

## IS HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS FOR YOU?

You do you NOT need human systems dynamics when . . .

- ▶ You can predict exactly what will happen and when.
- ▶ You control all the behaviors of all the players.
- ▶ You have perfect knowledge of the factors at play.
- ▶ You have been there, seen it, done it, and been successful before.
- ▶ Change is a smooth and incremental process toward shared goals.
- ▶ All levels of your human systems—individuals, teams, divisions—are working together productively and masterfully.

If you are not living in such a well behaved and predictable world, then you need human systems dynamics to help you see and influence dynamic patterns as people live, work, and play together.

HSD tools and techniques help you . . .

- ▶ Name the complex dynamics that shape your world.
- ▶ Recognize your role as one who influences—rather than pretending control of—behaviors of individuals and groups.
- ▶ Imagine innovative options for action that could reshape the future.
- ▶ Share your insights with others through simple language, models, and tools.

Your own experience and expertise might meet one or more of these needs. Organization development and management practices provide many models that name patterns of behavior in human systems. Leadership literature and lessons explain how to influence others, when control is not an option. Multiple disciplines provide advice for how to act with integrity and intention. Each of these helpful fields uses its own language and (sometimes complicated) models to explain what is happening and what you might do to make a difference. Human systems dynamics draws all of these diverse disciplines into a coherent whole and provides simple, meaningful ways to understand and influence the processes of change.

Human systems dynamics draws a wide variety of tools and metaphors from chaos and complexity, nonlinear dynamics, and social sciences. Each metaphor opens innovative ways to see and take adaptive action to influence what is happening as social, organizational, and political realities change. Four examples will demonstrate how human systems dynamics shifts what we see and what we do in support of individuals, teams, and organizations.

Pattern: Similarities, differences, and relationships that have meaning across space and time.

We talk about patterns. When change is rapid and perpetual, it is all too easy to lose track of where you are and where you're going. Urgent details draw your attention and make it difficult to focus on the larger, systemic

changes that surround you. HSD helps you become aware of patterns that will help shape the future. When you articulate the differences that make a difference, you discover sources of energy and meaning in a group. We've often been surprised what patterns appear when we focus on differences. A dysfunctional high school faculty found that differences in age disrupted their teamwork, so they formed mentoring relationships to cross the gap. A so-called team of middle managers discovered that their divergent interests in alcohol and golf disrupted their

communications and interfered with their working relationships. These and many other cases demonstrate how important differences are in defining and improving patterns in human systems. High performing teams, cultural competency, innovation, and learning organizations are all patterns of behavior based on beneficial similarities, differences, and relationships. Cliques, bias, violence, and resistance are also patterns, but they form around other, less productive, differences. HSD tools and techniques provide a lens through which patterns become apparent. Once the differences are apparent, they become accessible to action for change.

Complex adaptive system:  
Collection of free individuals  
whose interactions produce  
system-wide patterns.

We used to believe that human action in a business environment could be predicted and predetermined. In very specific situations and over short time periods, prediction and control may be possible. In our experience, though, unpredictability and surprise are the norm. That is why we use the concept of complex adaptive system (CAS)

to talk about and to influence the relationships among individuals and between individuals and their groups. In a CAS, people make their own choices, and they influence and are influenced by others in the group. Over time, the influences and relationships strengthen until patterns (similarities and differences) become apparent across the group as a whole. As soon as the patterns begin to form, their influence over individual action gets stronger, and the pattern is reinforced again. This process influences individual action in many different ways, including habits, personal rituals, addictions, and basic attitudes. If I see the world in a negative light, the world looks dark, and my negative view is reinforced. The same process influences organizational action through organizational culture, performance expectations, group norms, and cultural expectations. Communities and nations demonstrate the same capacity to form and reinforce emergent patterns through individual action. HSD names this phenomenon, acknowledges existing tools that help shape patterns, and introduces new tools to support adaptive action in emerging situations.

Stretch and Fold: Difference  
brings in energy and possibility  
as a system stretches. Similarity  
reduces tension and builds  
stability as a system folds.

A healthy complex adaptive system is constantly in motion. Parts of the system focus on differences that stretch beyond limitations of the past. Then, just as naturally, the parts move together as they focus on a joke, a shared experience, or common goal or understanding. This repeated process—stretching and folding—gives a group its resilience, diversity, and strength. The strength of the

stretch, the coherence of the fold, and the time for a full stretch-and-fold cycle are never the same, but the alternating pattern can be seen and influenced using HSD tools and techniques. We have incorporated the dynamics of stretch and fold into designs for strategic planning processes, retreats, training sessions, or system-wide transformations. The approach introduces strategies and tactics that are more natural and ones that adapt easily to unexpected and uncontrolled changes in the situation.

Adaptive Action: Repeating cycles of observation, decision, and action that build capacity to respond quickly and wisely to unpredictable developments.

Today's environment of rapid change, massive interdependency, and high risk and reward ratios require new ways to collect, analyze, and act on information as soon as it becomes available. When you depend on traditional planning and analysis procedures, you risk getting stuck in analysis paralysis and missing the next

great opportunity. Adaptive Action offers an alternative. One of human systems dynamics' fundamental methods cuts through tedious process, speeds up action, and still leaves room for on-going learning and adjustments. In the simplest and most streamlined form of Adaptive Action, the individual or group asks three questions: What? So what? Now what? These three questions move one along quickly from data collection to interpretation, to options for action. The process is perpetual. As soon as one action is taken, the first question--What?—becomes the focus again. Across a group, the Adaptive Action process works at many different levels and multiple cycle times. A whole organization might focus on the three questions annually in a planning process, while an individual computer technician might repeat the cycle many times in a single call. Like other HSD approaches, Adaptive Action opens the door to new ways of seeing and influencing patterns in times of rapid and unpredictable change.

Patterns, complex adaptive systems, stretch and fold, and adaptive action are only four of the many metaphors and models that Human Systems Dynamics Associates use to collect and analyze data about their environments and to take effective action to influence individual and group behavior. The HSD toolkit is virtually unlimited. Many of our tools come from traditional organization development and management practice. Others have emerged from related fields of complex dynamics. Still others are being developed by our Associates as they work adaptively with their clients and colleagues. All HSD approaches are designed to be useful, simple, clear, sensitive to the complex dynamics of human systems, and adaptable to the unique circumstances and challenges of each new situation.

For more information about human systems dynamics and the HSD Institute:

- ▶ Visit our website at [www.hsdinstitute.org](http://www.hsdinstitute.org).
- ▶ Look for us on the OD Network website at [www.odnetwork.org/resources/HSD/](http://www.odnetwork.org/resources/HSD/).
- ▶ Read one of our books:
  - ▶ *Voices from the Field: An Introduction to Human Systems Dynamics* (Eoyang, ed., 2003)
  - ▶ *Coping with Chaos: Seven Simple Tools* (Eoyang, 1997)
  - ▶ *Facilitating Organization Change: Lessons from Complexity Science* (Olson & Eoyang, 2001)
- ▶ Subscribe to our monthly newsletter by sending a request to [info@hsdinstitute.org](mailto:info@hsdinstitute.org).