



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

COMPLEX VS COMPLICATED

Over the years, we've learned many lessons about dealing effectively with human systems. This month's lesson is—

Distinguish between complex and complicated.

At this time of year we at HSD Institute look back to evaluate past performance and forward to plan for the future. Though the Institute is a small organization, this annual ritual poses a variety of challenges that are common for all our clients, no matter how large they are.

Who's got time for reflection? What should we focus on? What should we do with too many expectations and not enough resources? How will the environment change in the coming year? What patterns will influence us? What patterns will we influence? What will happen to the value of the dollar, the success of our clients, the political landscape, the technological capacity, and our personal and physical wellbeing?

All of these questions (and many others) quickly turn planning into a very complicated process. Each question leads to more unanswered—and sometimes unanswerable—questions. If we are not careful, we drown in details and fail to see the overarching patterns of learning from the past and preparing for the future.

It may seem ironic, but complex planning is much simpler.

In general practice, *complicated* and *complex* are often used interchangeably, but they mean quite different things in the world of human systems dynamics.

Complicated: composed of many parts; difficult to analyze or understand.

Complex: emerging from repeated interactions of a few, simple parts or factors.

When we consider our annual review as a complicated process, we can list all the different things HSD Institute did this year:

- Taught collaboration skills
- Helped resolve conflicts
- Supported strategic planning
- Developed adaptive capacity for teams
- Facilitated community engagement
- Designed, managed, and documented meetings
- Developed coaching skills
- Created retreat experiences
- Implemented focus groups
- Consulted with researchers
- Managed projects
- Developed leadership capacity for boards
- Completed needs assessments
- Designed, created, and archived webinars
- Made public presentations
- Maintained our website
- Stayed in communication
- Expanded our contact data base
- Coached leaders
- Designed and implemented evaluations
- Built adaptive capacity
- Inspired vision
- Recommended management changes
- Articulated coherent visions
- Reflected opportunities and constraints
- Made friends
- Participated in think tanks
- Practiced listening with our backs
- Presented at conferences
- Explored research opportunities
- Improved clients' processes
- Welcomed new HSD Associates
- Improved our own processes
- Supported HSD communities and projects
- Planned strategically with our Board of Directors
- Learned from our Network Board
- Forged strategic partnerships
- Developed products
- Celebrated many remarkable contributions of Associates
- Wrote books and articles
- And so on . . .

That sounds pretty complicated! Such a laundry list doesn't do much to help us plan for future. On the other hand, we might take a complex approach to thinking about 2009:

We helped people see and influence patterns.

This simple statement becomes complex when *seeing* and *influencing* enfold in repeated interactions for us, for our clients, and for the learning teams that include us all.

This simple, complex statement of our work leads us to equally powerful plans for 2010. How will we see and influence the patterns around us? How will we help others see and influence their patterns?

During this time of uncertainty and transition in our economy and our culture, we would like to thank you for being with us as the complexity of the past year unfolded, and we welcome you into the emerging and rich complexity of the coming year. We hope your holiday and your new year are more complex than complicated.

Sincerely,

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