



## Difference Matrix Description

The Difference Matrix uncovers the dynamics inside a human system and helps you understand the kinds of changes that are most likely to unfold. Within any container, it reveals and opens options for action to influence the speed and path of change in a self-organizing system.

— Difference Matrix —

	High Difference	Low Difference
High Exchange	<b>Emerging</b> + Radical change + Generative + Learning - Dangerous - Conflict - Destruction	<b>Spinning</b> + No change + Reinforcing + Bonding - Unproductive - Boring - Exhaustion
Low Exchange	<b>Holding Tension</b> + Internal change + Safety + Holding back - Potentially explosive - Isolation - Fear	<b>Resting</b> + Stability + Comfort + Relaxation - Entropic - Ignorance - Irrelevance

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## What?

The Difference Matrix represents the interactions of two conditions for self-organizing: Difference (D) and Exchange (E). Either of these conditions can high or low, and in combination, they define four different change dynamics: Emerging, Spinning, Holding Tension, and Resting.

## So What?

When you become aware of the patterns of change dynamics, you are able to make choices in the moment to reinforce what is or to shift conditions to influence what will be. Each of the four quadrants of the Difference Matrix has benefits and risks, represented in the model diagram. Sometimes a particular dynamic is quite useful. At other times it might be unproductive or dangerous. You can use the Difference Matrix to diagnose current dynamics, consider alternatives, and take action to set conditions for patterns that are most fit for function in a particular place and time.

## Now What?

Use the Difference Matrix in your next sticky issue to:

- ▶ See what is happening in the moment.
- ▶ Make sense of risks and benefits of what is and what might be.
- ▶ Take intentional action to shift from one quadrant of the Matrix to another.

Nothing is intractable.



# Difference Matrix

## What is the Purpose of the Difference Matrix?

The Difference Matrix helps you make sense of complex dynamics by highlighting two conditions for self-organizing: Difference (D) and Exchange (E). Each of these conditions can vary independently, each one increasing or decreasing in response to changing conditions in the system.

Difference refers to any distinction or gradient that exists across agents or parts of the system. Examples include race, expertise, age, learning styles, culture, professions, wealth, income, health, education, emotional state, political party, or any other distinction that influences how people interact with each other.

Exchange refers to any connection or flow between or among agents in the system. Examples include language, physical touch, money, energy. Sometimes exchanges can be intangible, or they can be invisible to some participant observers. Examples of these more subtle exchanges include bias, expectations, attraction or repulsion, judgment.

The behaviors of people in the system generate Differences and Exchanges that are more or less strong. The Differences and Exchanges interact to form recognizable patterns of systemic behavior. The patterns, then influence how the agents in the system interact in the future. This cycle of conditions, individual behaviors, tensions, and systemic patterns—all affecting each other—generates self-organizing change. The more you understand the conditions and the dynamics, the more prepared you can be to make choices that influence those patterns.

— Difference Matrix —

	High Difference	Low Difference
High Exchange	<b>Emerging</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Radical change</li><li>+ Generative</li><li>+ Learning</li><li>- Dangerous</li><li>- Conflict</li><li>- Destruction</li></ul>	<b>Spinning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ No change</li><li>+ Reinforcing</li><li>+ Bonding</li><li>- Unproductive</li><li>- Boring</li><li>- Exhaustion</li></ul>
Low Exchange	<b>Holding Tension</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Internal change</li><li>+ Safety</li><li>+ Holding back</li><li>- Potentially explosive</li><li>- Isolation</li><li>- Fear</li></ul>	<b>Resting</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Stability</li><li>+ Comfort</li><li>+ Relaxation</li><li>- Entropic</li><li>- Ignorance</li><li>- Irrelevance</li></ul>

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The Difference Matrix defines four different emergent systemic patterns.

- ▶ **Emerging** – High Difference and High Exchange – This pattern captures immediate action and energy when a specific distinction sparks agents into action. You will see this dynamic in times of active conflict or intense learning. The pattern can be destructive or constructive, depending on the nature of the conditions. In either case, energy that has been pent up over time is released, and the system shifts radically in the moment.
- ▶ **Spinning** – Low Difference and High Exchange – In this pattern, a great deal of energy is expended, but the system does not change because there is little tension within the system and there is small motivation to change. Examples include the “parking lot” conversations that happen after a contentious meeting. People who agree with each other get together and rant about what happened. Sometimes this pattern is called “singing to the choir,” because like-minded people expend energy agreeing with each other. This, too, can be a productive or destructive pattern. It gives comfort and builds a sense of belonging. Over time, however, it can make a group insular and biased.
- ▶ **Holding Tension** – High Difference and Low Exchange – In this quadrant, energy accumulates and is not released. The energy of difference can be held as long as the system’s containers are strong enough to contain it. Structural racism and political difference among family members are two current examples of this dynamic. It, too, can be productive. Introverts need Low Exchange space to be their true selves. We all need occasional time outs and vacations from work. These allow us to hold one set of tensions at bay while we resolve others or simply take a rest.
- ▶ **Resting** – Low Difference and Low Exchange – This is the quadrant of silent belonging. People feel their similarities and bask in the comfort of no surprises. A long-married couple eating in silence is an example of this pattern. The comfortable silence of friends is another. On the other hand, this quadrant can bring stagnation and death. Physicists call it entropy—when the energy that can sustain change is gone. Biologists recognize this state as death.

Each quadrant has its benefits and its risks, depending on the situation and the purpose of the group. The Difference Matrix helps you see the patterns in the moment and consider options for action.

## So What Can I Do to Move on the Matrix?

The first step is diagnosing the current pattern. Which of the four quadrants is the best description of the system in this moment? The second step is to assess whether or not that pattern is fit for function. Is the group able to do or be whatever is useful and appropriate for the individuals and for the whole group in this moment? The final step is to choose an action. If the pattern is perfectly fit for function, then you can wait and watch. If the system isn't working well, then you have four options for action.

- ▶ **Increase Difference** – You can either do this by pushing a difference that is currently active in the group or by focusing on a different Difference. For example, if a group is arguing about an issue in the budget, you can expand a current tension by asking them to explore the worst-case scenario on either side of the issue. Alternatively, you might choose to focus on a different tensions by exploring the differences in values and/or experience that contribute to this particular disagreement. When you increase difference, you will move to the left side of the Matrix.
- ▶ **Decrease Difference** – In this case you can also look at a current difference or introduce a new difference into the conversation. For example, if a group is arguing about strategy, you might reduce a current difference as you look for common ground among the various perspectives. On the other hand, you might invite the group to refocus on something else that you know to be a point of agreement, as you consider a shared experience or a value that is held by all. When you decrease difference, the system will shift toward the right side of the Matrix.
- ▶ **Increase Exchange** – When exchange is low, you will hear silence or experience stillness. If you choose to shift the system, you can re-activate connections that are familiar to the group, or you can introduce altogether new kinds of connection. For example, you can use alternative communication methods—written statements or artistic representations—to build an Exchange across Differences that have come detached. You may also amplify messages that are currently moving in the system but are being ignored by the group. You can do this by inviting silent members of a group to speak or by leaving space open for minority voices. When you increase Exchange, you shift up on the Matrix.
- ▶ **Decrease Exchange** – Sometimes, a system becomes too noisy. You may notice physical or emotional risk, or chaos may reign when a group is seeking clarity. In times like these, you may want to table a contentious issue, call a time out, or invite a time of quiet reflection. Circle Processes—where one person at a time is allowed to speak—allow a group to decrease Exchange without stopping a conversation. When you decrease Exchange, you shift toward the bottom of the Matrix.

As a facilitator, leader, or chair of a meeting, you may have power and permission to take these actions explicitly and intentionally. As a member of a group, you can use your voice to attempt to shift the dynamics, or you can make an observation or raise a question to invite the group to change their patterns in the moment.

Group dynamics are complex, so multiple dynamics are usually at play simultaneously. The Difference Matrix focuses on one container at a time—one level or component of the human system. You can use it to think about the behavior of the whole. Alternatively, you can shift your view and consider individual members of the group and where they are on the Matrix. Frequently, clusters of people come together and act as if they were one agent. When they do, you can consider their internal dynamics or how they play with the rest of the group. By considering multiple sub-groups, you can see a richer, more nuanced picture of Difference Matrix dynamics.

## Now What Are Some Ways to Use the Matrix?

We have used the Difference Matrix in a variety of ways.

- ▶ Analyze team conflict and dysfunctional dynamics
- ▶ Plan communications during times of unpredictable change
- ▶ Design meetings and/or facilitated community sessions
- ▶ Diagnose and intervene in meetings as they go off the rails
- ▶ Reflect on emotional and personal reactions of self and other
- ▶ Manage personal energy in relationships and work
- ▶ Understand how and why an interaction “went south”
- ▶ Choose to engage in ways that either mirror or shift current patterns in a group

Please share your practices and insights as you use the Difference Matrix to see, understand, and influence patterns in your human systems.