



ATTRACTORS
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The earthquake and tsunami of December 26, 2004 filled us with shock and sympathy. We can scarcely imagine the effects of such devastation on physical infrastructure and institutions. The effects on people, families, and communities are beyond our imagination. Can our emerging theory and practice of human systems dynamics (HSD) contribute to understanding or responding to crisis on this global scale? The answer is “no” and “yes.”

HSD cannot predict the unpredictable, but it can help identify and develop the skills to adapt effectively when emergencies arise. Here we describe five competencies that are critical to dealing effectively with crisis, how they are supporting the tsunami relief efforts, and how HSD helps clients build those competencies every day.

Attend to the part, whole and greater whole. Families cannot be healthy and whole until communities become safe. People will live disrupted lives until networks of shared intimacies emerge in place of shattered families. The world depends on nations, nations on their institutions, and institutions on their people. All levels of coherence and structure are dependent on all others. While one rescue initiative may invest in a single level, the entire process must include strategies to address all.

For our clients, day-to-day experiences provide opportunities to practice this HSD skill. When they work in teams or participate in meetings they learn to consider individual needs, the goal of the group, and the context of the larger cultural or organizational mission. As they take daily opportunities to consider the whole, the part, and the greater whole—each in the context of the other—they increase this capability that will be critical if and when crisis emerges.

Notice the noise. Stories tell about animals sensing the approaching tsunami and moving away from the shore to safety. Other stories describe families reunited as if by miracle when an unlikely event brought loved ones together. In these and many other cases, an almost imperceptible signal may carry significant meaning. In normal times, we can afford to ignore many kinds of irrelevant noise. In times of crisis, the irrelevant may become quite significant.

We do not recommend that our clients become hyper-vigilant. They cannot afford to perceive or respond to everything in the world around them. We can, however, help them collect information from a variety of sources and filter it to find the “differences that may make a difference.”

Stay connected. Both the rescuers and those to be rescued have depended on connections that remained after the disaster or ones that have been rebuilt since. Many different kinds of connections have played a role in the rescue: Physical (roads and wires), emotional (friends and family), and communication (media and wireless networks). The earliest efforts rebuilt failing connections that brought food, potable water, and information to sustain people as they began to recover.

Staying connected is easy to do in our world of solid infrastructure and information technology. So easy, in fact, that we take it for granted. We help our clients be more aware of their networks, building the capacity to rebuild or replace them when they are disrupted by unexpected events.

Use what's already there. Much of the recovery effort will involve making good use of whatever the tsunami left behind. Acknowledging these resources and recognizing their value will be a key to successful and rapid recovery. A special kind of creativity is required to use the residue from the past to build a foundation for the future, and that is exactly the capacity that will be needed as the damaged regions begin to rebuild.

We help our clients practice this skill. We help them avoid falling into the trap of planned obsolescence by making the most of the assets they have. These principles work in many different contexts including physical, mental, relationship, and institution. We help our clients recognize value in the present and use that value to establish foundations for the future.

Find strength in flexibility rather than rigidity. Many of the areas hit by the tsunami had invested in up-to-date physical infrastructure in recent years. Those solid structures were washed away in moments. In times of unpredictable turmoil, the flexible is more likely to survive than the rigid. This principle applies to both the physical and emotional domains. Persons whose expectations and world views are immovable have reduced capacity to respond to new and unexpected phenomena. Their rigidity makes them weaker rather than stronger in times of crisis.

To support our clients' development of this capacity, we help them develop the ability to distinguish between essential and merely circumstantial issues. When they know what is of most central importance, they hold tightly to it and adapt flexibly in all other considerations.

None of us can predict the unpredictable or know the unknowable, but we can use HSD and day-to-day challenges to develop a capacity for dealing with the unexpected. We appreciate the gifted and generous people who work today to rebuild the tsunami-torn countryside and the lives of the survivors. They are using a capacity for adaptation greater than any we can imagine. By exploring the principles of human systems dynamics, you can learn many lessons that will help you develop your own capacity for adaptation. If you would like the Human Systems Dynamics Institute to help you build adaptive capacity, please contact me at geoyang@hdsinstitute.org.

With thanks for those in service, grief for the lost, and hope for the survivors,

Glenda Eoyang
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