



**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

ADAPTIVE ACTION

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

Sometimes, prediction and control are not possible. You cannot collect enough data; you cannot anticipate possible shocks to the system; you cannot control the free will of clients, competitors, vendors or partners. In these situations, the future is not just unknown, it is unknowable. Nevertheless, you have to make decisions and take action, even when your understanding is incomplete and your picture of the future is fuzzy. What are your options for action when you're confronted with radical uncertainty?

The prime action is to mitigate your risk. In stable, predictable times, risk mitigation means planning. What are all the things that might happen? How will we respond to each of these possible scenarios? How can we prepare ourselves for predictable bumps in the road? What actions will increase control and decrease surprise? The problem is that when you work in complex, emergent environments, these activities intended to minimize uncertainty actually increase risk of failure. As you invest time and resources into imagining the unknowable, opportunities sweep right past you. As you strive to control the uncontrollable, you miss weak signals that hint at winning strategies. As you plan for an unpredictable future, you are helpless in response to the present.

In 1976, Karl Weick provided an alternative to planning paralysis when he wrote *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. He explained that you cannot wait to know before you act, because you cannot know until you act. The concept and practice of *adaptive action* grew from this simple and profound insight. It has become a keystone of our work at Human Systems Dynamics Institute.

Adaptive action is easy to learn about, but quite challenging to practice. It involves three simple questions: "What?" "So what?" And "Now What?"

What is going on? What patterns do we observe? What seems to be constant, and what is changing?

So what does it mean? What implications can we see? What conditions are shaping the current pattern, and what do they mean for the patterns we intend? What are the diverse interpretations of observations? So what are options for meaningful action?

Now, what will we do to shift the pattern? What are pros and cons of possible options? What is within our ability, scope of influence, time and resource constraints? How will we know whether the action was successful, and when will we begin our next cycle of adaptive action?

This sounds simple, and it is simple to talk about. The challenge comes when day-to-day busy-ness distracts us, when our desire to predict and control distorts our views, when powerful others ask for definitive answers about things that are unknowable. That is why our Human Systems Dynamics Professional (HSDP) certification training is more than certification and more than training.

In ten intense days, attendees learn the basic principles and practices of HSD, receive the designation of Human Systems Dynamics Professional, and become Associates in the HSD Network. In the days and months that follow, they practice adaptive action and the other approaches and tools in the context of a diverse learning community. Working with others in communities of practice, product development and research projects, learning circles, and formal and informal training contexts, Associates share their experiences and insights. Learning from each other, in the context of their own business and personal challenges, Associates develop their individual and collective adaptive action “muscles.” They adapt HSD tools to their own environments or create new ones to support the adaptive actions they and their clients take. Over time, each Associate develops his or her own process to observe, assess, and influence the patterns that contribute to productive and innovative work and play.

Over the years, we’ve seen how the adaptive action process informs institutional and community change in education, evaluation, conflict resolution, public policy, training, and process improvement. In all of these contexts, we’ve noticed some key ways that adaptive action process changes in response to unique and thorny challenges.

Sometimes the adaptive action cycle is short, and sometimes it is long. A single meeting or phone call leads one into multiple cycles of inquiry and action as data becomes available, shared meaning is made, and collective action is defined.

Sometimes the adaptive action is private, and sometimes it is public. As Associates balance individual and shared agendas, they become sensitive to what is best addressed by the person and what should be conscious for a group.

Sometimes the adaptive action process is formal, and sometimes it is informal. While individual learning and growth can move forward in informal and intimate ways, scaling the work up for institutional and community change often requires formal policies and procedures.

In every case, the adaptive action process adapts to the immediate and local demands of the situation. When they share their experiences, Associates become adept at shifting the cycle time, explicitness, and formality of each step to meet the emerging and unpredictable needs of their colleagues and clients. With practice, we become more agile as we support the agility of our organizations. So, we have a game plan that keeps us productive even in unpredictable and uncontrollable situations. Try it. You, too, will find that adaptive action is an efficient and effective approach to dealing with uncertainty of complex human systems.

Consider joining us for HSDP Certification this year. Courses are planned in Minnesota, London, and Ottawa, and we are taking applications now. We invite you to visit our website at www.hsdinstitute.org, check out our social networking site at <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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