



ATTRACTORS
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Why do we talk about an “art” of getting things done? Why is it not a “science?” After all, the question involves just task and time, and I should be able to predict and control both! I should be able to plan my time to match my work—or work to match time. I should be able to make solid commitments and get things done. I should . . .

In the world of emergence and self-organizing processes, there may be a “science” to finishing on time, but this nonlinear science is indistinguishable from art. “Getting things done” is a practical and familiar example of the complex adaptive nature of people and our engagements with the world around us. Dwelling in the tensions and opportunities of a daily “to do” list is a creative process that mirrors the basic characteristics of a complex adaptive system.

Four of these characteristics are as easy to see as they are impossible to control.

- Timeliness depends on a wide variety of factors, from human interactions to technical skills and natural forces. In a complex system this is described as “high dimensionality.”
- The factors that influence my ability to get things done are forever and constantly changing. This complex feature is “dynamical,” because it depends on ever-changing causes.
- No single cause lies at the root of my inability to get things done. One thing causes another and is also its result. In the world of complexity, this is called, “mutual causality.”
- Apparently inconsequential events can distract me and disrupt my plan. This feature of complex adaptive systems is called “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” or “butterfly effects.”

One feature of a complex adaptive system may provide hope. “Emergence” shows itself when a novel, but relatively stable, pattern emerges from the midst of apparent randomness. I am aware of emergence when my list of to do’s transforms itself through triage, redefinition, and creative interpretation. In these moments of artistic transformation, I am truly aware that if there is a science of getting things done, it is not the linear science of predictability, list making, and strict time allocation. Rather, it is one of the new, nonlinear sciences in which unthinkable complexity resolves itself naturally into new, comprehensible, and forever changing patterns.

At the Human Systems Dynamics Institute, we apply what we learn from the sciences of chaos and complexity to generate options for action for people in emergent environments. To learn more about the dynamics of complex adaptive human systems, visit our web site at www.hsdinstitute.org or contact Julia Wolter, Director of Operations, at jwolter@hsdinstitute.org.