



ATTRACTORS
THE INFO-LETTER OF THE
HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE
VOLUME 5.4
APRIL 2008

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

In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang reflects on

Self-Organizing in Action: CAN DO Minnesota

People often ask me how self-organizing works in human systems. It is easy to say that it happens whenever a group of people come together, but that isn't a very satisfying answer. It is hard to see the patterns of self-organizing unless you come to expect them and look for cues that the emerging patterns were not exactly predicted, planned, or controlled. Over the past few months, I have had the honor and pleasure of watching self-organization in a project that is now known as CAN DO Minnesota. I will share that story with you, point out what appeared to be the critical points of transformation, and peer into the future of this exciting, emergent community.

It started with a complex challenge: How can people who are concerned about and committed to change take effective action? An insightful and energetic leader at the Minnesota Department of Human Services acknowledged such a challenge with regard to people with disabilities. Multiple services are available to help people with disabilities find employment, transportation, health care, housing, and other supportive services. Many individuals and groups are committed to improving the lives of people with disabilities, including federal, state, and county government agencies; multiple private agencies; families; supportive communities; and people themselves who live with disabilities. In spite of their best efforts, however, services are often insufficient, difficult to access, and poorly coordinated. In recent years, numerous studies have documented the need for more effective methods to improve services and outcomes. An abundance of ideas were generated by these studies, but the challenge lay in

transforming the ideas into action. How might this diverse community of committed individuals and groups come together to make a difference?

In response to this challenge, the leader from DHS convened a group of people from across the system for informal conversations about options for action. The group had no formal power or standing. They were given no resources or any official status. What drew them together was their commitment and hope for better ways to make a difference. In their first meeting, they outlined issues and concerns. They also shared information about what was happening and about their frustration with the difficulties of translating hopes and commitment into effective action. At their second meeting, they explored alternatives to standard services and service delivery approaches. At one point in that meeting, one person said, "What we need is not another study. We need to stop studying and take action on what we already know." Someone else proposed, "We don't need another organization or any more formal structure. What we need is a network that connects us all together so that we can improve what we know and do. The network should also connect us directly to people who could contribute and benefit." Those bits of ideas began a snowball of conversations that set the conditions for a self-organizing community of individuals and groups who are committed to changing ideas into action to improve services and outcomes for people with disabilities across the state of Minnesota.

Over the following months, the group:

- Catalogued and consolidated findings from more than 15 previous studies that documented the needs, aspirations, and opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Learned about self-organizing change and fundamental principles of human systems dynamics that allowed them to take intentional action to influence productive self-organizing processes.
- Planned regional Action Conferences to be held across the state.

The Action Conferences formed the core strategy of the group. These were powerful self-organizing opportunities because they:

- Brought people together to explore their own hopes and opportunities to work collaboratively to make a difference.
- Included all individuals and organizations who wanted to take action to improve services and outcomes for people with disabilities. Everyone was welcome.
- Encouraged participants to follow their own passion and sense of responsibility as they defined projects to make a difference in people's lives.
- Celebrated any and all ideas that inspired passion and responsibility.
- Established minimal structures to support communication and action.

The result of the Action Conferences was more than 100 projects; each defined by a group and led by a member of the community. The groups committed to work autonomously and to report regularly on their progress. You can find out about the community and their project plans on the CAN DO Minnesota Network site at www.CANDOMN.ning.com.

Today, the projects move forward, and the original planning team has disbanded. It has been replaced by volunteers who chair CAN DO Committees that oversee essential system-wide functions: Capacity Development, Evaluation, Funding, Action Conference Planning, and Communications. One of the participating organizations provides a part-time administrator to support the network. On the first Monday of every month, those committee chairs and anybody else who is interested joins a conference call to find out about new developments, to share insights and questions, and to sustain the self-organizing momentum of the CAN DO Network.

It is clear that challenges remain:

- How will annual follow-up Action Conferences be funded and supported?
- How can the effects of the CAN DO project be documented and measured?
- How will the momentum of the project be sustained over time?
- What on-going resources will be available to ensure implementation of the actions that emerge from CAN DO activities?

It is equally clear that action has been taken to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Minnesota. Individuals and groups have recognized that they have the power to make a difference when they participate in self-organizing dynamics of human systems. The productive patterns that emerge when people come together under self-organizing conditions are natural, and they seem spontaneous. The more remarkable aspect of the CAN DO Network is the insight, courage, and enthusiasm of that original planning group who saw a possibility and overcame their institutional habits of prediction and control to allow the self-organizing patterns to emerge.

If you would like more information about the principles that informed the evolution of the CAN DO Network, contact the Human Systems Dynamics Institute Network of Associates (rholladay@hdsinstitute.org) or me (geoyang@hdsinstitute.org) or join the CAN DO team on one of their First Monday meetings!