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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 TOOLS FOR COMPLEX ISSUES

Over the years, we've learned many lessons about dealing effectively with human systems. This month's lesson is—
Simple tools are the key to changed behavior.

It is hard enough to think and talk about systems and their complex interactions, but it is even harder to change behaviors that influence those systemic patterns. Individual and collective behaviors are driven by habit, locked-in policies and procedures, personal and professional expectations, and pressure to make decisions and take action quickly. All of these factors draw us into behaviors that are familiar, even though we know how ineffective they have been in the past. In the last week, I've observed several examples that demonstrate this self-defeating pattern.

The US talks about whole-of-government, and it still funds functional silos.

Policy makers recognize the massive connections among food, security, and energy policies, and they still optimize the part at the risk of the whole.

Members of the US Congress talk about the need for collaboration across the aisle, and they still practice partisan politics.

Parents attend classes to learn how to support their children through difficult transitions of adolescence, and they still enter into unproductive power struggles.

Battered wives know the danger in their relationships, and they still accept apologies and hope for future safety. Their abusers promise to stop, but are drawn back in to destructive behavior.

If knowing about complex patterns does not inspire effective action to shift them, then what does? At HSD Institute, we believe that simple tools inform powerful actions in complex environments. If you are facing a complex challenge, the last thing you need is a complicated set of tools. Complicated on top of complex just makes the issue seem even more intractable. Simple tools, on the other hand, can help you cut through the tangled web of interdependencies and see new options for action. Some examples will demonstrate the power of simple tools in complex situations.

Krista Tippett's *Speaking of Faith* appears on many public radio stations across the US. Recently she ran a story about how Israelis and Palestinians are engaging with each other to transcend violence as they mourn together for their fallen friends and family members (<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2010/no-more/>). The group asks themselves to focus on being honest rather than being right. When they are honest about their pain and sorrow (as opposed to being right about who was in the wrong), they open space for understanding and peaceful action.

A colleague was developing a computer simulation model for conflict between the Serbs and Croats. He knew there were complex issues internal to each, such as the balance of power, family dynamics, historical relationships, and the role of elites. Of course these patterns influenced the immensely complex relationships between the two parties, including economic, political, religious, and social interactions. He had worked on the problem for many months trying to find a way to clarify these patterns and make sense of the ways they were massively entangled. We spent about an hour reframing his understanding into a simple table of containers, differences, and exchanges. In the course of the conversation, he saw new, simple ways to model the complex dynamics of historical and potential relationships.

In another recent case, a client was engaged in a merger of three non-profit organizations. On the surface, the missions of the three were quite similar, but their cultures and identities could not have been more distinct. We used a simple process to define how the three were SAME and DIFFERENT, and the client selected one (and only one) action that would amplify a critical similarity. Given the dynamic relationships among the organizations and their people, that one action can shift the complex patterns and open up even more opportunities for action.

One final example involves a process analysis and improvement project for a collection of government programs. Four, distinct programs that targeted the same populations were consolidating to improve turnaround time and client outcomes. Though the four had functioned independently in the past, they saw the wisdom of working together more closely. Rather than trying to incorporate all four at the same time, we led them through a process that merged the two processes that were most similar. Then, processes three and four were folded into the newly defined process with minimal change. We tracked barriers and bridges for the consolidated pattern and wrote action plans for resolving issues as they arose.

In each of these cases, the problem seemed intractable, the tool was simple, and the emergent solutions are (or promise to be) effective. We see the same emergent process in HSD applications for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. Public, private, and government institutions at all levels generate creative options for change using the elegant tools of HSD.

Of course not all simple tools are powerful. The only ones that are effective reach into the core of the complex pattern, reflect the underlying dynamics of the complex relationships, are easy to understand and implement, and translate directly into options for action. HSD Associates offer such simple tools to their clients every day in a wide variety of environments. They adapt old tools to meet emerging challenges, and they create new tools to respond when novel situations arise.

We invite you to visit our website (www.hsdinstitute.org), check out our social networking site (<http://humansystemsdynamicsinstitute.ning.com/>), or contact one of our Associates to explore the simple tools that can help you address your complex challenges.

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