Seeing a Continuum of Possibility

by Royce Holladay

*Rather than seeing difference as a duality between right and wrong,
can we stand together in a continuum of possibility?*

In HSD we use three characteristics to describe and understand complex adaptive systems:

- They are open to influence from internal and external forces that may be known or not, predictable or not, and controllable or not.

- They are highly diverse.

- They are nonlinear, and what you know from the past and experience today can influence the patterns of your future…or not.

You live and work in highly complex systems that exhibit these characteristics, and perhaps, the most readily obvious is the diversity that exists all around you. The numbers and variety of people, ideas, situations, and cultures you encounter every day shape your patterns of behavior and decision making in ways you may not even notice. There are times, however, when you may find that differences you encounter appear to be so wide that you can't see your way through them. The differences that separate you from another become so significant they constrain your ability to see possibility or options for action.

In these situations, you can often find yourself establishing separate "camps" where people who are more similar come together, and those who are different become the "other". Or you find other ways to work together, ignoring the differences for as long as possible. Or you marginalize the "other" and continue to move on without them.

Those kinds of approaches to dealing with difference ignore the value that difference offers. Difference in a system contributes to rich and powerful patterns that enable fitness across the greater whole. Difference can trigger new thinking and problem solving. It is the key to innovative responses to old challenges. When you can think of your differences in this way, it holds you in a space with the "other" so that you can explore that difference and find the connections and possibilities that offer new options for action.
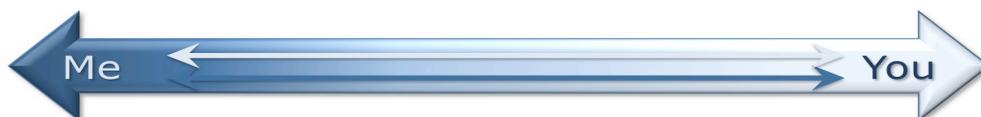
When you face diversity that seems overwhelming, how can you navigate those differences in productive ways that unlock that potential? This month's Change the World offers a model for understanding the differences that exist. The following protocol provides a method for leveraging those differences into patterns of creativity, innovation, and problem solving.

Navigating Patterns of Difference

What?

1. Create a "T" chart. On one side of the T, list all the issues/characteristics that make you similar and on the other list those that make you different from each other.

2. Go through each of those and assign a value.

   a. Assign "+" if a difference is an asset. Assign a "+" if a similarity is an asset.

   b. Assign "0" where the difference or similarity is neutral or has no real bearing on the challenge at hand.

   c. Assign "-" if that difference or the similarity has a negative impact on how you relate to each other or are barriers to your relationship.

So what?

3. Eliminate the neutral items and focus first on how you can use your assets to address those areas that are barriers to your relationship.

   a. What do these assets mean you can accomplish together?

   b. What can you learn from each other about this issue?

   c. What understandings or agreements will help you work together to build on those assets?

   d. What are the patterns you can generate by building on those assets? How will those patterns support your work/life together?

   e. Other insights or explorations about our similarities?

4. Explore each significant difference to identify possibilities and opportunities.

   a. What bridges might link your differences?

   b. What can you learn from each other about this issue?

   c. How might you leverage those differences to benefit both sides?

   d. What agreements will help you work inside those differences?

   e. Other insights or explorations about difference?

Now what?

5. Create and agree to a plan of action that will move you forward.

   a. What actions will you agree to, and who will do what?

   b. What outcomes or changes will you look for to know how your agreements are working out?

   c. What are the timeframes you will use to inform your next steps or decisions?

Remember these tips and traps:

- Consider inviting a more neutral, 3rd party to help facilitate and question assumptions, identify questions, and support interpretations.

- Agree to openness, honesty, and patience in the exchange.

- Help each other stand in inquiry:
    - Turn judgment to curiosity.
    - Turn disagreement to shared exploration.
    - Turn defensiveness to self-reflection.
    - Turn assumptions to questions.

- Look for where assumptions shade your thoughts and constrain your perspective.

- Use periodic reality checks to be sure you are working with real facts, rather than your "stories" about the facts.

- Take your time. The shared exploration is crucial to building real understanding.

- Other HSD models and methods that may be helpful: (http://wiki.hsdinstitute.org/)

Finite and Infinite Games	Generative Engagement
4 Truths	Pattern Spotters
Decision Map	

Try using this Adaptive Action the next time you get stuck trying to navigate difference. Be in touch and let us know what you learn when you allow yourself to leverage your differences into a continuum of possibility.

Navigating Patterns of Difference

How are we the same? **How are we different?**

+

Our differences are an asset.

O

Our differences are neutral.

-

Our differences are a barrier.

+

Our differences are an asset.

O

Our differences are neutral.

-

Our differences are a barrier.