



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

SIMPLE RULES FOR COMPLEX TIMES

Human Systems Dynamics Institute engages 135 people in a loosely knit web of the Associates' Network. Our Associates are a diverse group: public, private, and not-for-profit; multiple sectors and industries; academics and practitioners from a wide variety of core disciplines; internal and external consultants, managers, technical contributors. In spite of this diversity, the Network is held together as a learning community because members share the theory, methods, models, and tools of human systems dynamics. A volunteer board and a part-time Director provide the governance structure, set policy, support projects and communities that bring small groups together for focused work.

Shared skills and centralized management would not be strong enough to sustain such a wide-flung and diverse group of strong-minded and busy people. In addition to these, we depend on a short list of simple rules to help order emerge from the creative chaos of many people doing many kinds of work in many different places.

In a complex adaptive system, each person is free to make decisions and adapt to local and immediate concerns. On the other hand, the group as a whole maintains shared work and identity. Everyone participates in the same emergent pattern because each one follows the same short list of simple rules. Computer simulation models like "boids" demonstrate how group coherence can emerge from a collection of individuals who apply the same set of simple operating rules. HSD Institute uses this idea to provide both consistency and freedom for its complex network of gifted professionals. These rules define the pattern that we value and believe to be the most creative, adaptive, and productive way for a human system to function.

HSD Institute operates inside six simple rules.

Teach and learn in every interaction. Every engagement—from performance appraisal to marketing call—presents an opportunity for transformation and growth. Associates approach every person and each moment with a passion for sharing and challenging what they know.

Reinforce strengths of self and other. Of course we all have weaknesses and opportunities for improvement, but in the HSD Associates' Network, we choose to focus on strengths. Positive feedback generates energy, provides direction, and empowers each one of us to be even better than our best.

Search for the true and the useful. HSD is a new field of theory and practice. Many truths come out of nonlinear dynamics, the scientific foundation of HSD, but not all of them are useful in productive human systems. On the other hand, some apparently useful strategies are based on false assumptions or delusions. Our Associates explore and apply ideas and tools that (to the best of our current knowledge) fit BOTH scientifically proven fact and the practical demands of the real world.

Give and get value for value. A healthy, sustainable human system is based on fair and balanced exchanges of energy, money, time, and commitment. Over time, each participant must feel a “balance of payments” or burnout, guilt, or resentment can begin to influence patterns of the whole.

Attend to the part, the whole, and the greater whole. Human systems are massively entangled. Every social structure is built on structures within and depends on structures beyond. Individual people manage their own intrapersonal dynamics while pairs and teams engage in shared work. These influence and are influenced by neighborhoods, organizations, interest groups, and nation states. When one engages with a human system, it is not sufficient to pay attention to only one level—team or family or company—because a change there will certainly ripple into effects above and below. Responsible human systems dynamics practitioners are sensitive to the impacts of their actions on the part, the whole, and the greater whole.

Engage in joyful practice. Many human systems around the world are in crisis today, but we miss opportunities to make a difference if we slide into anger, pain, or despair. When we find excitement and satisfaction in our work and each other, then we build our capacity to make a difference for the people and human systems that surround us.

These six simple rules shape individual and group action in the HSD Associates' Network, determine our quality measures, shape our policies and procedures, inform communications and product development, and shape our relationships with clients and with each other. We have chosen these rules because we believe they will generate the institutional patterns of performance that we want for our organization.

A different set of rules shape behaviors in your organization. Can you see the implied and explicit simple rules that are in effect for you and your team? Next month, we'll talk about simple rules in your organization, and lay out a step-by-step plan to develop your own list of simple rules.

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