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

In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang reflects on

PLANNING IN CHAOS

Like every other organization we know, the Human Systems Dynamics Institute is moving quickly into an unknowable future. No matter your industry, sector, or organizational role, you are probably also looking toward 2008 with as many question marks as exclamation points! Human systems dynamics, with its focus on complex patterns of self-organization, provides some clues about how to plan effectively so you and your organization are prepared for whatever the future holds.

This week I spent a day with information technology professionals from government agencies across Minnesota. They came to learn how to plan in the tumultuous political and technical environments that have become a way of life in the public sector. I shared with them seven tricks that have emerged for us out of our theoretical work with nonlinear dynamics and our practical challenges of developing an international, virtual, creative network of HSD Associates. I hope these tricks are helpful to you, too.

1. Have a plan, but hold it lightly.

Thoughtful action depends on planning, even in the midst of uncertainty. The benefits of a plan disappear, however, when it blinds you to emerging opportunities and issues. At the Institute, we try to make our planning assumptions explicit and to revisit those assumptions often. When new information comes to our attention, we strive to be agile enough to adapt plans to meet new possibilities. We focus on building a "good enough" plan, so that we are willing and able to build a new one when the old is no longer good enough.

2. Plan to plan again.

There is always a temptation to wait to plan until things settle down. In chaotic times, this is a real mistake. When things are changing quickly, it is even more important that you have plans to guide intentional action. You have to be willing to change your plan, (see 1 above), but you need to have one. At the Institute we review and revise our budget monthly, project plans periodically (weekly to quarterly depending on the length of the project), and strategic plan annually. At each point we check our assumptions, adapt to surprises, and reconsider new options for action.

3. Look toward multiple horizons.

In stable environments, one plan may be enough, but that is not true in situations of rapid and unpredictable change. Near-term action demands precision in planning, while the long-term plan can be sketchy. In the middle are all the plans that mix certainty with unknowability. A good plan matches the level of detail with the degrees of freedom in the environment—the more degrees of freedom, the less specificity in the plan. That’s why the Institute depends on project, financial, and strategic plans. Each one implies a different level of certainty, so each one has a different level of detail and a different schedule for review and revision. (See 2 above.)

4. See the future from different points of view.

Nonlinearity teaches us that the future may unfold in unknowable ways. Even multiple perspectives can’t predict the future with certainty, but they do a much better job than a single point of view. Any planning process should include multiple stakeholders and diverse voices. They not only add data about past and present, they also contribute creative options for future possibilities. This is one area that has been lacking at the HSD Institute. In the past, our planning processes have been informal, and the participants have been few. In 2008, that pattern will change as we reconstitute our Board of Directors and formalize some of our communications with Associates and other stakeholders.

5. Expect to stretch and fold.

Stretching allows human systems to collect new data and energy. Folding helps them build shared mental models, stability, and coherence. Both stretching and folding are necessary for growth and adaptation, and each one affects the planning process differently. The challenge is to maintain the stretch and fold dynamic in many different places and many different cycle times. At the Institute, we ask

ourselves two questions to balance these dynamics. *What more do we need to know? What is clear to us now?*

6. Leave space for surprise.

Everyone who makes a plan includes a “fudge” factor, but we often think of it as leaving room for failure. “The resources weren’t available. The estimates were wrong. The task was more difficult than anticipated.” This trick is different because it helps you leave time in the schedule so that you can pursue new opportunities and adapt to a changing environments. We don’t just build margins for error into our schedules; we also leave margins for surprise. (See 1 through 5 above.)

7. Plan for every part of the landscape.

In any organization—no matter how small—some things are structured and predictable, others are totally surprising, and still others are constantly changing patterns. Each kind of dynamic needs a different kind of plan. Often these differences correlate with time horizons with near-term being most predictable and long-term the least. (See 3 above.) This isn’t always the case, however. Some long-term factors (death and taxes for instance) are certainties. Some short term factors (economics or natural disasters) may be totally surprising. In the past, HSD Institute plans have accommodated these differences informally. As we get larger and our activities get more complex, perhaps it is time for us to formalize the ways we prepare for different dynamics of the future. 2008 seems like a good year to begin.

All of us at the HSD Institute wish you a great holiday season and a happy and productive new year. We hope that your plans are adaptive and your success bountiful! Contact us if you want to explore how the theory and practice of human systems dynamics can make a difference for you, your teams, organizations, and communities.

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