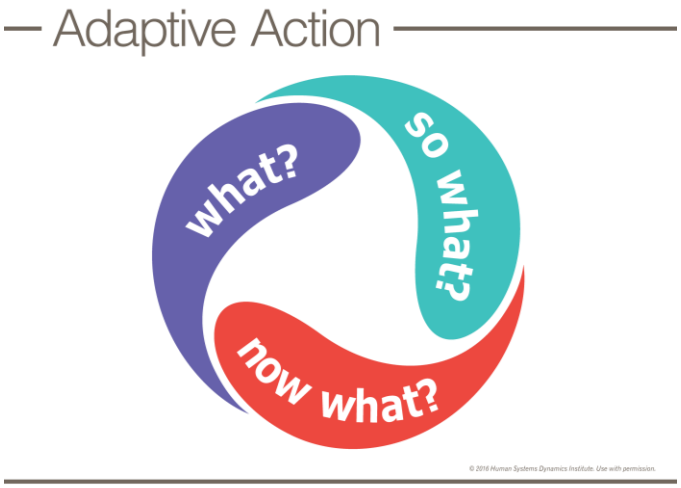
HUMAN SYSTEMS
DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

Adaptive Action

Description of Adaptive Action

Adaptive Action is an iterative, deceptively simple planning process that allows you to move forward in uncertainty. When you feel like you cannot move forward because you don't know what to do, you can always use Adaptive Action to identify your next wise action.



What?

Using Adaptive Action you ask three questions. What? helps you name patterns of interaction and decision making that shape success. So what? helps you make sense of those patterns. Now what? helps you inform action to influence yourself and your team toward greater fit, success, and sustainability.

So What?

In a complex world, you don't always see all that shapes the patterns around you. Adaptive Action gives you a way to see deeply into your world to understand the conditions that shape those patterns. You may work in an organization where the culture is toxic with competitive and hidden agendas. Adaptive Action gives you a path toward understanding the conditions that shape those patterns, and insights into potential actions to influence new patterns to shift the culture.

Nothing is intractable.

Every day you are challenged by "sticky" issues—questions with no answers. Problems that defy solution and recurring entanglements hold you in a limbo of indecision. Adaptive Action can move you forward by reminding you to look at the dynamics of your world to understand what is and to inform your next wise action.

Now What?

Use Adaptive Action in your next sticky issue to:

- See the patterns in the challenges you face.
- Understand the dynamics that shape those patterns.
- Take wise action to more toward greater coherence and sustainability.

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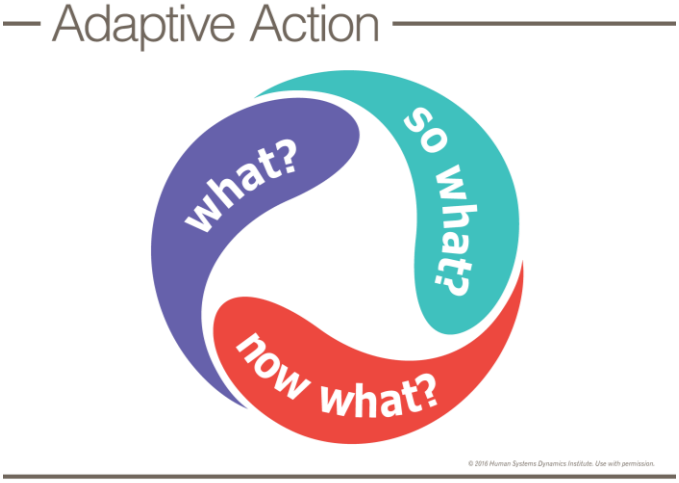
What is the Purpose of Adaptive Action?

Adaptive Action Planning is an iterative planning process involving three questions.



- **What?** – You gather pertinent data from across the system's environment to develop a picture of underlying dynamics of your current status.
- **So What?** – You examine data about those patterns to make sense of your observations and experiences. You use Pattern Logic* to develop an understanding of what the "picture" of your current status means so you can begin to explore and plan next steps. You explore the impact of the system patterns on the whole, part, and greater whole; the conditions that generated those patterns; and options for action that can shift the patterns to make the system more adaptable, more sustainable, more fit.
- **Now What?** – You take action and pause for a second check to measure your impact. By following up and asking where you are now and what is to be done next, you start the next cycle in the iterative process.

Progressing through the three steps to collect and analyze data that informs next steps becomes an ongoing cycle that can be carried out at all levels of the system. This sounds and looks much like the "Plan-Do-Check-Act"-type models that are used in a number of approaches to change. There are, however, fundamental differences that set Adaptive Action apart.

- What? So what? and Now what? questions use Pattern Logic to examine the dynamics of decision making and interaction. Analysis of patterns focuses on

* For more information, visit www.hsdinstitute.org.

understanding the conditions (Containers, Differences, Exchanges) that make your issue so sticky.

- The connection between talk and action is quick and easy. Options for action emerge from what you see in the patterns themselves. You might choose to:
  - Amplify or damp current patterns by influencing environmental conditions.
  - Shape new patterns by shifting environmental conditions toward greater sustainability and fitness.
- This approach to planning is intended to be iterative and scalable:
  - Each cycle builds on the learning gleaned in previous cycles. Each "Now what?" returns to a new "What?" to launch a new cycle.
  - Each learning cycle can happen in the span of a heartbeat or across the arc of a lifetime.
  - Individuals, teams, organizations, and communities pursue their own Adaptive Actions at the same time. Together, they can create a coherent whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.
- Because Adaptive Action consists of questions, each cycle requires you to remain in a stance of inquiry, always watching, open to what you can learn from dynamics that swirl around you.
- Anyone can understand and use Adaptive Action. Children in kindergarten and CEOs of global corporations use these same simple questions to tackle their own intractable problems.

In a human system, long-range change can happen as individuals and groups use multiple and connected cycles of Adaptive Action to shape their own patterns of productivity and performance to support the overall, agreed-upon goals of the system. Engaging in Adaptive Action on an ongoing basis builds adaptive capacity, increasing your ability to be:

- Sensitive to your environment in a deeper and more useful way
- Responsive to the surprise and messiness of uncertainty
- Strong and resilient across the differences that shape your world

So What Can You Do to Engage in Adaptive Action?

Consider the one thing that is keeping you awake at night. Adaptive Action will help you see that challenge in new ways that, while not giving you a full-blown, ready to implement "answer," will help you see and take your next wise action.

What?

In this phase of the Adaptive Action cycle, you are asking yourself what you currently know. What do you observe? What do you feel? What do you see? What are you hearing? What are you and others doing?

What can you learn from feedback and other observers in the system? Then there's the challenge: How do you make sense of all the data, information, and impressions that you collect over time? How do you stop the feeling that all that is swirling around in your head?

In HSD we use a process called the Pattern Spotters to support our Adaptive Actions. We came to this approach from Vygotsky via Bob Williams (http://users.actrix.co.nz/bobwill) This list of sentence stems helps you make sense of the patterns you see so you can move forward. When you have gathered the data, reflect on and respond to the following stems.

- In general I notice . . ..
- In general I notice . . ., except for . . ..
- On the one hand, I notice . . .. On the other hand I notice . . ..
- I was surprised by . . ..
- I wonder about . . ..
- This reminds me of . . ..

The responses to these questions will help you settle into the major patterns as they are playing themselves out in your world. This is one way to go from the messiness of emergent and unpredictable patterns into a more manageable description of the challenge at hand.

So What?

At this point, you take the patterns you have named and and use Pattern Logic to understand those patterns at a deeper level. Pattern Logic is the use and study of disciplined reasoning about the conditions for self-organization. In her ground-breaking research, Glenda Eoyang discovered three conditions that shape the speed, path, and direction of the system as patterns emerge. Using these patterns to understand your

system and to take action is the essence of Pattern Logic. She has also found that those tensions in the system results from system fitness. Too much tension or too little tension in the system limits its coherence and resilience, decreasing its sustainability. As the system adjusts to find better fit, it will increase or decrease tension by shifting one or more condition. Change at any scale occurs when one or more conditions shift in response to tension.

Think about a balloon. At rest the air in the balloon is balanced with the air pressure in the room. The tension of the air molecules filling the space of the rubber "skin" of the balloon maintains the "pattern" we see as the shape, color, and size of the balloon. Over time, as air escapes through the microscopic spaces in the rubber of the balloon, it reduces the tension between the "skin" of the balloon and the air inside. The shape of the balloon changes as it slowly deflates into a pattern we recognize as a sad little piece of colored rubber with a sagging string tied to it. Another scenario might be that the balloon gets too close to a heater, and the air inside expands. Tension builds because the "skin" of the balloon is not adequate to hold the air inside. In a loud "pop" the rubber of the balloon is ruptured, and the air that was inside all escapes in a loud rush. This also releases the tension in the balloon, changing the pattern that we knew. This response to shifting tension and resulting changes in the conditions that shaped the balloon is a powerful metaphor to the ways patterns emerge and shift in human systems.

So what you can do, when you feel tension in your system that points to a lack of fitness, is to ask yourself where that tension is being formed. Is the container too large or too small? Are there too many differences? Too few? Are the exchanges fit for purpose in the overall functioning of the system? Those questions open many options for action and you can choose one. Choose the action that is easiest, or the one that's closest to you, or the one you think will have the most efficient impact. You don't have to shift all three conditions. They are so interdependent that a shift in one will shift the other two.

Now What?

This is the point at which you:

- Take your most accessible next wise action
- Watch for the impact of that action.
- Return to the next cycle and ask "What?" do I see now?

Now What Can You Do to Shift Patterns Toward Greater Fitness?

First you take one small action and watch for the impact.

Plan that wise action:

- Who should be involved?
- What steps need to be taken?
- Who needs to know? What do they need to know?
- How will you judge/assess your success?
- When will you look for evidence?

Assess the impact of that wise action:

- Does the original pattern shift? In what ways?
- Is there more or less tension in the system? Is the tension more fit for purpose than before?
- As tension shifted one place, what was the impact in another?
- What, if any, unintended consequences or benefits do you see?

Look to the system to point you to the next cycle. Step into the next, **"What?"**