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

I used to think I should solve all the problems. I looked forward to some day when everything would be fine, and all the problems would be solved. Now I know that each problem solved is another one unmasked. A problem-free future is an illusion, and not a very helpful one!

This reflection came from a wise practitioner friend and client as we sipped, nibbled, and chatted at her fabulous farm retreat last weekend. Her practice had taught her a valuable lesson that we strive to share with our students and clients every day.

What we see as problems to be solved are not. They are patterns that emerge from human interactions. In human systems dynamics, we define a pattern as "similarities, differences, and relationships that have meaning across space and time." At any given moment, in any given context, groups of people manifest patterns of understanding and behavior.

On a playground, for example, kids cluster according to same gender and similar interests. They articulate significant differences through competitive or imaginative play. They build and articulate relationships with each other and the rest of the world. And, across time and space, they make meaning in the form of friendships, social skills, and physical capacity to inform their individual and collective action. Patterns capture their realities in the moment and shape their possibilities for the future.

The same is true for us as working adults. We cluster according to professional discipline, identity, race and ethnicity, regional cultures, and so on. We articulate significant differences through public discourse, voting, commenting on public events, telling stories, judging the quality of work, celebrating rituals, or evaluating the ethics of elected leaders. We build relationships through exchange of information, money, experience, physical contact, and hobbies. We make meaning of the patterns that form around us. When we choose to name those patterns "problems," and when we convince ourselves that problems should be "solved," we lock ourselves into a world that is ". . . an illusion, and not a very helpful one!"

My friend recognized a reasonable alternative to this not-so-helpful delusion. She went on to explain that she now sees "situations" to be "managed." She knows that whatever the current circumstances are, she needs to take action. When she does, old patterns will shift, and new ones will emerge. Those, too, will provide options for effective action, and new generations of emergent patterns will follow. This process has no expectation of impending stability and rest. It will never be finished. Rather, we are asked to realize that healthy biological, psychological, and social lives depend on continuous and perpetual adaptation. The adaptation is continuous because each adaptive act sets the context for the next. There is no safe moment of complete rest. The adaptation is perpetual, because the pattern-forming process is not heading toward some final, pre-determined end. It is forever searching for the next resolution to the current tensions.

This sounds strangely similar to the advice from my family physician about managing my husband's diabetes. It will not be cured. The goal is to manage the disease so that each day is as healthy as possible. Over time, as we reinforce healthy decisions, new symptoms—patterns of illness—will develop more slowly or not at all.

Sometimes the patterns that emerge over time match our expectations and sometimes they don't. Sometimes they are healthy and sometimes they are toxic. Sometimes they fit the patterns of the part, the whole, and the greater whole. In such an emergent world, the real work of organizational leaders and change agents is to:

- See patterns as they emerge as clearly and objectively as possible,
- Evaluate the patterns for their fitness with other patterns as they emerge from the individual and collective levels, and
- Take action to influence the pattern-forming and fit-making dynamics over time.

We call this iterative process Adaptive Action. One stands in the midst of roiling change, when patterns are unclear and options for action appear to be limited or nonexistent. We ask people to focus on three questions. The first is WHAT? This helps one see and articulate the patterns as they emerge. If the challenge is collective, it also gives different players a chance to learn new perspectives from each other. The second question is SO WHAT? This question assesses fitness of the new, emerging pattern with those that went before, those that are hoped for in future, and ones that are emerging in other places at the same time. The final question in each Adaptive Action Cycle is NOW WHAT? This step moves one from understanding to action. Action, in turn, shifts the patterns and sets the stage for the next Adaptive Action Cycle. WHAT? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

The Adaptive Action Process affects all facets of work. It supports effective decision making and action in customer service, product design and development, consulting, management and leadership, work supervision, service delivery, quality management and control, workplace communications, planning and execution, teamwork, and all other aspects of productive workplaces and communities.

When we begin to think of social and business processes as emergent and self-organizing, we begin to see ourselves as dancers. We know the basic steps, have ideas about what should happen, have expectations of our partners and the music. But more important than all these things, we are present in the moment—sensing the partner's movements, observing the motions of others, and creating the future by acting in consonance with the surroundings. Such fluid, flexible, and graceful motion is not possible until we, like my friend, acknowledge that patterns are not problems, and that emergent patterns do not allow permanent solutions.

Thanks, My Friend, for reminding us that adaptation, not resolution, should be the focus of our thoughts and actions.

Glenda H. Eoyang, Ph.D
www.hsdinstitute.org
866-HSD-INST