



Four Principles of Change in Human Systems

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Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) helps you see, understand, and influence the patterns of interaction and decision making that shape your world. Over the past few months we have been exploring 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. (October's offering)*
- 3. A short list of simple rules increases system-wide coherence. (This month's offering)**
- 4. Adaptive change happens through iterative cycles of Adaptive Action. (December)*

Principle 3: A short list of simple rules increases system-wide coherence

When you are going through change, how can you be sure that the decisions you make today align with the decisions you made a week ago or those you will make in the next month? If you are part of a large group, how can you know that the decisions you make in your contributions match the decisions your colleagues make in their areas? How do large groups of loosely connected individuals generate system-wide patterns of similar activity across space and time?

- Throughout history, communities have developed expectations about distinctive patterns of interaction and decision making that characterize their ways of life. Ethnic groups, faith communities, regional or geopolitical groups all have their traditions that celebrate or mark the milestones for individuals and for the community.
- In organizations, whether in teams or departments, between management and labor, or between customer and service provider, there are recognizable ways of interacting and making decisions that generalize across the system in recognizable and characteristic patterns.
- Each family has its own unique pattern of expectations and role-definitions that shape the dynamics of interactions and relationships.

This self-similarity of patterns across a system is visible evidence of underlying system coherence. The HSD Institute wiki (<http://wiki.hsdinstitute.org/coherence>) defines coherence as *the degree to which parts of a system "fit" each other or the external environment*. Dictionary.com offers one definition of coherence as "the quality of being logical and consistent; of forming a unified whole." The parts 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. This is what you want when you move through change. You want some guide so that you know you are doing what needs to be done, without being so overly constrained that you can't make decisions that make sense in the moment.

Coherence across the whole and in the parts is particularly critical in times when you are experiencing dynamical or complex change. Because of the complex nature of change in human systems, it's impossible to codify all aspects of a change process, and then expect that you and other agents in the system will be able to abide by those expectations in all the parts. In complex systems that go through change, you have to be changing in the same direction as others in the system. You don't have to change in identical ways, but you do need a shared set of "simple rules" that inform your decisions and actions. Otherwise everyone makes decisions and takes action in ways that create multiple and diverse patterns that limit the system's ability to respond and adapt in the most effective ways. This additional diversity in the system increases the tension in the system in unproductive ways, rather than leveraging it for positive change. When everyone in a group uses a common set of simple rules, you generate shared patterns of decision making and interaction that build coherence across the whole of the group, as well as among and between the parts.

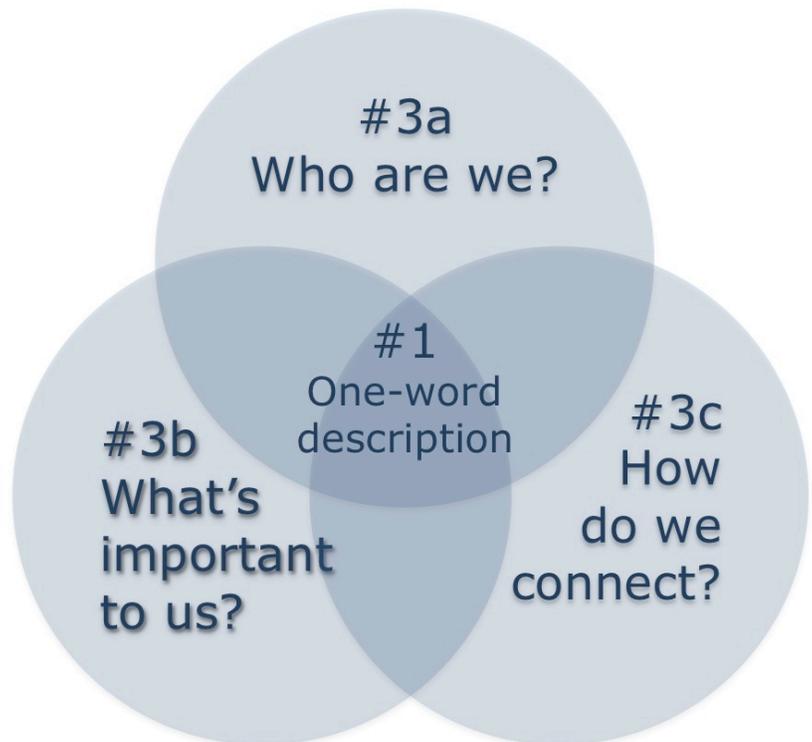
In HSD we offer a process called Radical Inquiry to help you name the simple rules you believe will shape the patterns of greatest coherence. You can do a Radical Inquiry by yourself, to support you in personal change. You can also engage your family, team members, organization, or community in stepping into a Radical Inquiry together. Use the attached diagram as you play with how the Radical Inquiry works.

1. Identify the big-picture, ideal one- or two-word description of the overall outcome you want. That goes in the center, where all the circles overlap.
2. Agree on the patterns of interaction and decision making that will be most present when you are working toward that outcome. List those in the blanks at the bottom of the page.
3. Reflect on and articulate your responses to three major questions that will shape the patterns you want. Be succinct and concise; get your responses down to the one- to two-word phrases that best represent your responses.
 - a. **Who are we?** Talk about who you are as a group as you move toward your big-picture ideal. What one- or two-word phrase will capture the

Radical Inquiry: Defining Simple Rules

Radical Inquiry Protocol:

- #1. Identify the big-picture, ideal one- or two-word description of the overall outcome you want
- #2. Agree on the patterns of interaction and decision making that will be most present when you are working toward that outcome. List those at the bottom of the page.
- #3. Reflect on and articulate your responses to three major questions that will shape the patterns you want.
 - a. Who are we?
 - b. What's important to us? ?
 - c. How do we connect?
- #4. Define a short list of simple rules that will shape your behavior and decision making so that you are able to create the patterns you want.
- #5. Remember the "rules" about simple rules:
 - a. The list is short so people can remember them.
 - b. The rules are stated in the positive.
 - c. The rules start with action verbs.
 - d. The rules have to be general for possible scenarios, specific about boundaries.



#2
What patterns do we want to see?

#4
What Simple Rules can shape the patterns we want?