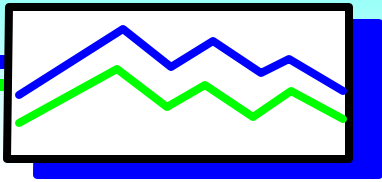


# **A Systems Approach to Organizational Learning**

**Steven E. Daniels  
Western Rural Development Center  
Utah State University  
sdaniels@ext.usu.edu**

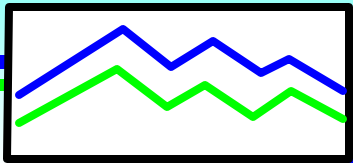
**Presented at “Organizational Learning: Adaptive Management  
for Salmon Conservation”  
Bellevue, WA. 3 December 2001**



# Two distinctions from Peter Senge

**Types of complexity**

**Types of teams**

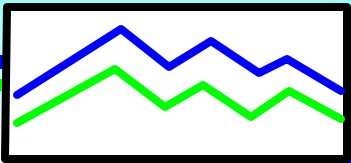


## Two types of complexity

**Detail complexity** emphasizes components;  
painstaking inventories

**Dynamic complexity** emphasizes  
connections and inter-relationships;  
anticipates unintended consequences

Both are important forms of understanding.



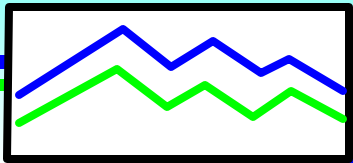
## Three types of teams

**Management teams** emphasize orderly flow of information, resources, and tasks.

**Crisis teams** emphasize rapid response to emerging conditions and deadlines.

**Learning teams** emphasize inquiry and exploration.

All are essential in a well-functioning organization.



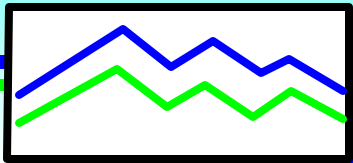
## So what is the point?

**I contend that:**

**understanding dynamic complexity is the  
*sine qua non* of salmon conservation;**

**understanding dynamic complexity requires  
learning teams; but**

**learning teams are rare in resource  
agencies.**



# Dynamic Complexity of Salmon Conservation

**Multiple Parties**

**Multiple Issues**

**Multiple Venues**

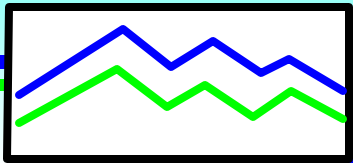
**Shared Decision Authority**

**Deeply Held Values**

**Technical Issues**

**Legal Requirements**

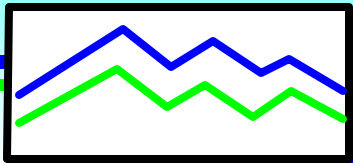
**Conflict Beneficiaries**



**Only learning teams can  
address dynamic complexity  
adequately**

**Any individual lacks the breadth and  
authority needed to succeed.**

**Neither management nor crisis  
teams exhibit the appropriate  
behaviors.**

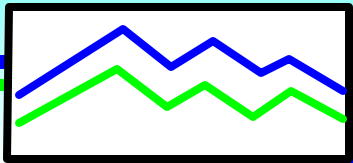


# **Learning teams are rare in natural resource agencies**

**Common team behaviors:  
disciplinary disengagement and  
“filemerge”**

**or**

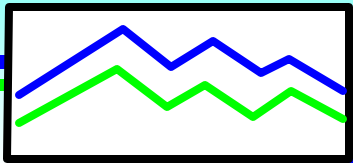
**disciplinary advocacy and  
arbitration**



# Frequency data regarding learning teams

67 mid-career resource professionals enrolled in NRI

	% Mgmt.	% Crisis	% Indiv. Learning	% Team Learning
Ave	48.7	28.2	14.9	9.2
A	90	3	5	2
B	20	70	5	5
C	10	10	50	30



# **Barriers to learning teams**

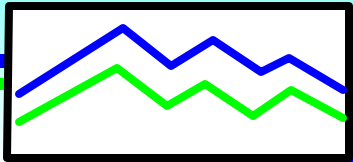
**Western intellectual traditions**

**Downsizing/busy-ness**

**Congressional/legislative incentives**

**Weberian organizational archetypes**

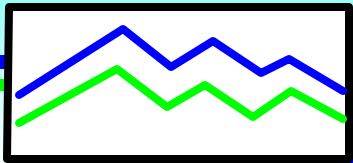
**Litigious environment**



## **In short...**

**We are afraid—at both the individual and corporate levels—to admit there are things we do not know.**

**But that is the first step to authentic learning.**



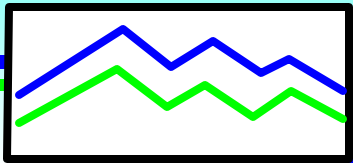
## **Chapter 9: What we don't know**

**Questions that baffle us.**

**Questions that keep us awake at  
night.**

**Inconsistencies in our data.**

**Questions that haven't even  
occurred to us.**



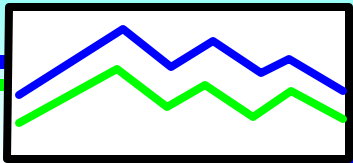
# Things to do...

**Recognize when learning is an essential outcome.  
Reconceptualize analysis/project teams as learning teams.**

**Take disclosure risks**

- **internally,**
- **in terms of processes, and**
- **in terms of content.**

**Train team leaders to facilitate inquiry processes.**



# Facilitating inquiry processes?

**Invoke concepts from:**

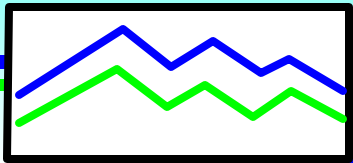
**Experiential adult learning**

**Learning preferences**

**Communication competence**

**Conflict management**

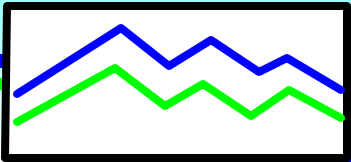
**Systems thinking**



## **So what might this look like?**

**Our projects in Collaborative Learning embody these learning team/systems thinking concepts.**

**Decisions affecting some 9 million acres have emerged through processes based upon Collaborative Learning principles.**



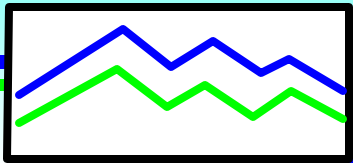
# Characteristics of Collaborative Learning

Encourages *systems thinking* rather than simply linear, cause-effect thinking.

Recognizes that *considerable learning* -- about science, issues, value differences -- needs to occur before improvements are possible.

Respects *traditional knowledge* as well as scientific expertise.

Features *communication and negotiation interaction* as the means through which learning and progress occur.



# Results from Collaborative Learning Applications

**Participants' understanding of the situation is broadened.**

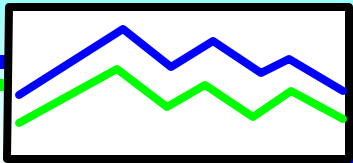
**Concerns are expressed and meaningfully discussed.**

**Improvements are developed and implemented.**

**Strategic behaviors persist.**

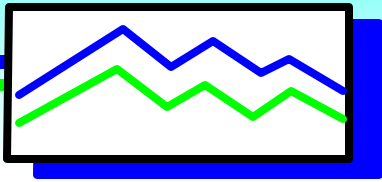
**Relationships improve.**

**Participants prefer collaboration to traditional public involvement methods.**



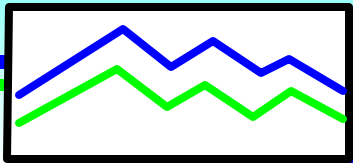
## A conclusion?

**The scarcity of learning teams in our natural resource agencies constrains our ability to address systems-level problems such as salmon conservation.**



## Conclusion, cont.

Learning teams will not make salmon conservation **easy**, but they may make it **possible**.



## To follow up...

**This presentation is available at:  
[extension.usu.edu/WRDC/salmon.pdf](http://extension.usu.edu/WRDC/salmon.pdf)**

**My e-mail is  
[sdaniels@ext.usu.edu](mailto:sdaniels@ext.usu.edu)**