

Questions from the Edge of Chaos

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When government officials, past and present, met with systems experts, funders, and civil society leaders at a recent Systems and Policy Roundtable as many new questions arose as answers were attempted.

We understand that the challenges we face as a human community in these times are a set of interconnected systems – environmental, economic, political, and social – that are near or over the edge of chaos. This unprecedented degree of interdependence requires actors from every sector and across national boundaries to be innovative, resilient, adaptive, and collaborative.

We know that living systems seek the best fit with their environment. So we are not surprised to learn that government actors, as well as those from other sectors, are exploring how to operate effectively in this landscape of complexity and urgency, where linear thinking does not suit a non-linear environment, where top-down, command-and-control methods do not work well in a networked world of distributed and de-centralized power; and where no one player by acting alone can ‘fix’ anything.

This exploration meets its own set of constraints: political and organizational culture, norms, and procedures in our institutions (governmental and international) are not necessarily conducive to navigating this new landscape. We have stove-piped agencies, an incentive structure that does not reward risk-taking or sharing credit, and a strong ‘us against them’ mentality deeply ingrained in our view of national and global relationships. And more.

How, then, can government re-vision its role and its methods of operating, given the need and also the constraints, to best fit with the new environment of global interdependence and failing systems we find ourselves in?

Some of the sub-questions around this core inquiry that arose from our day together included:

- How can government create conditions that would facilitate the emergence of new solutions? What are those conditions?
- How can government convene and connect actors from many sectors to catalyze innovation?
- How can government insure diversity of views to enable resilience and creativity?
- How can government learn from, integrate, and support the great surge of innovation occurring at the local and civil society levels, especially in the realms of green energy and sustainable agriculture?

- How can government build trust networks and support honest dialogues on critical issues to transcend the current divisiveness?
- How can government explore common patterns across different scales and dimensions to extract new learning?
- How can government recognize, initiate, and nourish effective networks, internally, externally, and in combination?
- How can government best utilize the knowledge and best practices of other disciplines and existing networks to craft the best-informed policies?
- How can government know, and show, that a systems approach is actually better – can we produce a ‘proof of concept?’

Of course, the responsibility is not just on the government. We also noted the importance of public education, training in systems thinking at all levels, and the roles of the media, the non-governmental community, and the funders. We are all engaged in this great, some would say evolutionary, shift – from a worldview of separateness to one where truly we are all in this together.

A study of complex systems tells us that the space near the edge of chaos is a rich one, for it shakes up old ways of thinking and doing and lets loose a surge of creative energy for finding new approaches and opportunities. As our climate, energy, food, water, security, and other systems approach that edge, we can be grateful that these questions are being asked, for it is in the asking that the answers we need can emerge; it is in the seeking that we discover the potential waiting to be born.