

Book Review

Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization. By Glenda H. Eoyang and Royce J. Holladay. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA. 2013. vii + 253 pp; 10 figures. ISBN 978-0-8047-8196-1 (cloth: alk. paper), 978-0-8047-8711-6 (pbk.: alk. paper).

Have you ever read something that you consider “the obvious,” but it spells out “the obvious” in such a clear and concise manner that you secretly wish *you* could have understood the topic so thoroughly *and* had the talent to explain it so effectively? Well, this is one of those readings. Birth-sisters Glenda Eoyang and Royce Holladay’s 2013 book is a certain go-to for practitioners who seek an understandable guiding light for leading or managing change in any nonlinear organization. This book is certainly readable and useful to all, expert or novice.

As one might expect in this easy, weekend read, Eoyang and Holladay present the case for appreciating that human organizations are nonlinear and are essentially uncertain – something *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Sciences* (NDPLS) readers can readily come to grips with. The big story about this 253-page *discussion*, however, is that it presents an understandable and simple framework that advocates *embracing* the natural uncertainties of every human system, rather than steadfastly fighting the nonlinearity.

The authors have done such a fine job with the craft of presentation that several times while reading the text, I found myself lost in deep thought about my past-and-present personal organizational situations, which resonated and aligned precisely with their material concepts. *Note:* I hereby warn future readers of this book that such deep engagement with Eoyang and Holladay’s text can add considerably to reading time; one might need to reread two or three pages after becoming absorbed and then lost *into* the material.

Praise aside, the book is divided into three major parts, the first part -- “What causes uncertainty? What can you do about it?” -- is nearly half of the text and is what I would consider the essence of the book’s message. The second part -- “So What does Adaptive Action Look Like on the Ground?” -- supports the central ideas presented in the first section by sharing numerous stories of the ideas in real-world practice. The examples are all of successful implementations with the notable exception of the story about how the political advocacy group [Washington] DC Vote has not quite achieved its primary objective, but effectually serves as a good example of the cyclical nature of organizational dynamics and the Adaptive Action framework. The third section -- “Now What Will You Do?” -- takes the authors’ concepts down to the tactical level, perfect for organizational-change practitioners.

As highlighted in the book’s title, the term *Adaptive Action* refers to a

model of change for use in a world that self-organizes, as in any complex human system. The model involves repeatedly asking three simple questions: (a) What?, (b) So what? and (c) Now what? It is an iterative, cyclical procedure that mirrors the age-old process of data collection, analysis, and action. But, by combining Adaptive Action with Eoyang's (2001, 2004) CDE Model (Containers, Differences, and Exchange), one can engage with the fluidity of the self-organizing world in a structured manner that the authors and their disciplines have proven in over more than a decade of real-world practice.

Indeed, I have become a fan of the Adaptive Action Model. After reading this book, I have a palpable framework that can be used to better inform my own academic research into the nonlinear behavior dynamics during organizational post-merger integration (PMI). In my past research, investigating PMI has been mostly exploratory using static human-integration policies, but by incorporating Adaptive Action ideas into my PMI computer simulations the integration policies can now be dynamic. I can easily envision implementing the three Adaptive Action questions embedded within an abstracted implementation of the CDE Model to allow a virtual manager to respond to the changing human integration system, just as in the real-world. If Adaptive Action can be implemented in a computer program by writing a series of basic statements, surely any organizational-change practitioner can incorporate Adaptive Action into their practice without much ado. In short, a relaxing, weekend read of this book will likely serve to clarify and advance the reader's mental model of self-organizing human systems, and ultimately better inform research or practice.

A website dedicated to Adaptive Action (www.adaptiveaction.org) is managed by the authors' HSD Institute which can be a useful resource that includes a blog and workshop announcements. Moreover, for a direction to more background related to the complexity of the issues that Adaptive Action address, a NDPLS review of Glenda Eoyang's edited book *Voices from the Field: An Introduction to Human Systems Dynamics* (2003) is available (Haslett, 2005).

REFERENCES

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