



## HUMAN SYSTEMS DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

### **For Immediate Release**

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"What defines GenFlux is a mind-set that embraces instability, that tolerates—and even enjoys—recalibrating careers, business models, and assumptions. Not everyone will join Generation Flux, but to be successful, businesses and individuals will have to work at it. This is no simple task. The vast bulk of our institutions—educational, corporate, political—are not built for flux. Few traditional career tactics train us for an era where the most important skill is the ability to acquire new skills."

—Robert Safian  
*Fast Company*, January 9, 2012

### **But What If We *Don't* Love Chaos? (A Generation Flux Cheat Sheet for the Rest of Us)**

*It's easy for an unfettered 20-something to embrace chaos, transience, and everything else the "GenFlux" mind-set implies. But what if your team is made up of fearful 40-somethings with mortgages? Glenda Eoyang and Royce Holladay offer reassurance that all us "reluctant fluxers" can adapt to (and even thrive in) a chaotic new world.*

**Palo Alto, CA** (April 2013)—When *Fast Company's* Robert Safian first coined the phrase "Generation Flux" a little over a year ago, boy did it resonate! Suddenly, the uncertainty, instability, and chaos we'd all been feeling for at least a decade had a name. His article (and the follow-up published in October) did a brilliant job of showcasing the mind-sets of hip young entrepreneurs (the type who wear trendy nerd-glasses and slouchy jeans) and hot Flux-friendly companies like Nike, Mashable, and Foursquare. But what about the rest of us?

What about the more, well, *sedate* institutions Safian mentions in the above quote? What about established companies whose employees don't naturally love chaos and live fearlessly? What about uncool, unhip, and frankly, scared-out-of-our-wits old-school workers with kids we have to feed and mortgages we have to pay?

Don't worry: Glenda Eoyang and Royce Holladay say there is hope for us "reluctant fluxers," too!

Nothing is intractable.

"It's true that we all need to work in new ways to keep up with the supercharged velocity of change that defines the global economy," says Eoyang, who along with coauthor Holladay wrote the new book *Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization* (Stanford University Press, 2013, ISBN: 978-0-8047871-1-6, \$27.95, [www.adaptiveaction.org](http://www.adaptiveaction.org)). "And it's true that leaders need to encourage a sense of urgency in the people we're counting on to carry out the work.

"However, that sense of urgency needs to energize, not *paralyze*," she adds. "We want people excited about the future, not feeling like it's some kind of alien universe. We need to let them know, in no uncertain terms, that they *can* get there from here."

Many people desperately need to hear this message. While globalism has opened infinite doors, it has also made decisions exponentially more complex. Markets, governments, and cultures are shifting. Technology is altering everything from the way we buy and sell to the way we communicate to the way we perceive the world. And all of this manifests in pure chaos—the dismaying sense that you can't predict or control anything about your environment.

In other words, we can't make long-term plans because market conditions change violently and rapidly. The goals we're working toward won't hold still. Yesterday's "must-haves" aren't even factors today. We struggle to communicate with team members who live 7,000 miles away and speak English as a second (or third or fourth) language.

"We're not just playing one game whose rules we don't know and whose boundaries are unclear; we're playing many such games," observes Eoyang. "No one knows who will get the prizes in the end, and for what. And when people don't know what their next move should be, they shut down."

Helping less-adventurous organizations move from where they are to where they need to be is what Eoyang and Holladay do for a living. They deploy their Adaptive Action model (thoroughly described in their book) inside big corporations, slow-moving school systems, and government agencies mired in bureaucracy.

Adaptive Action is as simple as it is powerful. It is a cycle of three questions that are repeated again and again. They are repeated in moments when a meeting goes off agenda, in hours when crisis requires rapid response, in days or years when plans are disrupted by unexpected events. Single people, pairs or teams, organizations, and whole communities have used Adaptive Action to thrive in flux-filled environments.

The three questions are simple, but not always easy: **What? So what? Now what?**

**What** patterns shape the current situation? What do you observe, see, hear, know? What is happening? What did you and others expect? What surprises? What builds or releases tension? What is working or not working?

**So what** does the pattern suggest for action and future opportunities? So what do the patterns mean? So what do others think or see? So what might you do and what might be the results? So what are the interconnections that will cause ripples across these and other patterns? So what do current patterns mean for how people work and play together?

Now what will I do to change the pattern? Now what information should I share? Now what responses can I expect to my actions? Now what alliances might I build? Now what future paths might appear? Now what will I do to see how patterns change when I take my action?

These questions provide a lifeline for those who feel deeply uncomfortable with but nonetheless have to live in flux. Here are a few reasons why they, and Adaptive Action in general, seem doable as we seek to thrive in chaos and leverage uncertainty:

- **There are patterns in chaos. Once we learn to see them, we can take action that makes sense.** For example, Eoyang says she and Holladay worked with a company that was experiencing overwhelming confusion about a new product release. But after applying the “three questions” exercise, it became clear that the problem boiled down to communication issues inside the player organizations—not problems with the product design, sales training, or user documentation.

“Once the client saw the pattern emerge, they were able to say, ‘Oh, okay, *this* is the problem; *this* is what we need to change,’” explains Eoyang. “Without that insight they might have gone back to the drawing board and tinkered with the product some more. This would have been wasted time and energy and would have done nothing to tackle the root of the problem—and of course, these communication issues would have reared their heads again at some other place and time.”

- **You don’t have to see the future. You only have to clearly see the present.** A lot of anxiety is generated when companies prepare to compete in a future they can’t see. And while a certain amount is inevitable—and actually beneficial as it creates the urgency that drives action—anxiety can spiral out of control if the plans made aren’t firmly grounded in reality.

“Adaptive Action forces a brutally honest assessment of current resources and challenges,” says Eoyang. “This reveals true potential for future success, while a blue-sky vision only frustrates and disappoints. Being honest about the present takes certain options off the table, but that’s a good thing. People tend to do better when we have fewer choices—this is why a small boutique is easier to shop in than a huge department store.”

► **Some of the old solutions still work. You don't have to start from scratch.**

Knowing that the entire system doesn't have to be scrapped comes as a relief to less adventurous souls who are overwhelmed enough about the new things they have to learn. The trick, says Eoyang, is to be able to see what fits with old solutions and what requires new. (That's why we call it Adaptive Action.)

"For example, traditional command and control in production and distribution are just as important as flux-inspired exploration and innovation in product design and customer service," she explains. "The familiarity of the old ways soothes and reassures, which makes room for excitement about the new stuff."

► **You can still plan. You just need to plan for a month ahead, not a year ahead (and certainly not five years ahead).** When you're in flux, you can see some things very clearly and others not at all, says Eoyang. Planning processes must be agile enough to fit both. This means tight prediction and control for close and clear information horizons and broad-brush, directional planning for what is fuzzy and far away.

"We teach clients that if a situation is highly diverse, massively entangled, and dependent on history, then they have to use looser planning," explains Eoyang. "On the other hand, if there are few moving parts and few changing forces, they can plan more tightly."

► **The pressure to find "the one true answer" is off.** In a workplace defined by chaos, no single solution works in all places. The one thing we know for sure about complex systems is that no two are alike, and no one is the same moment to moment. Even if a structured solution worked for that one person at one point in time, there is no reason to believe that it will work in the future. You need a solution that's flexible enough to allow for multiple paths to success. Adaptive Action fosters such solutions.

"Not expecting a single solution is both a blessing and a curse," says Eoyang. "Free from the fear of 'getting it wrong,' one can experience the fear of 'not getting it right.' Adaptive Action is an antidote to both because it replaces 'right and wrong' solutions with 'best fit for current knowledge.' Adaptive Action also helps you fail fast and learn faster. That's a good thing, because once you realize what doesn't work, you're one step closer to what does work."

- ▶ **It's okay to make mistakes.** "Our friends in Agile IT management have addressed this nicely," says Eoyang. "They work in small cycles of Adaptive Action, so no one ever goes too far wrong. They hold continuing dialogues about what people see and learn, so each person gets the benefits of all. They explore surprise with an open but critical eye, so every mistake leads to learning."

"These conditions let the team move forward as fast as they need to while limiting the amount if not the number of risks," she adds. "When uncertainty is a given, and the future is unknowable, the only way to mitigate risks is to try something, see if it works, learn from the experience, and try again. Adaptive action is the only hedge against the risks of chaos."

- ▶ **You can give up your desire to "win."** Winning is possible only in finite games. With a single goal and scorecard, and clear rules and boundaries, you can build a winning strategy and compete for the prize. In the world of flux, goals, scores, rules, and boundaries change all the time, so it is impossible to win. Instead, you have to play an infinite game where the goal is to keep playing. Scorecards, rules, and boundaries adjust over time to involve everyone, including customers and competitors, in games of sustainable collaboration.

"State-of-the-art technology, customer service, environmental sustainability, corporate social responsibility, global economics—all are infinite games," explains Eoyang. "Yet finite games don't disappear in the world of flux. Even the most flux-friendly person has a bank account and a place to live. The difference is that GenFlux always remembers that the finite games are played within the infinite ones."

"World-class chefs know how to chop, and master artists clean their brushes—they know that the predictable games make the infinite ones possible," she says. "In this larger universe, the purpose is to keep the flux-inspired game going, and that requires basic skills of traditional play."

- ▶ **It is fun.** Remember the most exciting and satisfying and fun thing you ever did. What made it fun? For most people, the delight comes from discovering new surprises and overcoming seemingly impossible odds. The world of flux is full of surprises and impossibilities, and with Adaptive Action you will play the game and rediscover the delight of discovery.

"Working this way feels less like work and more like play," asserts Eoyang. "It's not that you're working any less; it's that you're invigorated and motivated rather than anxious, confused, and weighed down."

Even the people who kick the hardest and scream the loudest when they're dragged into this brave new work world will eventually admit that the change has been good for them, says Eoyang.

"Underneath our dislike for change, I think there is a part of humanity that wants to be challenged," she states. "There is real fulfillment in overcoming these challenges, in mastering new skills, in gaining fresh insights.

"I've seen people, once our message truly 'clicks' for them, get excited about their job for the first time in years," adds Eoyang. "There's huge relief in seeing how it can all work, but there's also a gleam in their eye about what the future could hold. That kind of deep engagement is priceless, and it's one of my favorite byproducts of Adaptive Action."

### **About the Authors**

Dr. Glenda Eoyang and Royce Holladay are coauthors of *Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

Glenda works with public and private organizations and communities to help them thrive in the face of overwhelming complexity and uncertainty. She is a pioneer in the field of human systems dynamics (HSD), which she founded. Through Human Systems Dynamics Institute, Glenda helps others see patterns in the chaos that surrounds them, understand the patterns in simple and powerful ways, and take practical steps to shift chaos into order. She shares her practical theories and theory-informed practices as she speaks and teaches around the globe. She speaks about adaptive action wherever it is needed: peace and justice, education, leadership, evaluation, public policy, productivity, sustainability. Her clients include Fraser Health Authority, Merrill Lynch, Cargill, McKnight Foundation, Prevention Institute, social service and high-tech start-ups, as well as local, state, and federal government agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

Royce is a leader among HSD Associates around the world who use Adaptive Action in their work. She serves as a consultant and coach to help individuals, groups, and organizations cope with uncertainty. Well grounded in the theoretical foundations of HSD, she brings a practitioner's voice to everyday applications. Royce's deep understanding of the dynamics of human systems has been a springboard for the development of a number of models and methods. She has worked with colleagues to address issues such as school reform, inclusion and social justice, coherent system design, finding and sustaining peaceful solutions, strategic adaptive action, and self-reflection and growth through inquiry.

### **About the Book**

*Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization* (Stanford University Press, 2013, ISBN: 978-0-8047871-1-6, \$27.95, [www.adaptiveaction.org](http://www.adaptiveaction.org)) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.