Human Systems Dynamics

Competencies for a New Organizational Practice

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Today's organizational challenges are different in kind from those of the past. As Organization Development professionals, we and our clients cope with global diversity, virtual relationships, unpredictable outcomes, and unflinching demands for performance, profitability, and sustainability. We are called upon to help others manage change that is instantaneous, unpredictable, and cross-functional. While familiar, hierarchical roles and relationships are being transformed into "collaborative leadership," the drive toward measurable outcomes and lean performance continues to escalate. While global virtual teams work together toward common goals, cultural conflicts erupt in communities and organizations. While cycle time and client expectations for response time shrink, processes and procedures to ensure consistent quality expand. These and many other tensions drive our clients' organizations and our own.

Such an environment requires that we rethink the theory and practice of organization development and our roles as practitioners. Many emerging theories and practices help us adapt to this new and less stable environment. Barry Johnson talks about the many polarities that shape individual, social, organizational, and community realities (Johnson, 1992). Lisa Kimball talks about positive deviance (http://www.positivedeviance.org/). Harrison Owen expands Open Space (Owen, 2008). Large scale intervention techniques are transformed to meet local needs and resources (Bunker & Alban, 2006; Holman, et al, 2006). Many other innovative tools and methods are emerging to help our practice evolve to meet the demands of this transformed marketplace, but something is missing.

Any innovative tool or method can be brought into a traditional OD practice. It can be integrated into the process that we trust and that we repeatedly ask our clients to trust. We can co-opt even the most radical approach and adapt it—tame it—to fit with our tried-and-true approaches. While this path allows us to stretch our toolkits, it will not prepare us to meet the challenges of a radically different organizational ecology and a transformed professional services market. Around the world organization development practitioners and their clients and client systems are dissatisfied with the standard theories and practices of OD. Many people find that, even with an assortment of radically new tools, they are unprepared to meet the challenges of this emerging world. Sometimes native abilities and deep intuitions lead practitioners and their clients in the right direction, but even that sometimes-reliable strategy can break down at the most

inopportune times. These practitioners are as frustrated as they are experienced. They realize that effective OD practice of the future will require a new foundation of assumption, method, and theory. This new foundation must adapt to local and changing requirements, support rapid response, and integrate the use of a wide variety of tools and practices. To make such a significant and meaningful difference, we OD practitioners have to re-examine our common notions. We have to take a risk and challenge our fundamental practices and assumptions with new ways to think about change. We have to consider our options and our roles as responsible, active agents of change.

This chapter outlines a theory base that is both radical and familiar. While it fits the intuitions of the most experienced OD practitioners, it breaks through the locked-in assumptions of traditional OD practice. This new approach to organization development has emerged from the new sciences of nonlinear dynamics, chaos, and complexity. It incorporates a wide range of philosophies and social science disciplines. It has been tempered with on-the-ground theory and practice. It is an open and adaptive approach to dealing with the unpredictability of organization development in the twenty-first century. It is human systems dynamics.

HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS DEFINED

 Human systems dynamics (HSD) is field of research and practice that emerges at the intersection of complexity and social sciences. It is grounded in the assumption that human systems—at all levels of organization from intrapersonal to national—are complex adaptive systems. A complex adaptive system (CAS) is a collection of semi-autonomous agents that are free to interact in unpredictable ways, and whose interactions generate system-wide patterns. Over time, those emergent patterns influence the subsequent behaviors of the participating agents. Within an individual, emotional, cognitive, and physical factors interact as agents, and a recognizable personality emerges. In a team, diverse members interact over time to create patterns of success or failure, which then influence the behavior of members of the team. In an organization, individuals, teams, or departments interact in creative ways to generate patterns that are recognizable as organizational culture, performance, or profitability. Families act as agents when neighborhoods are considered complex adaptive systems. Stockholders are agents in an active market. Players are agents in games. Organization Development practitioners are agents with others in patterns of organizational performance over time.

Human systems dynamics takes seriously the assumption that social systems are complex adaptive systems, and incorporates a range of models, methods, and tools to support conscious and intentional action for individuals and groups. Many of the practices of HSD mimic those of traditional OD because the best of that tradition evolved as individuals and groups took action to respond to the complex adaptive, pattern-forming properties of teams, organizations, and communities. On the other hand, HSD practice contradicts some of the fundamental assumptions that form the foundation of OD theory.

Human systems dynamics is grounded in the following assumptions:
- Change in human systems is emergent, based on the interactions of the participating agents.

- The same complex adaptive dynamics shape individual and group behaviors at all levels of organization—from personal to national patterns of behavior.
- Human systems are open to unknowable forces from dynamics that are internal to agents, among agents inside and outside of any given boundary, and from overarching systems that incorporate other, self-organizing patterns of influence.
- Change in human systems can be modeled as static (at rest waiting to be moved), dynamic (moving in a smooth response to constant forces), or dynamical (influenced by unknowable and unstable forces). The "correct" model at a specific place and time is the one that is a best fit to the emergent patterns of the interest in the moment.
- In CAS, the change may be slow and deliberate (organized), fast and random (unorganized), or patterned and emergent (self-organizing).

If organizations truly conform to these assumptions and function as full-fledged complex adaptive systems, then practitioners seeking to influence change must demonstrate the competencies of human systems dynamics. The next section outlines those competencies in contradistinction to some of the more traditional competencies of OD.

HSD COMPETENCIES

Complex adaptive systems cannot be predicted or controlled. Agents, their complex interactions, and the openness of the system create an unpredictable future for individual or the collective patterns of behavior. To be effective in such an emergent ecology, an HSD practitioner needs to see what is happening in the self-organizing system around them, understand the implications of those patterns and generate options for action, and take action to influence those patterns as they emerge. The HSD Institute (www.hsdinstitute.org) expects each of its associates to practice a short list of simple rules. These rules function as guidance to action and as fundamental competencies to support effective change in a human system.

Teach and learn in every interaction.

Every complex adaptive system is unique. Each moment in a complex adaptive system is unpredictable, so an HSD practitioner must be committed to constant inquiry and perpetual meaning-making. This simple rule is quite complex in its application. It means that an effective practitioner will NOT:
- Habitually depend on a small set of tools.
- Disregard of the clients' view of the clients' situation.
- Assume that similar patterns represent identical dynamics.
- Expect to transform others without being transformed yourself.
- Encourage client dependency by withholding information or resources.

Though a professional plan is certainly a part of the HSD approach, it is equally balanced with the ability to observe changing patterns and adapt to meet them. Each moment is a transaction of potential transformation for both the client and the HSD practitioner. One of the key competencies for working

effectively in a complex adaptive system is to trust the dynamics, understanding that you as much to learn from your clients and their environments as you have to teach them.

An HSD practitioner teaches and learns in every interaction.

Reinforce strengths of self and others.

As an HSD practitioner, you are not the arbiter of what is better or worse. Only clients can judge what will make them more fit for success in their current environments. As HSD professionals, our job is to try to see the world through the eyes of our clients, focus on the differences that make a difference to them, and help them move toward greater coherence and fit with their own complex contexts.

Many OD processes focus on positive patterns to build strength, reinforce effectiveness, feed creativity, and encourage energy for individuals and groups. This rule focuses on the capacity to see, acknowledge, and use the unique gifts of each and every agent in the system. While this might seem a Pollyannaish response, it is quite the contrary. It requires that the HSD practitioner be discriminating enough to find the special strengths of others and creative enough to find appropriate and pro-active ways to reinforce those strengths. This rule also requires deep introspection, as the professional discerns his or her own strengths and finds ways to use those strengths most effectively for the good of the clients' agents and systemic patterns of performance.

An HSD practitioner reinforces strengths of self and other.

Search for the true and the useful.

When someone is working in a complex and fast-moving system, the last thing they need is a complicated solution! Effective work with human systems dynamics focuses on interventions that are simple to understand and simple to implement. This rule builds the capacity for praxis—action at the intersection of theory and practice. Every client's environment is evolving in surprising and unpredictable ways, so practitioners need to be able to build and test hypotheses to understand and help clients understand the emerging dynamics. Thinking alone, however, runs the risk of not being grounded in the reality of emergent complex dynamics. HSD requires that practitioners consider both the underlying theory of action as well as its practical outcomes. Effective ideas and actions in complex adaptive systems require both truth and usefulness because agents and their patterns are constantly in flux and cannot be measured against some external, absolute measure or expectation. On the other hand, practice without theory—the useful without the true—is not effective, either. Generally referred to as "implicit knowledge," practice without theory creates unconscious experts who may function as magicians rather than responsible professionals.

In some ways, truth and usefulness merge in the life of a complex adaptive system. Both concepts lie in the ways that the client systems fit successfully with their complicated environments. For the practitioner, this can be a challenge. We may believe that one approach, tool, or method is better than another. We may have our own ideas about what should work or what should happen in the course of an intervention. We may think we know what is "true."

An HSD professional searches for the true and the useful.

Give and get value for value.

Each agent in a healthy self-organizing system contributes to the good of the whole and depends on the contributions of its neighbors. HSD practitioners should be aware of the dynamic balance of giving and getting in a health human ecology and refuse to participate in one that is unbalanced. Of course an honest professional will not expect to get value out of proportion to what they provide, but clients are not well

served either when the practitioner gives more value than they receive. Over time, the relationship sours, expectations and reality do not match, and one or both players feel cheated in the transaction. This rule, too, requires a modicum of self-reflection because the professional must consider the value of what they give and receive both in their own judgment and the understood judgment of the client.

Among other challenges, this rule moves practitioners away from the expectation of an objective, neutral stance. We are agents in the system, and no agent functions without influencing and being influenced by others. A strong HSD practitioner acknowledges both a subjective and objective influence on the client system and uses that power consciously and carefully.

An HSD professional gives and gets value for value.

Attend to the whole, the part, and the greater whole.

Self-organizing systems must be known by their patterns. Unlike simply linear systems, complex adaptive systems cannot be reduced to their parts. They function with holistic, systemic, emergent patterns that characterize their histories, current capacities, and future possibilities. An effective practitioner is able to see and influence patterns as they emerge from the complex adaptive dynamics.

In addition, every human system incorporates multiple levels of active self-organizing. Intrapersonal interactions frame individual patterns. Individual patterns frame team patterns. Team patterns frame departmental ones. Departmental patterns frame corporate patterns, and so on through industry, sector, and economy. It is not possible to consider all interacting levels all the time, but it is not wise to focus on only one. Any intervention that attends only to one level in isolation from others risks ignoring important and powerful forces. Or, stated more positively, runs the risk of missing potentially powerful options for action. The HSD compromise is to focus on three levels at the same time. The whole constitutes the primary level of focus—individual, team, or department. The part includes the agents whose interactions generate the whole. The greater whole is the broader context in which this whole plays the role of a single agent. By focusing on one level and the adjacent levels above and below, the practitioner increases ability to anticipate patterns of the future and to generate counter-intuitive options for action.

An HSD professional attends to the whole, the part, and the greater whole.

Engage in joyful practice.

Anxiety is a natural reaction to the unpredictability and lack of control in a complex adaptive system. Too often practitioners will revert to a well-known intervention, blame individuals or groups who appear resistive, or exercise undue control when a client system begins to move in unexpected ways. Professionals who are not prepared for the surprises of self-organizing can react with fear or frustration and disrupt the natural pattern-forming process of a group. The alternative is to develop a comfort with self-organizing and delight in the emergence of new patterns and the opportunities for action they represent. This final competence, joyful practice, establishes the personal and emotional resilience that allows an HSD practitioner to hold his or her own anxiety in check and to turn the anxiety of others toward productive complex adaptive, pattern-forming action.

An HSD professional engages in joyful practice.

HSD SELF-ASSESSMENT

The key to developing HSD competencies is to assess and adapt continually. It is helpful to reflect with colleagues, but it is also helpful to complete a series of personal reflections. The attached self-assessment document provides a series of questions that can help you focus on, assess, and adapt your current behaviors to improve your performance as a human systems dynamics professional in future.

You should complete the self-assessment either at the close of a project or at regular intervals—monthly or weekly. Plans from previous assessments should inform performance on the current one, as well as plans for future action.

Keep copies of your assessments over time. Periodically look back on your emerging practice and review how your expectations for yourself and your performance have changed over time.

As you reflect on your practice and build HSD competencies, you will find that your expectations increase, so you will always find new ways to enhance your adaptive action over time. Like any complex adaptive system, you will continue to grow and adjust to the changing needs in your environment. In this way, you will develop new and creative models, methods, and tools to help you set conditions for adaptive self-organizing in the human systems you serve.

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