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

LESSONS LEARNED

Last week over lunch, a client asked about the lessons I'd learned from working with messy, apparently intractable problems in human systems. I told him stories about successes and failures and reflected on the fact that both have contributed to the theory and practice of human systems dynamics. His question continued to haunt me, so last night I captured the many threads and tried to weave them together into a coherent list of "lessons learned." There are six:

1. See and influence patterns.
2. Move beyond description to explanation that informs action.
3. Distinguish between complex and complicated.
4. Attend to the whole, the part, and the greater whole.
5. Simple tools are the key to changed behavior.
6. Take adaptive action.

Over the coming months, I will dig into each of these lessons to share with you where they came from and how they help us act with wisdom and power to implement sustainable change, even in the most disrupted and chaotic environments.

First, what does it mean to "see and influence patterns?"

Some people assume that pattern thinking is an innate gift that is available only to an elite few. Artists, scientific geniuses, and charismatic leaders have it, but the rest of us have to depend on them to see the "big picture" and to share it with us.

Our experience has taught us that this is not true. Anyone can see and influence patterns in human systems, if they have tools and practice to build the skill. We've also learned that many wise practitioners in a wide variety of contexts see and influence patterns intuitively. But, because they don't have language to describe what they see and do, their insights seem magical. Our job, at the HSD Institute is to help people put language to what they know, use tools that leverage their natural abilities, and work together to shift their human systems into more healthy and productive paths.

We begin with a practical and concrete definition of "patterns." In HSD, a pattern is, "Similarities, differences, and relationships that have meaning across space and time." Such a simple, operational definition can be quickly learned and successfully applied by anyone in an organization. Any group—functional or dysfunctional—can describe how they are same and different. They can also describe the ways they relate to each other, whether good or bad. When they've answered these three questions, they have seen the pattern that holds them in their current behaviors, and they can begin to work together to make the changes they desire.

A few years ago we were working with a middle management team. They were Midwestern, white, middle-aged men who had been commanded to “become a team.” After months of work, they still bristled at the thought of collaborating with each other. In a simple pattern-spotting exercise, I asked them to brainstorm the ways they were same and different. After a slow start, they were laughing and adding things at random to their lists when a strange thing happened. Someone said, “the schools we went to,” and the room got very quiet. What under the sun, I wondered, could such a difference make to these guys? Turns out that, in this agriculture-based business, two university experiences are not generally considered equal. In almost every state in the US, there is an elite school of ag theory and an aggie school of ag practice. This difference in focus and methods generated in our group of powerful professionals a pattern of distrust and competition.

When I saw the pattern, I began to push it. I asked them to line up—left and right—according to where they went to school. Each group was to quote the worst things they thought the other said about them. Dirty fingernails. Bookworms. Smell of the farm. Can’t find the hind end of a cow. Bumpkin. Know-it-all. And on it went until someone recognized a new pattern. “Hey, we couldn’t do what we do without you, and you sure couldn’t do what you do without us!” The pattern shifted, and the group was free to establish new foundations as a team of diverse professionals.

When individuals or groups come to shared understanding of a current pattern, they are immediately empowered to influence that pattern.

In a more recent example, government workers were asked to integrate their services to aging and disabled persons. After rough starts with collaborative teamwork, the groups stopped, assessed their patterns, and realized that their relationships frequently assumed negative intent from the other side. They decided to adopt a new simple rule, “Assume positive intent,” and shifted how they engaged with each other in both formal and informal venues. Together, they saw and influenced a pattern and improved their individual and group productivity.

Many different tools, methods, and approaches help people recognize and shift patterns in human systems:

- Simple Rules
- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)
- Lean and Six Sigma
- Diversity training
- Strategic planning
- 360 degree feedback

You probably have your own toolbox. When you think of the real purpose of these tools as “seeing and influencing patterns,” each one takes on a systemic power. You can use your tools in non-systemic ways to push and prod individuals and to search for single points of leverage, or you can think of the ways your tools help to see similarities, differences, and relationships. Then, once you’ve seen, you are ready to explore your adaptive options for action. Many viable options emerge, when you can focus on important similarities, find the differences that really make a difference, and/or build (or break) relationships that support (or disrupt) the work. Any of these actions shifts the pattern and leads you into the next cycle of seeing patterns as they emerge and influencing them toward greater health and productivity.

Join us to learn more about how to see and influence patterns in your crazy and chaotic environment! Next month we’ll explore the distinctions between *description* and *explanation*. Have a great month.

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