader with the environment
- Increase the flexibility and opportunity
- Tease out new insights and shake old assumptions
- Deliver the intelligence of the network
- Encourage courage and independence for colleagues
- Establish adaptive potential for the leader as individual and for those who follow

Of course, the obvious (though rather tricky) question is: What are the right questions?

With a very few exceptions, it doesn't really matter what questions are asked. The good questions are without number. The main point is

that the leader stands in inquiry and is open to being surprised. On the other hand, the number of bad questions is relatively small. Bad questions:

- Presuppose a “right” answer.
- Preclude “unwanted” responses.
- Accuse or blame individuals or groups.
- Perpetuate bias.
- Speak to the ego—either to build up or tear down.

With these exceptions, any question is a good question. It will open conversation and increase options for action in any situation, no matter how messy. Based on my experience, the most important competency of a leader is to ask questions that elicit intelligence and build the capacity to address whatever challenges arise.

You can practice the art of question-asking in many different ways:

- Read philosophy or listen to it on books on tape
- Listen to expert question askers
- Reflect on what you do and don’t know and focus your talk on the latter
- Brainstorm questions and pick the one(s) that are most likely to lead to interesting places
- Practice with your friends and family
- Be willing to reframe a question if your first attempt isn’t fruitful
- Listen to answers and build your next question out of the response to the last

Our colleagues at HSD Institute have developed a short leadership assessment that helps people think about their leadership styles and question-asking habits. The assessment is available from the OD Network website at [www.odnetwork.org/resources/HSD/](http://www.odnetwork.org/resources/HSD/). When you’ve completed the assessment, I would love to hear about the questions you ask and how they help you lead in the midst of change. Contact us for information about this and other tools, techniques, and learning opportunities of human systems dynamics.

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