# Adaptive Action: Changing Change Consulting

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## Abstract

The theory and practice of change consulting rely on fundamental assumptions about the nature of change in human systems. Economic and organizational landscapes today challenge many of those assumptions. Based on complexity theory and informed by successful change practice, we introduce a new kind of change and the assumptions and practices of Adaptive Action that will help consultants and their clients thrive in unpredictable and chaotic contexts.

## Biographical Sketch

Glenda Eoyang is founding Executive Director of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute. She leads an international network of scholar-practitioners who apply and extend her work in complex dynamics. Her recent books include *Adaptive Action: Leveraging uncertainty in your organization* (Stanford University Press, 2013) and *Radical rules for schools: Adaptive Action for complex change* (HSD Press, 2013). Her recent research and practice interests include complex dynamics of peace and fundamental reform of education, international development, healthcare and human resources. She holds a Ph.D. in Human Systems Dynamics from The Union Institute and University in Cincinnati, OH where she studied with Kevin Dooley, Jeffrey Goldstein and Donald Klein.

Nothing is intractable.

## Introduction:  What's the Problem?

Like all the other change consultants I know, I am eager to help clients thrive. We all understand that no one can thrive without changing to meet evolving demands. Over the past thirty years, everything from technology, globalization, information and networks to integrated supply chains have transformed business. At the same time, ironic as it may seem, we have struggled to make our practice as change consultants as predictable and replicable as possible. We trademark new ways to say old things, and our clients' employees complain about the "flavor of the month." We bring people into dialogue to transform their hearts and minds, but their policies and practices often lag behind. We introduce Lean and Six Sigma to reform processes, but too many people get lost in the shuffle. As my mother used to say, "The harder we work, the behinder we get."

Of course there are voices within the change consulting community that talk about a new reality. The language and metaphors of complexity science are infused in some state-of-the-art organizational change literature. Still, I was disappointed in what I found as I reviewed the complexity literature for a chapter on organizational change in 2011 (*Allen, et al., 2011).* Many sources gave convincing descriptions of the complexities of organizational life, but very few offered practical and usable, complexity-inspired ideas to inform real action for consultants and organizations. There are some promising exceptions. Heifetz distinguishes technical from adaptive leadership (Heifetz, et al., 2009). Ralph Stacey acknowledges there are no tools or techniques for change management, even while naming his book *Tools and Techniques of Leadership and Management* (Stacey, 2012). Jeff Gilley and his colleagues talk about the manager as change agent (Gilley, et al., 2001). Frank Barrett says "yes to the mess" (Barrett, 2012). This current collection and its predecessor *Consultation for Organizational Change* (Buono & Jamieson, 2012), represent multiple perspectives about change and change management. Lichtenstein, Hazy and Goldstein share a complexity-inspired nexus of leadership (Goldstein, et al., 2012). Ed Olson and I tried to shake up change management with *Facilitating Organization Change: Lessons from Complexity Science* (Olson & Eoyang, 2001). Many of these titles help us see a new reality, but most of them are a bit thin on what to do about it. Others have lots of actionable advice, but the insights are based on traditional assumptions and historical realities.

While the practice- and theory-based literature for change has been sparse, real world effective change efforts have been even rarer. When was the last time you heard about an organizational change effort that went as planned? Within schedule and budget? What about one that met its goals, even if things changed *en route*? What about a change initiative that had terrible unintended consequences? What about one that was declared a winner, while people and processes at all levels were left crippled? What about your own experience? What about hearing from front-line employees and customers? Let's face it, change management and the consulting that supports it often fail, and they continue to fail in spite of the well- meaning commitment of those of us who consult for change.

## Nothing is intractable.

My own journey as a change consultant began with complexity science and chaos theory. I was a successful entrepreneur who wanted a theory base that could help me understand my unpredictable and nuanced challenges. When I did not find such a base in the organization development or management literature of the late 1980s, I turned to the promising world of the "new sciences." That emerging theory acknowledged the openness, high dimensionality and massive interdependence of my clients' realities. It was a great beginning, but in the past three decades I have realized serious limitations to the practical applications of the complexity perspective, as well. The science is difficult, so popular writers either overwhelm with detail or gloss over important distinctions. Scholars focus on theory, as they are supposed to do, so they discover arcane differences that don't make a difference in the "real" world. Uncertainty in emergent systems stymies traditional research methods, so reliable evidence for useful practices are few and far between. Current complexity-based models and methods recognize and describe patterns that emerged in the past, but seldom do they inform decisions in the present to influence success in the future. Even the most complex phenomenon in the natural world is tame compared to the wicked issues of human systems at all scales. In short, complexity was a good foundation for my theory as a change agent, but it failed to support change practice for my clients and me.

What did work? Intuition. Time and again I saw my colleagues respond in the moment with grace and power. The problem was that they were unable to explain what they had done, how they had chosen, or why their interventions had worked. When success happened, it was not replicable because explanations were either personal (and somewhat mystical) or connected to any one of many arbitrary taxonomic models. What I wanted and what my clients needed was a base in theory and practice that matched both the intuitions of master change agents and the complexity of their environments.

Drawing from theories of complexity and practices of effective professionals, my colleagues and I have come to a radical conclusion: Our assumptions about change are fundamentally flawed. That is why we have no way to avoid failure or to repeat success when it happens. In this chapter, I would like to expand the definition of change so that it mirrors the experience of people and their organizations today. Based on this new understanding, I will introduce radical assumptions that have emerged from our practice of human systems dynamics and transformed our change practice. Finally, I will invite you to share this amazing journey, where change consulting is an ever-emerging process that ensures success by erasing the line between theory and practice. My hope is that my observations will resonate with your own experience and contribute to your own changing praxis of change. What Is Change?

Nothing is intractable.

I have the dubious honor of having taught middle-school science in my dim and distant youth. Though I don't draw on that experience often, I did use it when my clients and their change projects challenged my understanding of what organizational change was, is and can be. What I discovered were three kinds of change. These simple distinctions were a shock to my theories of organizational behavior, but they reinforced the intuition and practice that had emerged in my change practice over the years.

## *Static Change*

In the old days, we taught two kinds of change. The first made some simple assumptions:

► An object stays still until I move it.

► It will stay where I put it.

► It will resist.

► The amount of resistance will depend on how heavy and smooth it is.

► No unexpected or unknown forces work against me.

► The direction I push is the direction the object will move.

► If I have pushed one object, I've pushed them all.

This kind of change was understood prior to Newton's time, and it is very important to some engineering techniques even today. Teachers and textbooks call this *static mechanics*, and in human systems dynamics we call it *static change*. Sometimes it is very effective to think about change in human systems as static change. These assumptions are close enough to reality when you're changing safety standards, physical relocation, illegal or criminal behavior. So change initiatives that share these assumptions are effective for similar circumstances and outcomes.

The problem is, many of our change practices and consulting interventions hold tight to these assumptions, even when most human systems do not match them anymore. We refer to static change when we talk about applying pressure, overcoming resistance, setting clear objectives, defining the vision, moving beyond current practice, pushing through the period of change. Even getting out of the box is a static change metaphor. None of those things is bad, but they only work when these static change assumptions are a close enough description of the real world. Consider the change strategies and tactics you know about and use. Do you make these static change assumptions?  When you do, how well do they work? When do they work?  More importantly when and where do they not work?

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## *Dynamic Change*

The second kind of change inspired Newton and continues to inspire much of modern life today. It is called *dynamic change*. It makes very different assumptions about the process and objects of change.

► An object that is moving will keep moving in the same direction until I do something.

► If I know enough history, I can predict the future.

► When I know enough about its beginning, I can predict when and how a change will end.

► I don't control everything, but what I don't control I can at least understand.

► The harder I push the more it will change.

► Predictable paths lead to predictable ends.

► If I've thrown one object, I've thrown them all.

► I can recognize predictable, sequential and unavoidable stages of change.

This is a great set of assumptions. They won the Olympics, built the US interstate highway system and got us to the moon. They also form the foundation for most change management theory and practice today, either explicitly or implicitly. Project timelines, milestones, stages of change, strategic planning, getting/staying on track, hit our numbers and holding momentum are all based on a metaphor of dynamic change. Consider all the change pundits you know or know about. How do their techniques rely on these dynamic assumptions? How do your expectations and the expectations of your clients depend on these same assumptions? How do these assumptions influence your expectations of yourself and your clients?

The critical question, though, is when are these assumptions really true of individuals, teams, or organizations? Have you ever seen a real project, a real learning process, or a cultural change initiative that passed neatly through a series of stages, worked exactly like any previous project, or responded only to forces you knew or controlled? Even though the real world doesn't match any of these assumptions, we talk about it as if it did because (until recently) that was the only way we knew to talk about change. Is it any wonder that our theory and practice of change don't fit the experiences of our clients? Is it any wonder that we are disappointed more than we are affirmed in our expectations for organizational change? Should we be surprised that our clients, or at least our clients' employees, grow cynical about the most recent "flavor of the month?"

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Change interventions based on dynamic change assumptions simply will not work in a real world with people who do not act like billiard balls or streams of water from garden hoses. One of our colleagues, an experienced change practitioner shared her experience, which may reflect your own. For many years, she knew that change was not dynamic. She didn't expect to predict or control the change process. She followed her intuitions to meet clients' needs, but she always felt a little guilty. She felt guilty because everyone who was supposed to know, all of the theories and high-priced consultants, said dynamic strategies were supposed to work. If they didn't work with her clients, there must be something wrong with her clients or with her. She, and maybe you, knew there had to be another way to talk about the intuitive change practice that had to break so many rules for it to work so well.

## *Dynamical Change*

In the past thirty years, since I taught school in rural Oklahoma, a new kind of change has emerged from many different physical, information and mathematical sciences. It, too, is a natural form of change and goes by many names: nonlinear dynamics, complex adaptive systems, dynamical systems theory, complexity science, chaos theory. Each of these titles represents slight technical differences, but all of them deal with unpredictable change. One particular aspect of these new sciences is called *dynamical change*, and its assumptions are quite different from those for static and dynamic change.

▶ Change is happening at many different levels all around me at the same time.

▶ The levels are connected and influence each other in ways I cannot predict.

▶ A small change in one place can trigger large changes in distant places.

▶ It takes lots of little and middle-sized changes before a big one can happen, but I cannot know exactly how many of which sizes are required or when they'll come.

▶ When I've seen one change process, I've seen only that one change process, and each one is unique.

▶ I can never predict the exact time and place and shape of the next shift.

▶ I cannot know all the forces that influence the change.

▶ It looks like nothing's happening for a very long time, then all at once the change breaks loose.

These assumptions may sound very strange, even in relation to natural systems, but they are not. Avalanches, earthquakes, boiling water, tsunamis, chronic illness, climate change, seed germination, melting ice, embryo development and molecular change are all believed to match these fundamental assumptions. The study of dynamical change is a bit complicated, as you can imagine, because each discipline has its own way of describing and explaining the phenomenon. Depending on who you ask this third kind of change may involve triggers, thresholds, tipping points, activation energies, self-organized criticality, power law dynamics, Pareto principle, inverse log functions, scale-free structures, resonance patterns, or dissipative structures. What does it mean to say that an avalanche and fetal development are examples of the same fundamental theory of change? They are different in every way, but the processes of change are the same across the board. We like the mathematicians' label for this process—dynamical change—because it is the most general. When our clients don't want the technical term—or when they are working in a language where there is no such word—we call it "complex change."

These same patterns of dynamical change are perfectly obvious to me in my experiences of individual and collective change in human systems.

► Individuals change, teams change, departments change, organizations change and industries change. The change in any affects change in all.

► Top-down, bottom-up and inside out influences contribute to change over time.

► Tiny changes or rumors can spark revolutions—or not.

► When enough people "get" it, peer pressure takes over, and a tipping point is reached.

► You cannot step into the same change project twice.

► You cannot be sure whether, and you certainly can't predict when or how, sustainable change will occur.

► No matter how diligent you are, you can never know all of the factors that influence change in a particular place or time.

► Breakthroughs are the key to all kinds of human change, including learning, innovation, personal transformation, violent conflict and organizational culture shifts.

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All these dynamical assumptions match my experience of organizational change, but how many of them are explicitly captured in the theory or theory-driven practice of change consulting? While most contemporary writers have begun to alter their language to accommodate uncertainty and complexity, they often add this as a special case of predictable change. They don't represent it as a radically different theory of change. Even change theories that talk about complexity rarely provide practical advice for supporting dynamical change. Our old practices of change consulting and change management have been good enough in the past, why are they not working now? Why were static and dynamic understandings of change sufficient in the past, but not nuanced enough for today or tomorrow?

The underlying conditions of organizations and their environments have changed. Organizational systems are a "close enough" fit for static and dynamic change when the system is bounded, responds to few influences and has limited interconnections. Under such highly constrained conditions, a person or organization can appear to change in predictable, controllable, old-fashioned, dynamic or static ways. Until relatively recently, communications, corporate structures, homogeneous workforces, local economies, government regulations and many other factors constrained individuals and groups so that we appeared to change in static and dynamic ways. Now, these conditions have shifted for most people and most industries. We live and work in open systems driven by a multitude of factors and massive interdependencies. As a result, we can no longer rely on dynamic assumptions of stability and predictability. If we will successfully support our clients, we understand and support dynamical change.

## So What Does this Mean to You?

Over the years of setting conditions for people and organizations to deal with all kinds of change, we have come to recognize some patterns of practice that emerge when interventions succeed in change that is dynamical. Here is a baker's dozen of them, in no particular order.

1. **Talk has be to generative, or it is just talk.** There is a great deal of talk about dialogue in OD circles these days, and we think that is great. On the other hand, not all dialogue is created equal. Dialogue in support of change involves speaking, listening and co-creation. If engagement is not focused, diverse and action-oriented, it generates nothing new, and it will not support sustainable organizational or individual dynamical change.

2. **There's no "there" there.** This may be the most controversial of all our dynamical change observations because it challenges the place of vision in change management. In complex environments, where dynamical assumptions hold sway, a vision is of little use. In fact, a future vision and its hopes can distort current vision, which is so important in adaptation. Individuals and groups can hold shared intentions and hopes to inform how they see, understand and influence patterns around them, but sticking to a vision as an imagined end goal only works in static or dynamic change.

3. **Talking about it doesn't do it.** Logic and talking through things are useful tools in dynamic and static change because there is always a chance you can figure it out before you do it. Dynamical change is unpredictable by nature, so trying to plan for it completely or describe it in detail is usually wasted effort. The only way to gather information and figure things out is to work alone or with others to complete cycles of inquiry.

4. **When it comes to change, difference is more important than common ground.** Similarity in dynamical change gives stability and holds individuals and groups in place. Anchoring in common ground can be very useful to reduce tension, lower anxiety, or avoid conflict. But when you want energy and innovation, turn your focus to significant differences. Difference is the engine for change in complex systems, and if you use it well it can accelerate and shape emerging patterns for individuals, groups and institutions.

5. **Answers have a short shelf life.** Because every dynamical situation is unique, a good answer in one place may be a terrible one somewhere else. A good one now might be disastrous next month. What always works are good questions. As an agent of change, you can bring questions to help groups reflect on their current situations, make useful meaning and come to shared and effective action. My colleagues at the Human Systems Dynamics Institute are so committed to questions that even our core change tool—Adaptive Action—is framed in questions and based in inquiry (Eoyang & Holladay, 2013).

6. **All the consultant brings to the table is the table.** Sustainable change is based on the recognition and resolution of the tensions inside the system. Technology, resources, reputation and competition can cause change because they are tensions within and beyond the client's organization. The point is that nothing you bring with you as a consultant will change the client system. You can convene them, ask them questions, set conditions for transformation, but if there is to be change, your client must, individually and collectively, change themselves.

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7. **Leaders are nowhere, unless they are now here.** In dynamical change, the function of the leader is identical to every other person in the system. Everyone participates in cycles of inquiry. The scope, breadth and power of the leaders' inquiry must be different because they command more resources and span a wider scope. But the process of inquiry puts the role of leadership in the hands of every person, wherever they are in the organization. Dynamical change will only leverage the energy of the whole when everyone, everywhere is paying attention and adjusting to change.

8. **It's about today, not tomorrow or yesterday.** The past is important, but only insofar as it shows up in patterns of the present. The potential of the future is significant, but only insofar as it influences decisions in the here and now. Simple forms of inquiry are effective in times of dynamical change because they focus on the place where information and opportunities for change really do exist—in this place and in this moment.

9. **Best practices are a sales pitch**. Any list of best practices emerged in a particular complex system with unique combination of history, circumstance, goals, resources, challenges, people and any other unique success factor you can imagine. Why would anyone suspect that what worked there would necessarily work in another complex system with a unique combination of unimaginable factors?  Best practices build confidence and establish credibility, but as long as you're working in dynamical change, they build nothing more than confidence and credibility.

10. **It is easy.** Yes, change is easy in a dynamical system. It is happening in all places and all the time. Human systems always were and will forever be in constant motion. The challenge for us as change consultants is to understand the current patterns and potential of change well enough to engage and influence our clients toward greater success and sustainability.

11. **They can learn it, but you can't teach it**. Change in a dynamical system depends on massive amounts of information from far ranging places inside and outside of the organization. As an outsider, you cannot collect, understand, or act on that information. On the other hand, everyone inside the system can see, understand and act on whatever information is significant to them and their changing roles. You can help set conditions for them to learn how to enquire and engage to fulfill this goal, but you cannot teach them what they need to know about their worlds and the changes demanded of them.

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12. **The game ain't over 'til it is over.** When I write a proposal for a change project, I put in start dates, end dates, milestones and outcomes as if I thought it were a static or dynamic change process. I do that because the business, legal and financial infrastructures in which we work still make those assumptions and work within those constraints. Even so, I know that the change process I support has already come a long way before they hire me and that it will continue long after I am gone. The best I can do for my client is to help them leverage their potential from the past and help them build adaptive capacity for the future while I'm sharing their journey.

13. **Forgetting is a necessary part of learning.** There is a strange phenomenon in dynamical change that is the bane of every change consultant's existence. It is called hysteresis. It means that any complex system going through dynamical change will visit a new pattern, and then return to the old. For some time, the system bounces back and forth (at unpredictable increments) between old and new until it finally locks into the new pattern. What we see as backsliding, reversion, or resistance among our clients may very well be part of the natural process of change where forgetting is an integral part of learning.

In dynamical change, the only reasonable action is to focus on patterns as they emerge and to stand in inquiry. To influence change in dynamical systems, you have to see the pattern of what is happening in the moment and in all the places you have access to. You have to analyze the observations and understand them in ways that are useful. You have to take courageous action to shift the pattern. Then you begin the cycle again to see what is happening as a result of your action and other changing conditions.

## Now What Does Dynamical Change Management Look Like?

We give this process of iterative inquiry, and the pattern-spotting models and methods that support it a name. We call it Adaptive Action (*Eoyang & Holladay, 2013*). Adaptive Action is a full-force strategy of engagement, dialogue, experimentation and discovery. We practice and teach Adaptive Action in the form of three simple questions:

What?

So what?

Now what?

It may seem simple. It may challenge your view of yourself and your clients' expectations for you, but if you want to work effectively in dynamical change, you have no other choice. We and our clients and students are convinced that if you want to support change in dynamical environments, Adaptive Action isn't just the best thing you can do; it is the only thing you can do.

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Like many other paradigm-breaking practices, Adaptive Action is simple, but it isn't easy. Becoming a musician, living into a meditation practice, becoming a parent, even riding a bicycle are all examples of practices that are easy to name and hard to do. Of course these processes are also easier to do than to talk about. They are dynamical changes, and a language that fits these strange patterns of knowing and acting is still evolving.

We have also discovered that dynamical change has no spectators. Each of us, as an individual consultant, can be consciously engaged in personal and professional cascades of learning and change. For me, Adaptive Action frames my most important work as I play the roles of leader, teacher and learner. Adaptive Action guides our Network of Human Systems Dynamics Associates as we share action and inquiry. When we ask the three questions—What? So what? and Now what?—we engage with each other and the world to see, understand and influence dynamical change. We invite you to join us in this emergent journey.

If you are an experienced change consultant, what does that journey look like?  How can you integrate dynamical change into your practice?  Surely you won't be surprised when I say, "Use Adaptive Action!"

## *What?  Observe Reality from Fresh Perspectives*

*Give yourself some credit.* Recognize that you are already doing Adaptive Action. Whenever you are successful, it is because you have seen a pattern (What?), understood it in meaningful ways (So what?) and taken action to shift it (Now what?). Consider your powerful intuition that has emerged over time and recognize when and how it is implicit Adaptive Action.

*Get off the balcony.* Focus on seeing patterns from your client's viewpoint. What patterns—similarities, differences and connections—inform their worlds of work? Ultimately, it is *their* actions on the patterns *they* see within *their* own contexts that will make change happen. What you see and do is ultimately irrelevant, unless your client becomes the instrument of change. Make the support of their Adaptive Actions the key to your own.

When you have seen what you can see, consider options for action.

### *So What?  Make Meaning in Useful Ways*

*Pay attention to what is there.* Rather than looking for predictable explanations in received models and methods, look for the potential in what is before you. How often do we assign labels that limit our options for action:  personality types, resistance, vision, employee engagement?  Consider what is really happening:  What agents are interacting? What differences form tension?  What connections are flowing or stuck? When you see the client's situation in this way, you and they can co-create understanding that is actionable.

*Notice and leverage tension.* Differences within patterns—of expertise, understanding, resources and so on—generate the energy for change. The proverbial gap between current and future states is one example, but generative tensions can be found anywhere, and each one presents a powerful option for change. Rather than ignoring or resolving tensions, harvest them for the lessons and opportunities they hold.

*Look at multiple scales.* Dynamical change happens because a shift at one scale influences tensions at other scales. An individual learns, and the team plan shifts. The economy slumps, and a department reorganizes. No change in a dynamical system is localized. When you are working in change be sure to consider the meaning and implications at scales above and below. Remember, though, you cannot predict or control them, but you can be conscious of their importance.

*Don't overcomplicate it.* When change is fast and unpredictable, what you and your clients need are simple, direct understanding that leads to highly leveraged action. Not all changes are dynamical changes. Some aspects of organizational change are like moving inanimate objects in static change. Sometimes, a plan works like a plan is supposed to work in dynamic change. When that happens, celebrate, and use Adaptive Action to do your predictable work. But, when you experience dynamical change rely on Adaptive Action to see, understand and influence patterns of change as quickly as they emerge.

As you make sense of what you see, options for action begin to emerge. What can you and your clients do to make change sustainable?

## Nothing is intractable.

### *Now What? Just Do It*

*Don't wait for a complete picture.* Dynamical change works without boundaries, so a complete analysis is never possible. What you need to find is a picture that is complete enough to inspire reasonable action—then to take the action and stand in inquiry about the results.

*Do it again and again.* Dynamical change never ends. Every avalanche sets conditions for the next to emerge. Never delude yourself (or your client) that a change process is complete. Instead, take each action with an awareness of the options it leaves for the next Adaptive Action cycle . . . and the next.

*Reflect on and document your practice.* You will never step into the same change project twice, but what you learn in one builds your capacity to see, understand and influence in the next. Use every Adaptive Action cycle to improve your awareness of your emerging adaptive capacity.

*Connect with colleagues*. You are not alone. Your colleagues are dealing with the same questions and challenges as you are. Use your engagements with them to amplify your learning and action while supporting theirs.

When you take action, don't assume you know what comes next. Immediately begin the next Adaptive Action cycle because, regardless of your expertise and care, the dynamical system will change in ways you never imagined.

## Conclusion: Next What?

As change consultants, we have failed, and we have succeeded, but we have seldom known why. What worked in one context failed miserably in the next. What worked fine in theory failed in practice. What worked in practice failed to stand up to rigorous theory. Over the past three decades, I have used principles from complexity science, my own intuitive practice and the power of inquiry with colleagues to untie this Gordian knot. We believe the source of the problem is a fundamental misunderstanding of change as predictable and controllable. We see the accumulation and cascading release of tension in dynamical change as a more realistic—though unpredictable—mechanism for change in human systems. Our theory and practice confirm that Adaptive Action and pattern thinking hold the key to seeing, understanding and influencing change as effective consults.

In this chapter I have tried to share my praxis with you, but there is one underlying pattern I need to emphasize. Underneath my practice as a change consultant is my practice of inquiry. When dealing with a world of dynamical change, the only thing I can be certain of is my uncertainty. My clients and I must act we can never be sure of the success of our actions. Our only hope is to hold our questions more tightly than our answers. And that, for me, is the answer. Welcome to this dynamical conversation about dynamical change!

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