



Four Principles of Change in Human Systems

by Royce Holladay

Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) helps you see, understand, and influence the patterns of interaction and decision making that shape your world. Last month I introduced a set of four principles that help you understand change in the complexity of human systems. These principles use the essence of HSD to offer options for understanding and taking action as you navigate change in complex systems. While HSD, as a field of study, presents many ways to think about change, these four principles establish a solid framework for affecting change in your organization:

1. *Human systems change in response to system tension. (September's offering)*
2. **Change at a global level depends on change at the local level. (This month's offering)**
3. *A short list of simple rules increases system-wide coherence. (November)*
4. *Adaptive change happens through iterative cycles of Adaptive Action. (December)*

Principle 2: Change at a global level depends on change at the local level.

The "system" can't change unless the individual agents change.

In a complex adaptive system what happens locally shapes system-wide patterns. In its purest sense, the "system" is made up of the similarities and differences between and among the agents of the system, along with the connections that allow them to exchange information and other resources. As they interact over time, the individual agents create patterns of interaction that come to characterize that system.

Any time a group of agents (people, ideas, beliefs, insects, etc.) of any sort interact, and are interdependent, they form a system. That being said, as groups of humans come together in families and communities, they form organizations, policies and procedures, cultural traditions, laws and regulations to codify relationships and expectations for the patterns that define who they are as a group. Often, it is these formal structures that you refer to as "the system."

Whether it's an informal, emergent system or a formally structured organizational system or a more loosely coupled, but established cultural system, the individual agents are highly interdependent at all scales. Humans form complex adaptive systems; they are influenced by multiple, often unknown forces; they are highly diverse; and they interact in nonlinear, unpredictable ways. These characteristics, which define the system as both complex and adaptive, also make it possible for individual agents to take action that will shift the whole. And it is those same characteristics that make it impossible for the whole to change if the individual agents don't. The performance of the whole system is intimately tied to the performance of and actions of the individual parts, while the whole establishes conditions for the changing of the parts.

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In a family, each person engages with the other family members, creating the patterns that shape the family relationships. Strong parents, independent children, sibling rivalry, cooperation and civic awareness, faith practices, family and holiday traditions, dysfunction and health--all of the ways you characterize a particular family--emerge from the patterns of interactions between and among the individual family members. Those characteristics of the whole family cannot change unless and until the behaviors and actions of the individual family members changes, setting conditions for others to change as well.

In a more formal "system" like a factory, individual actions can influence much larger spheres. What you do as a manufacturing line worker contributes to the overall productivity of the factory, which impacts the economy of the region, which shapes national purchasing and production measures, which influences the amount of power a country has in a global setting. Even if you work at a global level, making decisions, passing laws, and taking action in the name of "the system," change depends on your action as an individual member of that system.

This principle explains why external demands for change, even incited change, will not shift the underlying dynamics of the system. As a member of a formal organization or community, you may respond to rules or mandates by complying with the "letter of the law". As a member of an informal system, like a family or neighborhood, you may conform to social pressure in public settings. However, unless and until those external expectations, rules, or regulations help you deal with your own challenges or needs, you will continue to seek other ways to get what you need in less public, more private ways.

This more private behavior is manifested in organizations in many ways, such as informal networks of power and information, "parking lot" meetings, and "water-cooler" negotiations. In communities and families, this more private behavior shows up as secretive behaviors, social cliques, interpersonal sabotage, and other covert activities. If leaders (parents, officials, directors, etc.) want to bring about change at the level of the whole system, they first must find ways to engage individual system agents to support them on their own terms.

In US public healthcare, national mandates call for changes that will "close the health care gap". External standards for patient care and various programs are aimed at changing the system of health care across the country. At the same time, individual health care workers and administrators are making day-to-day decisions, setting the conditions for healing and health in their hospitals and care facilities. How can leaders set conditions for supporting and focusing on the creativity and productivity of individual health care workers as they strive to meet the needs of individual patients and clients in their unique contexts/

Local choices shape the patterns of the whole. HSD helps individuals grapple with their local challenges, even as it also helps leaders set conditions for system-wide and systemic change. So today's tool is a table for thinking about how you as a leader (parent, colleague, friend) can think about patterns you would like to change.

Consider the current pattern:

- Who are the agents involved in the pattern?
- What behaviors are shaping current patterns?
- What are the patterns I see that are not working for us?

Consider the pattern you want:

- Who do the agents need to be? Do I need to bring others in? Focus on a small subset?
- What behaviors can I invite/encourage that have a chance of changing the pattern?
- What are the patterns I want?

Use this table to reflect about your system to consider what changes need to happen for individuals to change the system-wide patterns. Ultimately how can you set conditions that will invite and encourage the agents to shift their interactions to create more effective patterns?

Try it! Then be in touch and let us know what you find.

Royce

Shifting Patterns of the Whole

	Agents (Who?)	Interactions (What are they doing?)	Patterns (What do we experience?)
<i>Current</i> (example)	<i>managers</i> <i>directors</i>	<i>hoarding resources</i> <i>hiding work</i> <i>isolating into silos</i>	<i>competition</i> <i>distrust</i> <i>fear</i> <i>frustration</i>
<i>Future</i> (example)	<i>managers</i> <i>directors</i>	<i>What will I support,</i> <i>influence in their behaviors...</i>	<i>...if I want patterns of</i> <i>cooperation</i> <i>trust, openness, satisfaction?</i>
Current			
Future			

Consider the **current** pattern:

- Who are the agents involved in the pattern?
- What behaviors are they engaging in that are not working?
- What are the patterns I see that are not working for us?

Consider the **pattern you want**:

- Who do the agents need to be? Do I need to bring others in? Focus on a small subset?
- What behaviors can I invite that have a chance of changing the pattern?
- What are the patterns I want?

As you consider these questions, start with what you can see. It doesn't have to be a linear process of filling in the boxes "in order".

*What's bothering you?
What are people complaining about?
What's getting in the way?
Who are the actors?*

*What do you want?
Who should be involved?
What will get you what you want?*