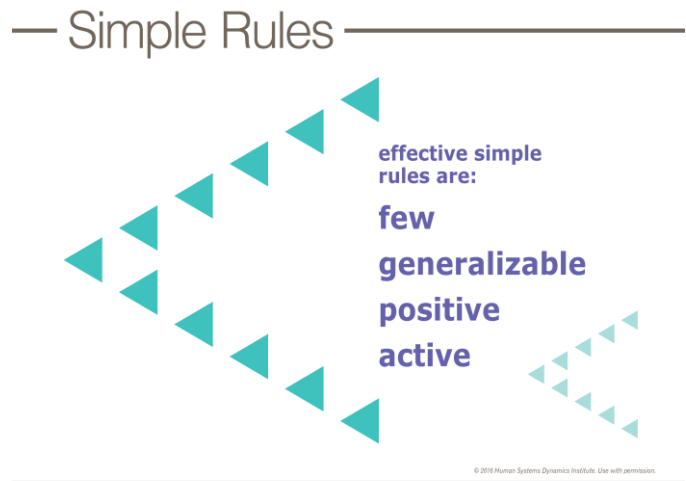




## Simple Rules

### Description of Simple Rules

Simple Rules are the agreed-upon guides that inform behavior and interactions among members of a Complex Adaptive System.\* Whether by conscious agreement or by unspoken assent, members of a CAS appear to engage with each other according to a short list of simple rules. Those Simple Rules shape the conditions that characterize the dominant patterns of the system.



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### What?

Simple Rules can be overt agreements about behavior in a system or they can be covert understandings. They can guide the behavior of an individual or a team or a family or a community. Together the Simple Rules act in interdependent ways to influence the conditions that shape the speed, path, and direction of emergent patterns in the system.

### So What?

Because they shape the dominant patterns among the agents, Simple Rules shape the culture of a complex system. They can emerge from history of interactions and decisions, or Simple Rules can emerge in a short session of intentional planning and decision making.

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\* For more information, see [www.hsdinstitute.org](http://www.hsdinstitute.org).

Nothing is intractable.

## Now What?

Teams can use Simple Rules in a number of ways.

- ▶ They can come together and agree on the patterns they want and establish Simple Rules they believe will shape those patterns.
- ▶ They can review their work together retrospectively to identify the unspoken Simple Rules that may be in effect. Then the team can choose to continue with the Rules that shape patterns they want, and find new Rules to shape patterns they want to improve.



HUMAN SYSTEMS  
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## Simple Rules

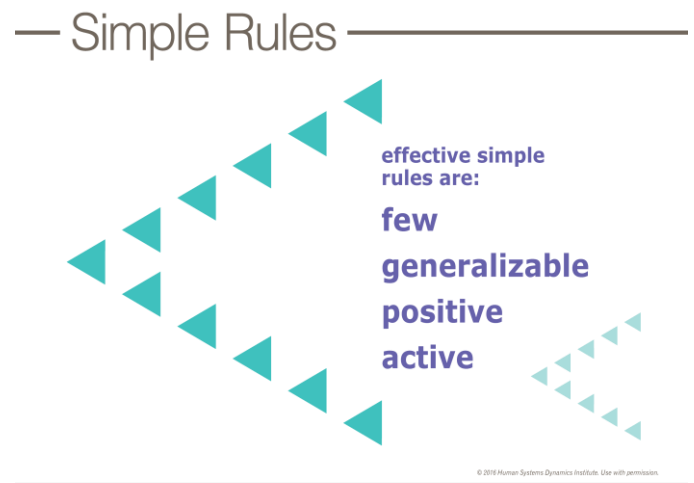
### What is the Purpose of Simple Rules?

Simple Rules are agreements that inform behavior, so a diverse group can function as one. They set conditions that shape the emergent patterns as a group self-organizes. The rules may emerge from covert or overt agreements among the players, and they inform decisions and actions to create coherence across the whole.

Families, organizations, and communities establish Simple Rules as they learn to live, work, and play together. Sometimes Simple Rules are codified through laws, regulations, contracts, or other formal means. At the same time Simple Rules can be unspoken, passing from person to person and generation to generation by the traditions and expectations that help people know how to belong and fit within the Simple Rules' cultural patterns.

The Human Systems Dynamics Institute uses a set of Simple Rules to define our culture—one that is aimed at ensuring resilience and coherence for individuals, groups, and our network as a whole. Employees, board members, network Associates, and interested colleagues around the globe experience these Simple Rules to shape the core patterns of the Institute. Our Simple Rules and their definitions appear below.

- ▶ **Stand in inquiry** calls you to a practice of perpetual and profound inquiry. HSD practitioners and professionals are committed to constant inquiry and ongoing meaning making. In HSD using Inquiry is to engage in four specific practices:
  - ▷ Turn judgment into curiosity
  - ▷ Turn disagreement into shared exploration
  - ▷ Turn defensiveness into self-reflection
  - ▷ Turn assumptions into questions



Nothing is intractable.

- ▶ **Leverage the energy of difference** points to the power of difference in a system. It is in difference where the tension emerges to create the impetus and energy for change. HSD practitioners use this understanding to look for the tension in system patterns and act to shift that tension. Those actions release the energy inside the system to shift the pattern.
- ▶ **Search for what is true and useful** encourages a pattern in which theory and practice play significant, dynamic, and interdependent roles. What is true (theory) and what is useful (practice) are considered equivalent and complementary. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient by itself. This tension between theory and practice (praxis) leads to increased capacity to respond and adapt.
- ▶ **Zoom in and zoom out** allows HSD practitioners to understand and engage with patterns at multiple scales, or levels, in the system. Understanding that different scales have an impact on each other, the individuals and groups can act or intervene at one point in the system, knowing that those actions will influence patterns at other scales. This phenomenon allows focus on one scale for analysis in the moment, and observations about sources and impacts of influence at scales above and below that focal point.
- ▶ **Connect through stories and impacts** connects HSD-formed patterns with other patterns in the world. Individuals and groups have unique stories about knowledge and action that shape their narrative about themselves and others. HSD practitioners recognize the patterns in different narratives and connect across those differences to make sense of the world. They share those stories and the impact of their work to inform other practitioners and to invite people into the HSD network.
- ▶ **Celebrate life** leverages the system's energy generated from the build-up and release of tension. HSD practitioners remind themselves and others to embrace the shift of tension that moves a system toward greater fitness. They celebrate the resulting respite of coherence in the systems where they live, work, and play.

## So What Can You Do to Use Simple Rules?

Simple Rules establish the conditions that give rise to patterns in the system. They can be covert agreements that emerge over time in a system, creating its culture. Often new leaders come into a system and state their intention to change the culture and “create a new world” for the workers, stakeholders, and customers. The problem is that unless intentional steps are taken to uncover and change the existing Simple Rules that hold those patterns in place, no amount of leadership command will change the system-wide patterns. Simple Rules can be used retrospectively to understand what shaped the conditions to generate whatever patterns are currently in the system.

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On the other hand, Simple Rules can be used prospectively to shape a desired future. Groups can identify patterns they want to generate and define Simple Rules that seem most likely to help them generate those patterns. What is critical in establishing system-wide patterns is that everyone has to use a shared set of Simple Rules at all levels of decision making and action. This requires a shared understanding of what the Rules mean and agreements to use the Rules to make decisions.

Simple Rules are different from the norms we name for meetings and short-term interactions because they are intended to be more generally applied and not time bound. They are also different from values and beliefs because they are about action. They start with a verb, so they inform action.

## Now What Can You Do to Create Simple Rules in Your System?

You can use Simple Rules in your system to shape the future.

- ▶ Name the dominant patterns in your system. Identify those you want to maintain and those you want to change.
- ▶ Work with others to develop a set of Simple Rules that will help to shape those patterns you want. Remember the rules about Simple Rules. They are:
  - ▷ Few in number (never more than about 7, preferably 5 is ideal).
  - ▷ General statements that apply in any situation and to everyone across the system.
  - ▷ Always stated in the positive.
  - ▷ Always begin with action verbs.
- ▶ Find ways to embed Simple Rules in your own system. The following suggestions can help you do that.
  - ▷ Discuss among your team what the Rules look like and what they do not look like. In human systems, the conversation about the Simple Rules and their impact on work and relationships is as important as the rules themselves.
  - ▷ Take one Simple Rule each week to focus on in meetings and conversations.
    - Put one Simple Rule as a footer into a team agenda format. Talk about your work using that as a lens for that week.
    - Formulate work-related questions about the Simple Rules in decision making processes, inviting participants to reflect and respond, based on their experiences and perspectives.

- ▷ Write the Simple Rules on the wall. One of our clients has their list of Simple Rules painted as a mural on the wall in their Board Room.
- ▷ Put them in pictures, use them to tell the story of your system. Make sure they are shared across the organization. One kindergarten teacher we work with helped her students learn and use Simple Rules by using pictures, songs, and children's literature to help them understand patterns of behavior.
- ▷ Revisit the list often. As patterns become set in the system you may be able to shift to other areas to establish new Simple Rules.
- ▷ Don't call them "Simple Rules" if people are bothered by the idea of more rules. One group we worked with called them "Seed Behaviors," and people were very comfortable stepping into their use.