



## HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

*Change the world by changing how people think about the world.*

### **Adaptive Action Guide**

The purpose of this guide is to provide a framework for ***seeing, understanding, and influencing patterns in complex adaptive systems***. Because work in these systems is contingent on emerging realities, simplistic lists of procedures are ultimately not useful. A flexible guide like this, however, can offer a springboard for exploring what is both true and useful in your system.

#### ***Human Systems Dynamics Simple Rules***

- ▶ Teach and learn in every interaction.
- ▶ Search for the true and the useful.
- ▶ Give and get value for value.
- ▶ Attend to the part, the whole and the greater whole.
- ▶ Engage in joyful practice.
- ▶ Share the HSD story.

#### ***Adaptive Action Defined***

***Adaptive Action*** is a process that enables people to respond to their environments in coherent and productive ways. Adaptive Action assumes that, although human systems may seem hopelessly complex and unpredictable, in fact, patterns emerge from the dynamics of these systems. By “pattern” we mean “the ***similarities, differences, and connections that have meaning across space and time.***” Adaptive Action provides a systematic approach to identifying these patterns and responding appropriately. In other words, people can learn from their experiences and work together to influence systems toward more coherence and greater sustainability.

We define Adaptive Action as an intentional reflective process based on these three questions: ***What? So What? Now What?*** These three questions are deceptively simple. Each one can lead into a deep exploration of the patterns emerging in human systems.

Nothing is intractable.

In her work with organizations, Glenda Eoyang recommends Adaptive Action as an alternative to more traditional approaches to strategic planning. The following chart provides more detail about Adaptive Action.

| <b>Traditional Strategic Planning</b>  | <b>Adaptive Action Planning</b>   |
|--|---|
| Assumes long-range future is knowable, so you can set reliable long-term objectives and control the environment sufficiently to meet them. | Assumes that the future is unpredictable, so you must work effectively with the circumstances that surround you.  |
| Focuses on setting goals that will pull an organization into the desired future.   | Focuses on defining actions that push the organization to live with its desired future.   |
| Divides goals, objectives, roles, and responsibilities into discrete organizational areas.   | Focuses on individual and group actions toward common goals.  |
| Works in quarterly or annual cycles to plan the path for the coming year, set expectations, and evaluate performance and communication.    | Works in multiple cycles of planning and evaluation that are as frequent as feasible to encourage adaptive change in response to the shifting environment.                    |
| Focuses on major threats, shifts, or transformations of the whole organization at the same time.   | Focuses on individual and small-group actions that make a difference in the “here and now” with an eye toward the preferred future.   |
| Produces long lists of goals and objectives that are more or less aligned toward a common goal.  | Produces a focused action plan for influencing one aspect of the system at a time. This single change begins a cascading process that ripples change across the organization. |
| Driven by insights and needs of leaders who believe that they see the desired future for the organization.                                 | Reflects the insights and knowledge of the professionals and service-delivery personnel who work in the system every day.   |
| Selects a single set of measures for success of the organization as a whole.   | Helps individuals and groups establish and track the measures that are significant to their work.   |
| Establishes a singular description of the current state, desired state, gaps, and strategies to close gaps.                                | Incorporates diverse perspectives and strategies that encourage ongoing learning through continuous improvement in all parts of the organization.                             |
| Assumes that the forces and influences on the organization will remain stable in the foreseeable future.                                   | Assumes that the environment inside and outside the organization will evolve continually in the near- and far-term futures.   |

So, as you consider your work, focus on a single “**sticky issue.**” By that, we mean an issue that

- ▶ has so many parts that you can’t hold them in mind all at once;
- ▶ comes unsolved each time you think you have it “fixed;”
- ▶ evolves over time.

As you focus on this “sticky issue,” respond to the questions and suggestions in this guide. We want to move toward patterns that are both coherent (internal “fitness”) and adaptive (external “fitness”). In other words, the goal is to work together in healthy and sustainable ways to respond to changes in the system, in its parts, and throughout the greater whole.

### **What?**

(Describe & explain the pattern.)

#### **Identify and explore the sticky issue.**

- ▶ List the concrete facts and issues.

- ▶ How are you stuck?

- ▶ Where are you stuck?

### Identify a pattern that's limiting "fit"

▶ Answer the Key Questions:

- a. Generalizations? *In general I notice . . .*
  
- b. Exceptions? *In general . . . , but . . .*
  
- c. Contradictions? *On one hand . . . , on the other . . .*
  
- d. Surprises? *I didn't expect . . .*
  
- e. Puzzles? *I wonder . . .*

► Describe the pattern

f. Who's involved? Individuals or Groups?

g. What's happening?

h. How are people responding?

**Conduct a CDE Analysis**

► Analyze the pattern using *CDE Profile*, *the CDE Diagram*, or *Radical Inquiry*.

*CDE Profile:* Name at least 3 containers involved in this sticky issue and do a CDE analysis of each, naming the differences and exchanges relevant in each container.

| <b>Container</b><br><i>Remember types of containers:<br/> social, structural,<br/> conceptual</i> | <b>Differences Within</b><br><i>Remember difference in<br/> kind and degree</i> | <b>Exchanges Within</b><br><i>Remember content, media, and<br/> frequency</i> |
|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |
|   |   |   |
|   |   |   |

Which set of CDEs best explain how this pattern is limiting fit or interfering with coherence in your system?

What is a brief explanation that would make sense to other stakeholders?

## So What?

(Interpret the pattern to generate options for action.)

### Make your best guess about which HSD Model(s) or Method(s) will help you understand the pattern and generate options for action.

Use this table to brainstorm options for action. Remember...there is no one "best practice." There is no "correct" answer! The suggestions here are just that...use your best judgment about what models and methods will work for you. Adaptive Action is about taking small steps and paying attention to how current patterns shift and how new patterns emerge. You are not committing to a five-year plan of action.

| Consider the fitness of the pattern . . .  | Try using this . . .  |
|--|---|
| It feels like there is too much similarity.<br>It feels like there is too little difference. | <i>"Same and Different"</i><br><i>"Attractor Patterns"</i>  |
| It feels like there is too little similarity.<br>It feels like there is too much difference. | <i>"Same and Different"</i><br><i>"Attractor Patterns"</i>  |
| It feels like the connections are too tight or too loose.                                    | <i>"Designing Exchanges"</i>  |
| It feels like the connections aren't effective or clear.                                     | <i>"Designing Exchanges"</i><br><i>"Decision Map"</i><br><i>"STAR Diagram"</i><br><i>"Generative Engagements"</i> |
| It feels like we are interpreting things differently.  | <i>"Four Truths"</i><br><i>"Decision Map"</i><br><i>"Conflict Circles"</i>  |
| It feels like there is too much or too little control in the system.                         | <i>"Landscape Diagram"</i><br><i>"Designing Exchanges"</i><br><i>"Simple Rules"</i><br><i>"CDE Constraints"</i>   |
| It feels like things are changing too quickly or too slowly.                                 | <i>"Questions for Uncertain Times"</i><br><i>"Maturity Change Model"</i>  |
| We sense a lack of capacity to sustain the pattern.  | <i>"Legacy Model"</i>   |
| It feels like there is a disconnection between the whole, part, and greater whole.           | <i>"Fractals"</i><br><i>"Attractor Patterns"</i><br><i>"Simple Rules"</i>   |

### **Test Your Best Guess**

- ▶ Decide which method or model to start with, and use it to figure out what the pattern means. Explain what you learn about what this pattern might mean for your sticky issue.

- ▶ Once you feel as if you understand the pattern, identify options for action to shift it toward fit.

Nothing is intractable.



## ***Now What?***

(Develop a plan for taking action.)

### **What's your plan?**

- ▶ Who's doing what?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ▶ When? For how long?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ▶ What resources do you need?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ▶ Who needs to know about it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ▶ How are you going to know when you are finished?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ▶ When will you plan to begin with your next "What?"

Nothing is intractable.

**How's it going? Figure out your next steps.**

- ▶ Look for new patterns or shifts in the old patterns. What do you see?

- ▶ And start the ***What? So What? Now What*** all over again . . .

Nothing is intractable.