Characteristics of Coherence:
Dynamics of High Performance

by Royce Holladay

When I talk with clients, they express a common concern. They struggle to get the whole organization to move forward together. They describe it in various ways:

- "One step forward and two steps back."

- "That group is never with us."

- "It's like we are all talking a different language."

- "It's like our left hands don't know what our rights hands are doing."

- "Isn't anyone talking to anyone else?"

As I explore this challenge with clients, I generally find a common theme across the different settings: the underlying dynamics that set the conditions for these complaints is a lack of **coherence** across the system.

Coherence is the degree to which parts of a system "fit" with each other or with the external environment. Dictionary.com defines coherence as "the quality of being logical and consistent; of forming a unified whole." The parts of the organization—departments, people, procedures, processes—work together in logical and consistent ways to create a unified and complete system. They make sense together. There is enough similarity that they can work together well, but enough difference that they are not unnecessarily redundant.

What do we mean when we say that patterns across a system are coherent? We mean that individuals and groups go beyond codified rules and regulations to make decisions that align with others across the organization. In her research, Glenda Eoyang has identified seven characteristics of coherent systems.

- **Shared Goals –** In a system that is coherent, disparate parts work toward similar targets, according to their respective roles and accountabilities. Rather than just relying on a formal strategic plan that is generally removed from daily tasks, planning across the system is an ongoing alignment of day-to-day work toward the overarching organizational goals at all levels.
- **Shared Meaning –** At one level, this indicator means that people across the system use similar work-related language. Jargon in known and shared. At a slightly deeper level this means shared stories carry consistent messages and importance to people across the organization. At the deepest level, it means that people seek and learn from similar questions and feedback across the system. What is heard and shared in one part of the organization informs work in similar ways in other parts of the system.
- **Repeated Patterns –** In coherent systems**,** interactions generate similar patterns across time and space. Behavior at the executive level is consistent with behavior seem among middle managers and touch workers. Decisions make in accounting and facilities align with decisions in human resources and research and development. At
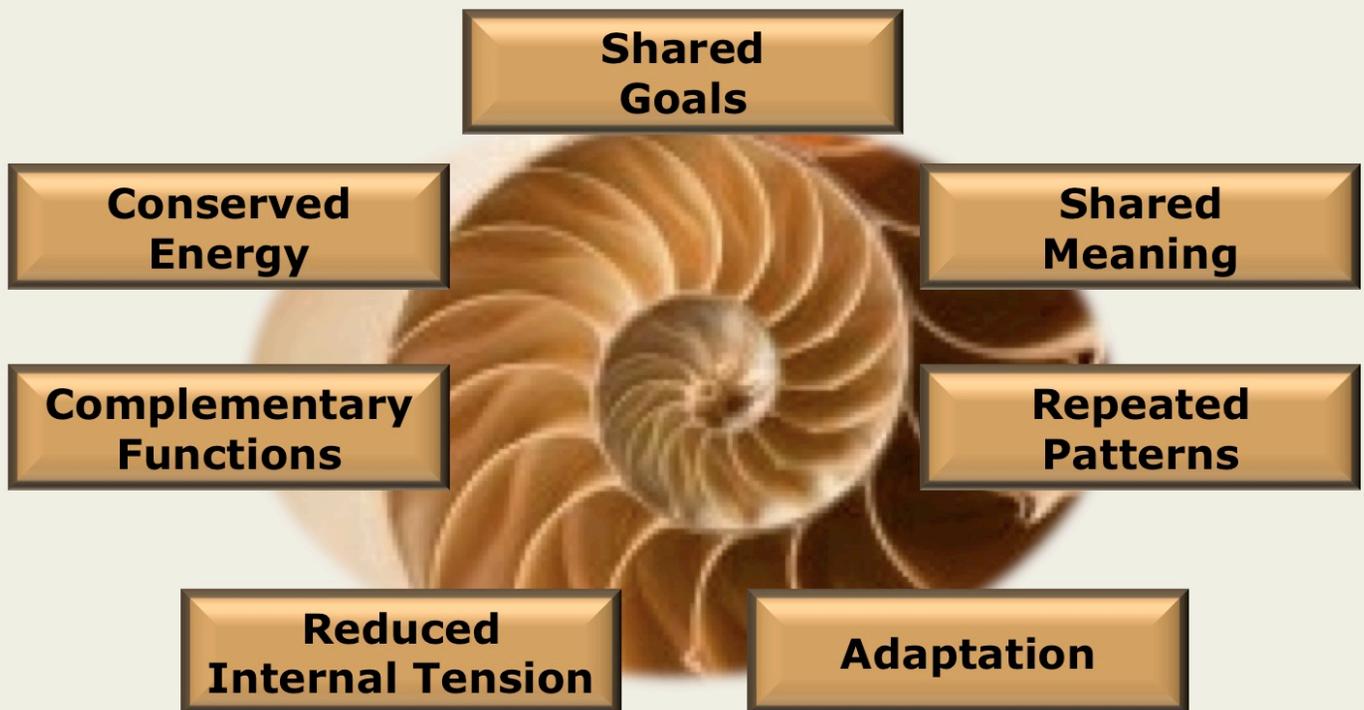
any point where stakeholders interact with the system their experiences are consistent and dependable.

- **Internal and External Adaptation** – Change happens, and in today's environment, it happens at a faster rate, with greater diversity of ideas and impact, and often n more surprising and turbulent ways**.** Coherent systems are able to adapt effectively to change: sensing environmental shifts, understanding the potential impacts, and responding in robust and elegant ways. Whether the changes are internal to the organization or external, the system is able to adjust toward greater fitness and resilience.
- **Reduced Internal Tension –** Tension in a system comes from the uncertainty of dealing with the unknown, and it is not necessarily a bad thing. It keeps us energized to accomplish the work that must be done. Tension about the future spurs creative and innovative action to see and move toward new possibilities and opportunities. Too much tension, however, can be paralyzing and debilitating in system. Coherence increases consistency and reliability in the system, reducing the tension to manageable and productive levels.
- **Complementary Functions –** In healthy organizations, individuals, teams and departments know what they contribute and what others have to offer in the general scheme of the work to be done. A sense of reciprocity draws people together to shared work and mutual contributions, multiplying the power of their individual insights and energy.
- **Conserved Energy** – Coherent systems have necessary levels of clarity and transparency that support information sharing, alignment of tasks and responsibilities, lack of redundancy, and productive exchanges. Energy is conserved in these types of endeavors, increasing energy and focus that are available for the real work of the system.

How do we help our clients build greater coherence in their systems? This definition of coherence describes the reality of how coherence can influence the functioning of a system. In our work with systems, we have found that each characteristic can describe a continuum of possibility—from dysfunctional randomness to dysfunctional similarity. Systems seek the middle range of each, allowing for optimal responsiveness and adaptability. This month's free resource provides a method for both analyzing a system and for opening conversation and taking action to increase coherence.

Join us at www.hsdcommunity.ning and let us know how the conversations go as you explore coherence in your own place and time.

Coherence

	Shared Goals

Conserved Energy

Shared Meaning

Complementary Functions

Repeated Patterns

Reduced Internal Tension

Adaptation

Human Systems Dynamics Institute
Coherence Self-Assessment

In each description, indicate where your team, group, or organization would score between the two statements. On the final page are some general questions to generate conversation about increasing the coherence.

Shared Goals	1	2	3	4	5	
Individual and group goals are shared and discussed.						There is no standard expectation for individuals or groups to set goals.
Individual and group goals are clearly aligned with each other and with the system's direction.						Individuals and groups who set goals focus on their own their work, with little or no regard to the work of the whole.
Shared Meaning	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
A common language is used to discuss system issues, processes, planning and decision making.						People use their own, disparate language around issues, processes, planning, and decision making with little or no attempt to include others.
Data and information are shared across the system in ways that build common understanding and perspective.						There is little or no sharing of information across the system to build common understanding and perspective.
Generally, individuals and groups across the system share perceptions and interpretations of events and issues inside the system and in the greater environment.						There is little conversation inside or outside the system to explore or discuss the real or potential impacts of issues, events, and trends.
People are encouraged to talk about their differences in perceptions and interpretations.						Discussions of difference across the system are not allowed or not valued for their contributions to coherence.
Repeated Patterns	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
Similar patterns of decision making and interaction are visible across departments and work groups						Any one group or department has little or no real awareness of decision making or interactions in other parts of the system.
Similar patterns of decision making and interaction are visible across scales from individual, to group, to department, to division to the greater whole across the system.						There are few, if any, similarities between patterns of interaction and decision making across scales in the system.
Over time, patterns of decision making and interaction are consistent, in spite of small differences that might be situation or time specific.						There is little or no consistency or certainty of interactions and decision making across time in the system.

Adaptation	1	2	3	4	5	
The parts of the system (individuals, groups, teams, departments) are able to respond and adapt in a timely manner to opportunities and barriers that emerge across the system.						The parts of the system (individuals, groups, teams, departments) are unable to respond or adapt in a timely manner to opportunities and barriers that emerge across the system, creating uncertainty and decreasing efficiency and effectiveness.
The system, as a whole, is able to respond and adapt as opportunities and barriers emerge in the greater system.						The system, as a whole, is unable to respond or adapt as opportunities and barriers emerge in the greater system.
Reduced Tension	1	2	3	4	5	
The general atmosphere across the system is one of relaxed productivity and engagement.						Across the system, people operate under a sense of tension and anxiety over their work and working relationships.
When opportunities and barriers emerge, individuals and groups deal with challenges productively.						Opportunities and challenges trigger anxiety and unnecessary stress across the system.
Roles and expectations are articulated and understood so that individuals and groups know they can rely on each other to move the work forward.						Because roles are not clear, individuals and groups are unsure about how their work contributes to the whole or how others' work supports theirs.
Complementary Functions	1	2	3	4	5	
People know how their work fits with and complements the work others are doing.						People and groups across the system experience a vacuum of information, with little or no awareness of how their work contributes to the whole.
People engage in team and committee work, contributing their unique skills, knowledge, and expertise to the success of the whole.						Individuals and groups often find they are working to optimize their own parts/segments of the system with no real engagement with the whole.
Conserved Energy	1	2	3	4	5	
People spend time doing important work, moving toward system outcomes.						People find that the work they are asked to focus on work that engages their time, but actually contributes little to the overall success of the organization.
Individuals and groups across the system engage in work that is unique and highly necessary to the success of the system.						Individuals and groups often find the work they do to be unnecessarily redundant in the system's overall productivity.

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Coherence Option Generator

Use the following questions to begin discussions in your system about coherence and how you can build greater coherence across the whole.

Shared Goals

1. In what areas are our goals not aligned?
2. What barriers make it difficult to share goals? What opportunities support sharing goals?
3. What would it look like across the organization if we had shared and complementary goals? How can we move toward that picture?

Shared Meaning

1. Where do stakeholders get information to make sense of their experience of our organization?
2. What is currently in place to help people see what we are about what is important to us?
3. How do we confuse people because what we say and what are do are not aligned?

Repeated Patterns

1. What barriers prevent similarity in patterns inside the system?
2. How do people describe their confusion at the various scales of the system?
3. What are the patterns we want replicated across the system at all levels?

Adaptation

1. How do we know we are or are not adaptable at the various scales and/or across the system?
2. What capacities allow us to detect changes or trends in the system or in the environment?
3. What do we do to build adaptive capacity? How can we increase our own adaptive capacity?
4. How long does it take us individually and collectively to recover from unexpected shocks?

Reduced Tension

1. What sources of tension do our employees name that limit their effectiveness?
2. How can we understand and influence the underlying dynamics that are causing that tension?
3. What capacities do our employees need to deal with unnecessary tension?

Complementary Functions

1. How do we help people understand their contributions to the work of the whole?
2. How can we support people in finding creative and productive ways contribute equally?
3. How do we establish organizational structures that allow complementary functions?

Conserved Energy

1. How do we identify unnecessary redundancies in the system where energy is being overtaxed?
2. How can we engage people around ideas, policies, and process that help us conserve energy?
3. How can we reward and celebrate innovations in the system that help us use our resources more effectively?