

# Attractors

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*Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics. In this month's edition, Glenda Eoyang reflects on*

## ***Dancing with Uncertainty***

For me these days every conversation either begins or ends with uncertainty. When will we know? What will they (or we) do? How will we recover? Who? What? When? Where? How? We are full of questions as we sense both deep and superficial changes in the contexts that shape our health, success, happiness, and livelihood.

This uncertainty is not simple uncertainty where we can wait for the game to play out according to well defined and widely accepted rules. No, it is radical uncertainty in which the rules, even the game itself, are transforming in surprising ways. We thought we were playing baseball, and at the top of the fourth the umpire signaled a tie ball and the opponents went into scrum. Not only do we not know what the future holds, but we don't know how to think about what the future might hold!

There is not an approach that can answer these urgent questions better than any other. But human systems dynamics poses questions that can help you engage productively and effectively with massive and unpredictable change. We learned and have adapted one of those key questions from Barry Johnson's polarity management (<http://www.polaritymanagement.com/>). This question deals with the underlying differences that establish meaning and motivate action in complex human systems.

The question is:

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*HSD uses principles from the new sciences to help professionals understand and influence their systems to develop positive and coherent options for action.*

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***What are the irreconcilable tensions that influence patterns of thought and action for this group in this context?***

As with most of the HSD questions that move quickly from description to action, this question is immediately followed by: ***What decisions and actions will optimize the benefits and minimize the risks of both poles of this tension?***

So, what does that really mean for adaptive action in times of uncertainty? I will give you some examples of ways that we've helped clients navigate these tensions and turn them from perennial conflicts into generative engagements.

**Standard (and not so standard) operating procedures.**

One large design and manufacturing company had worked as independent silos for decades. Separate funding streams encouraged autonomous administrative functions. Ample resources allowed for locally optimized procedures. Weak executive management, rapid growth, multiple acquisitions, global expansion, and poor communications all contributed to a patchwork of inconsistent policies and procedures.

Recent shifts in markets and technology put stress on the organization to increase quality and to reduce costs. The obvious solution was to centralize and standardize policy and process, but every effort to develop and implement standard operating procedures met with massive resistance or (worst yet) passive resistance.

In a management workshop, we explored this challenge as a tension between reality (what one sees and hears) and story (what one tells oneself about what one sees and hears). As the group explored their divergent and convergent realities and stories about standardized practice, the energy in the room shifted. Rather than a holy war between those who wrote and those who were supposed to follow procedures, the conversation turned into shared problem solving in which everyone recognized both the costs and benefits of standardization and customization. From this new

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perspective, the group explored options for action that included defining levels of customization and criteria for selecting the most appropriate level for local situations.

**The dance of difference.** This is one example, but we've helped many clients deal with a wide variety of dynamic tensions. Some of these may be familiar to you:

- Tradition and innovation
- Individual and group benefits
- External and internal accountability
- Qualitative and quantitative evidence
- Quality, cost, and schedule (three-way polarities are particularly challenging)

Using polarities to transform conflict into creative action is particularly useful in times of uncertainty. Individuals and groups need ways to make meaning and take action, even when they can't foresee the future. When the rules are changing, individuals and groups need some way to understand and influence themselves, each other, and the world around them. They need to dance with the uncertainty. At the same time, irreconcilable tensions become evident in times of rapid and unpredictable change. Here are some tips for using these tensions to dance with uncertainty.

*Name them.* Many tensions lie hidden under the surface of public discourse, inaccessible to rational action. When a group names its underlying polarities, they build the capacity to make conscious and shared decisions about them.

*Keep dancing.* The real juicy polarities are ones that you cannot resolve and that you wouldn't want to even if you could. Take the standard operating procedures example. Resolving the conflict to either of the poles (everything standard or everything unique) would be costly and ineffective. Finding some compromised middle ground might reap the costs of both with the benefits of neither. Instead, the most effective solution is a dynamic moderation and mediation between the two extremes.

*Do it again, and again, and again.* As time passes and things change, the polarities, their relative strengths, and potential options for action change quickly. Return often to observe, assess, and plan action to get the most out of your most important polarities.

*Resolve the things that are resolvable.* Not all serious concerns are polarity based. Sometimes, a challenge simply needs to be met and a problem needs to be solved. Before you begin to engage with a pattern based on an underlying polarity, ensure yourselves and others that it isn't simply a way to avoid doing the tough work of moving along a predictable path toward a known outcome.

Spend some time thinking about the fundamental tensions that absorb resources and keep you stuck in old, unproductive conversations. Explore new options that will allow you to get the best and avoid the worst of each extreme. Call one of your friends in the HSD Associate network, and we'll be happy to talk with you about how to dance more effectively with uncertainty.

*Glenda H. Eoyang, Ph.D.*

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