



ATTRACTORS
THE INFO-LETTER OF THE
HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE
VOLUME 6.1
JANUARY 2009

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

This inauguration is a beginning . . .
. . . a beginning of a conversation . . .
. . . a conversation that is not the dominant one of our past decade . . .
. . . a conversation that opens options for adaptive action for us, our nation, and the world.

Good conversations begin with questions, and Barack Obama has many of those. How will we balance environmental and economic sustainability? How should such a wealthy nation feed, clothe, educate, and care for its young? How might we transcend the partisan bickering and work together for the common good? How does a crumbling infrastructure open opportunities for productive work and its many benefits, including personal pride, economic activity, and social stability? How can we ensure our collective safety without destroying our individual freedoms? How do we extricate ourselves from an impossible war without leaving allies and enemies to annihilate each other?

His curiosity doesn't stop with the pragmatic, action-oriented "how" questions, either. What energy is locked within the youth of America? Why can we not transcend racism? When will we return to our position as honest broker in world politics? Who will discover the social, technical, economic, and organizational innovations to prepare us for an unknown and turbulent future? What is a just distribution of wealth across our stratified society? Why is the US spending more on health care than any other nation while suffering worse health outcomes than most? What will transform educational systems to meet the emerging needs of a diverse and global citizenry? What are the essential elements of a healthy democracy in the 21st century, and what are the American people willing and able to do to ensure those essentials? And

As Obama takes office, every corner of the earth seems embroiled in unfathomable troubles, in spite of which, he has the courage to bring us questions rather than answers! The openness and opportunity are thrilling, but they are not without risks.

A stance of inquiry, however generative, is not always the most effective response to troubles. In our research and practice of human systems dynamics, we've found a variety of risks that must be managed for inquiry to lead to adaptive action. Though

we've not yet seen much of Obama's leadership, it appears that he successfully manages the potential downside of his creative inquiry. The evidence is accumulating.

Sometimes inquirers enter self-reflexive loops, feeding on the search rather than finding solutions. Obama's campaign gives ample indication that this is not his way. His entourage generated lots of process-driven activity, but it never seemed to waiver from a steady commitment to solutions.

Sometimes questions complicate issues rather than simplifying them. No one can listen to an Obama speech without recognizing the simplicity of his messages. Though not always easy, his message is always clear and accessible. Even his questions have a ring of simplicity and forthrightness.

Sometimes individuals and groups in active inquiry get preoccupied with process rather than outcomes and impacts. Some express disappointment that Obama reaches into the ranks of old-time politicians to fill his cabinet. On the contrary, the choice of performance and experience over promise and naïve hope seems to be driven by a hunger for making a real difference in this all-too-real world.

Witless questions can waste precious time in pointless exploration. Wasting time has hardly been a weakness of our President Elect. As early as November, he was taking substantive stands and making appointments to key advisory positions.

Some questioners get stuck in theoretical possibilities and miss the reality under their noses. This man pays attention even to the little things. So much attention, in fact, that his daughters have no doubt about the new puppy destined to ease their transition into the White House.

Inquiry can get one stuck on the horns of a dilemma, but Obama doesn't stay there for long. Even when his beloved grandmother was dying in Hawaii, and his campaign was running on high, Barack balanced home and work to do what was right.

Sometimes people who ask questions forget to listen to answers. We have witnessed as Mr. Obama has collected and analyzed information, considered options, and chosen paths that were sometimes surprising. He is listening. Some charlatans use questions to confuse and distract while they pursue their own best interests. Many signs point to Obama as a man who truly believes in the common good and sees his duty to ensure the greatest benefit for the greatest number. Though not much encouraging news is emerging from the Illinois governor's office, we did hear that the Obama team wanted no more than "appreciation" in exchange for a senatorial appointment. His questions are not about or for himself. His questions are for us—individually and collectively, at home and abroad, rich and poor, black and white, hopeful and downtrodden.

Thanks to Obama, this is an inauguration of a conversation will be sparked by his questions, informed by our collective wisdom, and grounded in Constitutional and moral powers of his office. With his help, perhaps we can all grow up enough to engage in collective inquiry as we search for 21st century answers to our own complex 21st century questions.

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