

Article 7: Why so few senior women in business and politics?

Whitehall broached this issue about 'too few women in the Boardroom' and has been keen to catalyse action to redress the balance. As the Telegraph reported on 03 Aug 2010

A Labour peer and respected former banker is to lead a new inquiry into why so few women make it to the top of business, the Daily Telegraph can reveal. Lord Davies has been vocal about the problem of too few women making it to the top in business. The peer believes Britain would have 750,000 more small firms if women were fully engaged with the business world. He said recently:

"We have an issue in Britain in that we don't have enough women starting businesses. We need more female entrepreneurs. A quarter of the large FTSE companies don't have women on their boards. We should change that. It is all about providing role models. We need to showcase women who have done great things."

This issue of greater representation of women in top jobs is one that neither the Conservatives nor Liberal Democrats can claim to have the high moral ground on. There are just four women in the Coalition Cabinet and none from the Liberal Democrats who have just seven female MPs.

The question posed by Lord Davies' inquiry invites an answer that is grounded in the past. What is actually more interesting to me is: 'Is the current situation really a problem, and if so, what can be done to create a balance that positively impacts society locally and globally?' Lord Davies seems to believe that if there were more senior women in business, 'things' would be better. Perhaps the social, economic and environmental crisis we are currently facing in the world might be averted? Byron Katie would ask 'can you know this to be absolutely true – that things would be better if there were more women?' Well, in all honesty, 'no' we can't. And we can't because we cannot know the future and we cannot know how things would have been, had the past been different.

So what is going on here? Whether or not you or I believe there is a problem, is irrelevant. What is more vital is that we pay attention to what is currently manifesting in the world and then find a way to harness the energies and wisdom of multiple players to address the challenges. It could be that 'more women would be the difference that would make a difference. In my view, the last thing we need is to take action based on blind assumptions and find that the action we took was ill-informed and ineffective. So what to do?

The exciting and emerging field of Human System Dynamics, pioneered by Glenda Eoyang over the last 24 years, affords us the opportunity to discover new ways of both seeing and acting on the current world system to effect change that might give us a chance of halting the seemingly inevitable slide into chaos, crisis and possible collapse.

What is Human Systems Dynamics (HSD)?

HSD is an integrating, embracing field that brings together complexity theory and practice from diverse disciplines and applies it to what happens within and amongst human beings in organisations and communities from local to global levels. In particular, HSD draws on the science of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) and offers an emerging array of simple tools and approaches that enable us to take focused action to address the complex dilemmas of our time. The genius of what Glenda has done, is take complexity theory and answer the question that no one else has really addressed: 'yes, but how can we do something about it?' Some theoreticians have been able to articulate the science but few have been able to ground that theory into a place in which ordinary folk can do something useful with it. Glenda has – and how interesting it took a woman to do this?

More about Human Systems Dynamics

HSD calls us to pay attention to the whole of a system, the parts and the greater whole. So for example, we could look at the Board of an organisation as 'the' whole; it's 'parts' would include the Board Members and also other elements supporting that Board such as information, ideas, data, rooms, table, chairs, paper, pens, computers, refreshments, timetable for meetings and so forth. A 'greater whole' would be the organisation in which that Board operates. What we know from nature, seen through the eyes of CAS, is that there is always an even 'greater whole' eg. the market or region in which our organisation is operating or the wider economic system, right up to the global social, economic, environmental and political context. Additionally, every 'part' can also be a 'whole' in that each Board Member is a human being and a living system on its own. In HSD it is only necessary to pay attention at 3 connected levels in order to identify what might be helpful to change.

HSD offers simple ways of seeing through and into chaos and complexity, revealing, in the process of looking, opportunities for action that might bring about a desirable shift in the system. The principle at play, is that in any system, we do not need to act on every part of that system. We need only act on one part at a time. We



then observe the effect to see if it improves the whole system. If the effect or shift is in the desired direction, it could be that that is enough 'for now'; or we may choose another part in the system to generate even more shift. If the change is not helpful, we need to re-consider the system to choose another focus for action.

HSD truly honours the hidden knowledge and inherent wisdom in the system; it brings questions that reveal patterns which enable the people in the system to discover for themselves where and how to take consciously intentional action. By embracing the principles of CAS, we find ourselves working with, rather than against how we have come to know things work.

Benefits of HSD

From an economic perspective, HSD interventions are generally far cheaper, faster and simpler than most traditional interventions. They are also far less resource intensive and they create change more swiftly - which means impact/ results and benefits can more readily be experienced and measured, assessed and then further action can be taken. The time-frame between action, observed and or felt impact (feedback) and then assessment is radically reduced making it possible to decide and choose further actions in a more responsive, useful time-frame. We call this 'Adaptive Action' and it is this capacity that helps us to better respond in an increasingly unpredictable, fast-moving environment.

There is a dominant myth that we can and have to create detailed strategic and project plans to navigate our way to a clearly defined future and out of the current chaos and complexities of our times. HSD reveals that the myth is not true and neither is the assumption that such time and resource intensive planning processes are necessary. Quite simply, HSD liberates us from such 'conventional' approaches and frees us up to be more creative, responsive and ultimately effective, again and again, by enabling us to frame and choose how we see change – and then how to act in relation to the kind of change we may wish to effect.

Different types Change

Broadly speaking, there are 3 types of change – 'Static', 'Dynamic' and 'Dynamical'. I'll explain these briefly before returning to and moving on from the question posed in the title of this article.

- ❁ **Static Change:** When we are dealing with less complex change scenarios we may appear to have more 'control' over the results eg. lose half a stone in the next 2 months. This kind of change can be categorized as 'static' change ie. move from one place/ state to another. Competency frameworks fall into this category as do annual appraisal processes; likewise an increase by 20%, of the number of women in senior executive and Board room positions. In static change we or focus of attention is on the thing we want to shift from 'A' to 'B'; from 10st to 9 ½ stone; 2% women in the Boardroom to 50%. Seeing the situation in static change terms lulls us into a false sense of omnipotence – after all, we only have one thing to move! It appears neat, simple and seemingly straightforward and controllable.'
- ❁ **Dynamic Change:** Parcel distribution scheduling is an example of dynamic change, where we have a plan that shows where the parcels will be delivered and also when, how and in what stages. We do recognise there are more factors at play and we focus our attention, not only on the parcels to be moved, but also the route, timings, mode of transport etc etc. We are still believing that most of the variables are know-able, predictable and controllable. And, generally this may be 'true enough' and therefore useful to play along with the assumption about the controllable nature of the activity.
- ❁ **Dynamical Change:** However, for scenarios like 'changing the culture of an organisation' or 'creating corporate turnaround', or indeed 'getting more women in the Boardroom', we are talking about a different order of complexity where there are infinite unknowns at play. We call these 'wicked' problems. The factors are simply too great to meaningfully identify and plan for, using conventional methods. This is why such as medium or long range strategic planning and corporate culture programmes rarely deliver what is intended. In these so-called 'wicked problems' the kind of change we are talking about is called 'dynamical'. This is a mathematical term which conveys that the factors involved are so many and ultimately unknowable that it is impossible to predict effects and outcomes. For many people, this is a hard space to inhabit because it brings us face to face with the fact that we cannot make everything happen in the ways we want, simply because we want to.

And so, with the discomfort of that tension between knowing and not knowing, we may resort to perceiving change as a more simplistic process so that we can believe we have at least some control of our lives and destinies; or find ourselves giving up in a slough of despair or depression because deep down, we realise how little control we actually have!



Dynamical Reality: it's all about perception

In our daily lives we actually experience dynamical change all the time even though generally, we are unaware of it. So, when I go for the train at 07:31, I go along believing the train will arrive when I expect it and that it will race along the tracks, stop at all pre-determined stations at a certain time and arrive at my destination on time. I can view this situation as both 'static change' in that the train will take me from Edinburgh to London; it is also 'dynamic change' in that it will follow a predetermined path with timings, staff changes etc. Where we are faced by its dynamical nature is when another agent/ element in the system does something unexpected such as if there is a sudden snow storm, or when a cow wanders onto the line and gets killed by the train in front; or autumn leaves fall and affect the lines! Such unexpected, unpredictable events occur and always will. But for some situations and processes where there are tighter constraints which limit the possibility of variability (eg trains run on tracks and usually nothing else does) there may be sufficient predictability to view and treat the change process **as if** it is static or dynamic.

Traditional v HSD planning approaches

The assumption behind traditional planning approaches to change and transformation is that we need to work on everything in the system or that we need to isolate and work on parts; that we need to take snapshots to assess progress; that cause and effect is simple and linear, predictable and controllable; and that there are root causes which once discovered, can be eradicated. In other words, traditional planning treats change as 'static' and/or 'dynamic'.

HSD recognises the reality that we cannot act on a single part of the system without affecting the whole; that it is more useful to tend to whole, part and greater whole over time and not as snapshots in time; that the relationship between cause and effect is not unidirectional but bi-directional in relation to two parts and multi-directional in relation to many parts; that there are multiple rather than single causes; that the end is ultimately unknown; that getting to wherever we arrive, is a surprising and emergent process. This is the world we are living in and yet if we accept this, it leaves us in a seemingly impossible position – that there is nothing we can do to make change happen in the ways we want. HSD brings us hope.

Working with Dynamical Change

So how do we deal with wicked problems? To increase the efficacy of our actions we need to recognise and work with the dynamical nature of the system. So, we start by observing the system as a whole; we pay attention to the parts/ elements/ factors at play and the patterns that show up in the connections and flow between them; we look at differences and similarities between those parts and we draw upon an increasing range of tools that help us to choose and take action designed to generate useful outcomes. The beauty and elegance of HSD tools enable us to perceive unhelpful patterns, to decide and then take simple, adaptive action; to test the impact and then choose further adaptive action to take us in the direction we wish to go. The man who ultimately plugged the oil spill pouring into the Gulf of Mexico from a hole the size of a dinner plate, 1 mile underwater in a vast ocean, did so, not by approaching the problem as a static or dynamic one. He did so by paying attention to what was happening in the system, taking small actions; assessing impact on the system and progress towards the hole; and then adjusting his actions and direction again. He has a reputation for never missing – and that is because he approaches the challenge dynamically.

Present into the future

So what about women in the Boardroom? What is going on in the wider system? What is it about other factors/ elements in the wider system that finds far fewer women inhabiting the upper power echelons of our society? What are the connections between the different agents and elements in the system? Is it really that the difference that makes a difference is about 'being a man' or 'being a woman' or is it actually what gets connected to gender? We can guess on our own or play out the stories we tell amongst our small circles of friends. Or we can do something different. I am one amongst a small group of women who, in February 2011, will be launching an extraordinary venture, inviting 150 senior women and leaders from around Scotland. We will bring together pioneering women from across the globe, who are at the cutting edge of developing inspiring leaders and catalysing whole systems transformation. Our launch event at The Hub, Edinburgh will be like no other and it will open up opportunities for future young women to grow into inspiring leaders adept at working with dynamical realities to transform our world. We are starting in our own 'greater whole' of Scotland.

Keep connected with The3rdi or contact me direct to find out more.

© Louie Gardiner Date 1st October 2010

● www.potent6.co.uk ● louie.gardiner@potent6.co.uk ● +44 7730 596 771

info@potent6.co.uk www.potent6.co.uk