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Strategic Adaptive Action

Description of Strategic Adaptive Action

In the complexity of the 21st century, traditional strategic planning is no longer adequate to address the uncertainty of organizational life. At the same time, organizations do need to set direction and take coherent action toward establishing goals. They must have flexibility to adapt to the constant change of today's landscape. Strategic Adaptive Action offers a structure and process that provide both direction and flexibility.

— Strategic Adaptive Action —



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What?

Strategic Adaptive Action happens when a group engages in multiple, simultaneous, and ongoing iterative cycles of Adaptive Action* that focus on the same direction and priorities. At all organizational scales, individuals, groups, and departments use local information and resources in these cycles of Adaptive Action to take intentional action toward shared priorities.

So What?

In a system engaged in Strategic Adaptive Action at all scales, commonly shared information about the organization, the greater environment, and their work informs

* For more information, visit www.hsdinstitute.org.

Nothing is intractable.

decisions that work for the greater whole. They act within a shared list of Simple Rules* that helps them take coherent action. They access shared systems and processes that support and enable this level of coordinated and adaptive action.

Now What?

Use Strategic Adaptive Action to set priorities and direction for your entire organization. Build the organizational systems that will help you engage in ongoing, simultaneous, iterative cycles of Adaptive Action.

- ▶ Gather intelligence about your environment, history, current patterns, and aspirations to inform decisions about direction and priorities.
- ▶ Identify patterns that will move you forward and set conditions at all scales in your system to move you toward those priorities.
- ▶ Establish Simple Rules and organizational procedures and expectations to support coherent functioning and adaptability across the system.

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What is the Purpose of Strategic Adaptive Action?

Effective planning in today's turbulent landscape carries different responsibilities than traditional strategic planning. In an environment where change occurs as quickly and on such a massive scale, one long-range plan that stretches across three or five years is no longer viable. What is needed now is a way of responding quickly and effectively to adapt as the environment changes. Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) offers a tool for planning that enables that level of adaptability and response.



In Strategic Adaptive Action, organizations set their goals in the context of their overall resilience and sustainability. This becomes the over-arching frame for ongoing planning and adaptation at all levels of the organization.

Across the organization, individuals and departments engage in short cycles of Adaptive Action as they plot their courses and gather data about performance relative to overall goals and functioning. Moment-to-moment, day-to-day, and long-term decisions all exist in a context of ongoing Adaptive Action.

Operational and organizational systems support engagement in Adaptive Action.

- ▶ Functional planning at all scales builds on the Adaptive Action questions to ensure coherence and resilience across the system.
- ▶ Data and environmental intelligence collection functions to provide the information needed to support Adaptive Action across the system.
- ▶ Accountability systems align to address the work of the overall organization, the effectiveness of individual departments and programs, and the contributions of individuals who work there.

Nothing is intractable.

- ▶ The parts of the system are interdependent, supporting success and efficacy at all levels. Effective Strategic Adaptive Action is founded on four principles.
 - ▷ Individuals' work across the organization remains in alignment with others in support of the system-wide goals.
 - ▷ Stakeholder engagement provides input and feedback to inform plans as they are developed and implemented and serve as a driver for refinement and improvement.
 - ▷ Employees' reflections about their work, how it contributes to organizational goals, and their own needs for support and learning inform individual and group decision making.
 - ▷ Individuals accept accountability for achieving organizational outcomes.

So What Can You Do to Use Strategic Adaptive Action?

Adaptive Action Planning is an iterative process using three questions to make sense of the environment to develop choices that move the system forward.

- ▶ **What?** This question gathers data about the environment as well as organizational and individual performance. Customer feedback, competitive market information, and other sources are input in this phase to help you see existing patterns in your organization from multiple perspectives.
- ▶ **So What?** This question helps you make meaning of data collected in the first step. What are the implications and what are your aspirations, given current situations? Who is engaged, and who is not? Use Pattern Logic* to understand the patterns and to identify possible options for action to shift the patterns in light of that information. Define the over-arching priorities and direction that will build resilience in your system.
- ▶ **Now What?** This question brings the process full circle as the system takes action and gathers further data to determine results of steps taken. Individuals use the Simple Rules to build coherence as they engage in their own cycles of Adaptive Action. The data gathered in this stage feeds back into the "What?" questions in the next cycle.

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Now What Can You Do to Use Strategic Adaptive Action in Your System?

Once direction and priorities are set, the Simple Rules are in place, and other organizational supports are operational, you engage people across your organization in using Adaptive Action as the system-wide approach to problem solving and decision making.

- ▶ You ensure that they have the information they need about current functioning and environmental forces and opportunities. You support their data collection and information sharing at all scales of the system.
- ▶ You support their sense-making about what they see and how today's decisions can impact long-term performance for them and for the larger organization. You build coherence by engaging in generative relationships grounded in the Simple Rules. You encourage informed risk taking and innovation for problem solving and action taking.
- ▶ You help them take accountability for their own performance and contribution as they take steps to move toward organizational priorities. You support their actions and their data collection about the impacts of their actions.
- ▶ You engage the system in periodic reviews to determine the continued fitness between priorities and the needs of the system in the current environment.

Strategic Adaptive Action offers a systemic and responsive alternative to traditional strategic planning. Its use can enable your organization, whatever its size, to move toward continued resilience and sustainability in a complex world of uncertainty and surprise.