



## HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

### Contributing to Collective Benefit: Ethics in Human Systems Dynamics

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*Recently, I have felt a rising tension over whether or not to speak out about some current affairs. I am an employee of a non-profit organization. I know my limitations when I speak out in that role. I cannot lobby for a particular political position. I cannot tell people what to think or what to do. On the other hand, speaking out as an individual may have less influence or impact. So, here is my choice. I do what I can to increase the chances of making a difference. I share information that might help others question or challenge issues they face. I offer them tools for making up their own minds.*

*The current tension I feel is driven by news of powerful leaders who enrich and empower themselves at the expense of their larger community. My tension comes from stories I read about the rise of corruption around the world. Corrupt leaders cheat, intimidate, and use false nationalism to gather and hold power. They prey on the most vulnerable.*

*In the HSD Institute, we study human systems. We work from a science-based foundation that helps us—and others—see, understand, and influence patterns in human systems. As the larger pattern of corruption grows, we see another pattern emerging. Those who are not in power may feel more hopelessness. They may see few options for fighting the corruption they see. They are not sure their voices can make a difference.*

*Today's blog post offers hope. It offers a clear definition of ethical behavior. It says each one of us can choose actions to strengthen our communities in the face of corrupt and self-serving acts. It builds a case for individual and group action that builds on the strength of individual, grassroots action. It offers a way you can change your world by changing how you think about your world.*

#### What?

Recently you may have seen many public examples of unethical decisions. Careers have been destroyed. Organizations have gone out of business. Governments have been challenged. Books, editorials, and documentaries have studied these issues in recent years. They've exposed less-than-ethical practices in the tobacco industry, in some corporations, and in some large financial institutions. You may have noticed how they have explored global challenges to democratic principles.

This brief essay engages you in Adaptive Action. It is an iterative cycle of observation, meaning making, and action. It is the core process of Human Systems Dynamics (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013). This simple, but powerful cycle asks three questions for your consideration. First, WHAT constitutes ethical decisions and action in a complex adaptive system? SO WHAT might a shared understanding of ethics offer a complex human system? Finally, NOW WHAT can you do to increase your consideration of the ethics of

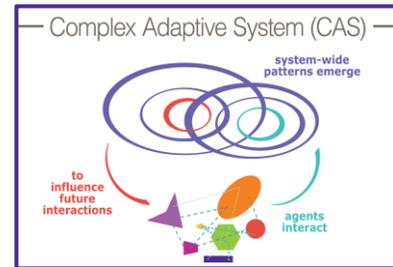


Nothing is intractable.

decisions you make at home, in your community, and at work?

In our community, we think about ethical action in a specific way. *Discretionary decision-making behavior that defines how struggles in human interests are to be settled and enhanced for the collective benefit of those living and working together in groups* (Husted and Allen, 2008). This boils down to basic questions you can ask. When you are free to choose your actions (*discretionary power in decision making*)? Do you think about only your own needs (*human interests*)? Do you think about how your decision will impact your community? Do you wonder how your decisions can be good for your larger community (collective benefit)?

Human System Dynamics tells you that in [complex adaptive systems](#) (Dooley, 1996), as individuals interact, they create system-wide patterns. When their choices consider collective benefit over time, system-wide patterns reflect that commitment. You see it at all scales, across multiple groups, and in diverse situations. These patterns frame shared agreements. They shape your future action as an individual and in groups. When you begin work or play with others, you agree on what is acceptable behavior. Those agreements become the foundation for your informal rules and formal laws. Those agreements inform future behavior and create the culture. Time passes and other people enter your system. You encourage new members to fit their behaviors with those patterns. Big events can change those patterns over time, but it is generally a slow, more incremental shift.



Agreements matter in a complex system. They generate patterns that support the culture. Consider interactions you have every day. When you and those around you agree about what is ethical, you build a more predictable, adaptable culture. You let others know about your agreements in many ways. You help each other understand and live up to those shared expectations. You establish laws and rules, that that let people and groups know how to relate to each other. Finally, you use those agreements to judge how your culture is working to benefit the whole community.

## So What?

Consider the definition we borrowed from Husted and Allen. When people's actions enhance the greater community, the whole community benefits in lots of ways. For one thing, it creates reciprocity in the community. You and those around behave in ways that contribute to the strength of the community. Community strength supports the quality of life among you and your community. You are "rewarded" by the benefits you get from the community. You are connected to something larger than yourself. Everyone pays taxes to the services and goods that hold the group together. This is the power of collective benefit. An individual who contributes to support the community will benefit because others contribute as well.

**What is Ethical?**  
Discretionary decision-making behavior that defines how struggles in human interests are to be settled and enhanced for the collective benefit of those living and working together in groups.  
*(Husted and Allen, 2008)*

In your community, people carry out your agreements by making rules that shape future behavior. Rules are formally stated or informally known. They define the "law of the land" or "how we do things around here." Rules shape formal codes for professional and social groups. They form foundations for social actions (patterns), even as they vary slightly from one generation, family, or neighborhood to the next.

There are people who, as individuals or as members of a group, make decisions that focus on their own needs and benefit. They ignore the greater collective benefit. That behavior may put them in

conflict with the greater community. Consider gang behavior. It's coherent inside the gang, with each member playing out his or her role to ensure the power of the gang. However, as a group, the gang seeks its own benefit, often at the expense of the larger community. This creates conflict with individuals and groups in around them.

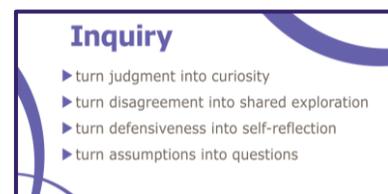
Government corruption is another example of individuals and groups working to gather power and riches to themselves. That's how it hurts you and your greater community. First, a corrupt act violates rules and laws that govern the community. It creates a self-reinforcing loop to enhance wealth and power of individuals, rather than enhancing the interests of the greater whole. Corruption breaks the cycle of reciprocal support. It violates trust and expectations held by you and others in the community. Finally, on a broader scope, corruption further erodes public trust in the leader, who chooses benefit for self over the collective benefit.

What might you see as public institutions frame your daily experience, given this definition of ethics? You would see that:

- ▶ Governance is about service to the citizenry, rather than about serving the social, economic, and/or political benefit of a few select individuals or groups.
- ▶ Quality public education is a right for every individual, not just those who can afford it or who can afford to live in areas where there are "good" schools.
- ▶ In healthcare, patient welfare and service outweigh financial risk or political gain of individuals or corporations.
- ▶ Justice is truly blind, using her scales to measure fairness and access to public goods for all people, regardless of differences that separate them.
- ▶ Societal goods and services (i.e. transportation, trade, public assistance, etc.) are available to all, regardless of disparities of social or economic station.

So, what does that require of you as you make decisions about your own behavior and contributions to sustain and feed the collective benefit of society? It requires that you:

- ▶ Take responsibility for the impact of your actions at all scales of your communities.
- ▶ Stand in inquiry, considering the roles you play in contributing to the whole.
- ▶ Reflect on your actions, learning from the past to improve your decisions in the future.



## **Now What?**

Use the following self-assessment to reflect on your actions and how they create collective benefit. Use it at home, at work, or wherever you join others in action. You can also share it in your work or community, where teams, departments, and other organizational groupings come together to consider the options for ethical decisions they face every day.

As you work through the assessment, remember:

- ▶ There is no right or wrong. This inquiry is about your own realities of decision making and the patterns you have created over time.
- ▶ Your responses are unique to you and/or your team—shaped by your history, your understandings and perspectives, your current context.

- ▶ This is not about finding the “best” response or action to move forward. It is about finding ways to shift the collective benefit.

Finally, don't consider this as a “one-and-done” type of assessment. Return to the assessment and your reflections often to continue your ethical journey.

*So please, consider your ability to contribute to collective benefit. Take back your power to influence your world. Know there are multiple ways you can challenge issues like corruption, inequality, social violence, and other patterns that create conflict in your world. Learn that you can choose to “define how struggles in human interests are to be settled and enhanced for the collective benefit of those living and working together in groups.”*



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## Collective Benefit Assessment: WHAT?

Consider your most recent discretionary decisions. Please rate your own decisions and actions, using the following scale:

1=Very Often      2=Often      3=Sometimes      4=Seldom      5=Very Seldom

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>In my individual actions, I consider my impact on collective benefit.</b>   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 1. In my work, I consider the impact of my decisions on the operations of my team, my department, my organization, etc.  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2. At home, I consider the impact of my decisions on the functioning of my family, my neighborhood, my community.  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 3. I participate in civic and/or community activities that I contribute to the greater collective impact.  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 4. I pay attention to and participate in political processes to ensure that government is truly about service to the citizenry.  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 5. I pay attention to the actions and events in my local community, looking for ways to contribute to the local collective benefit.  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6. I pay attention to actions and events on the national and global levels, looking for ways to contribute to the collective benefit of the greater whole.                     |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7. In my personal decisions about how I earn and spend money, how I make a living, I consider my impact on the collective benefit.   |   |   |   |   |   |
| <b>I join forces with others to contribute to collective benefit in each of the following areas:</b>   |   |   |   |   |   |
| ▶ Government<br><i>(Examples: Do I vote? Speak out against corruption? Visibly support candidates who work for collective benefit? Other actions?)</i>                         |   |   |   |   |   |
| ▶ Education<br><i>(Examples: Do I support local public schools? Vote in school board elections? Pay attention to kinds of curriculum and books being used? Other actions?)</i> |   |   |   |   |   |
| ▶ Healthcare<br><i>(Examples: Am I aware of health disparities in my community? Supporting health and wellbeing programs across my community? Other actions?)</i>              |   |   |   |   |   |
| ▶ Justice<br><i>(Examples: Do I actively support equitable justice systems? Demand fairness in appointed judicial seats? Other actions?)</i>                                   |   |   |   |   |   |
| ▶ Environment<br><i>(Examples: Do I advocate for environmental protections? Work for local access to public lands? Advocate to slow global climate change? Other actions?)</i> |   |   |   |   |   |
| ▶ Public corruption<br><i>(Examples: Do I speak out when I see corruption at a level of government? Speak out about corruption in other countries? Other actions?)</i>         |   |   |   |   |   |

**Notes:** What other patterns do I see in my own decision making and action in any of these areas? Are there other areas where I work for collective benefit?

## Collective Benefit Assessment: SO WHAT?

| Impact and Opportunity Reflection   |   |
|---|---|
| Impact Questions:   | Opportunity Question:   |
| <p>SO WHAT contributions do my actions make to the collective benefit at any level?</p> <p>SO WHAT factors enhance my impact?</p> <p>SO WHAT factors limit my impact?</p> | <p>SO WHAT can I do to increase my contribution to the collective benefit for each of the factors listed?</p> |

## **Collective Benefit Assessment: NOW WHAT?**

Now what will I commit to do to strengthen my own actions to increase collective benefit for myself, my family, and my community? Who will I invite to engage with me in these activities?



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### Resources

#### Articles

Dooley, K. (1996), "A Nominal Definition of Complex Adaptive Systems," *The Chaos Network*, 8(1): 2-3.

Husted, B. and Allen, D., 2008, "Toward a model of cross-cultural business ethics: The impact of individualism and collectivism on the ethical decision-making process." *Journal of Business Ethics*. 82(10): 293-305.

#### Books

Eoyang, G., and Holladay, R. (2013). *Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization*. Stanford University Press.

#### Website

[www.hsdinstitute.org](http://www.hsdinstitute.org)

For more information about the Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) Institute and the programs it offers, check out these links:

- ▶ Upcoming opportunities for learning more
  - ▷ Free monthly [Live Virtual Workshops](#), led by Glenda Eoyang, Ph.D., founder of the field of HSD.
  - ▷ Public online [Adaptive Action Labs](#) where you bring your own challenging issues to learn more about applications of HSD in specific challenges.

Our next Adaptive Action Lab, *Ethics in a Complex Adaptive System: What's Ethical in a World You Can't Predict or Control?* will be offered online February 11, 13, 2020, 12p - 3p (cst); 6p - 9p (utc). It offers a deeper dive into the questions in today's blog post.

- ▷ [Human Systems Dynamics Professional Certification Courses](#) (HSDPs) are designed to help you:
  - Deal with the complexity inherent in life in the 21st century
  - Focus on applying HSD in your sticky issues at work, in your community, and/or in your personal life
  - Understand social dynamics of the human systems where you live, work, and play

- Engage with others in more open and generative ways
- Make decisions, using models and methods that allow you to embrace the complex nature of your world
- ▷ We currently have two HSDP courses planned.
  - [HSDP Certification - Virtual Course](#) launches February 18, 2020 and continues through May 22, 2020.
  - [HSDP Certification - Roffey Park](#) launches October 19, 2020 with 5 days of in-person learning, in Horsham, West Sussex UK, followed by 4 months of virtual interaction.
- ▷ HSD offers many [resources](#) in the form of videos, case studies, blog posts, models and methods, guides, and books. All of these are available for download. Our intellectual property policy allows free use of our resources, with two requirements.
  - Please cite the source so people will know where they came from.
  - Please share anything you learn as you explore and apply any of these resources.