Tool 22: Friends and Strangers

Aim of the tool

To playfully illustrate how small changes in rules can have a big impact on a complex adaptive system.

When to use it?

For example, in the Divergent phase, when perspectives on the issue at hand are broadening. Especially when discussing the nature of systemic change.

What is Friends and Strangers?

This game energises and also illustrates how a small change in a rule can have big effects on the dynamics of a complex adaptive system. It is therefore suitable when groups discuss how to design interventions in a complex environment, when linear ways of planning and managing are unsuccessful.

Participants (between 10–100) walk around in an open space, and have to move close to a 'friend' and remain far from a 'stranger'. A second round has a small change in the rule: people have to be in between their friend and the stranger.

Friends and Strangers - Step by step

Procedure for facilitators:

When all participants are standing, give the following instructions:

1) Find one person in the room who is your 'friend';
2) Find one person who is a 'stranger';
3) Don't let them know that you have selected them. Don't speak.

Round 1 starts with the following instruction: "Try to stand as close to your friend as possible, and as far from your stranger as possible". Allow participants to do this (2 minutes max).

Then, introduce round Round 2 by giving a new instruction: "Try to stand in between your friend and your stranger". Allow participants to do likewise (2 minutes max).

You will see that each round generates completely different patterns of the system. Only because one small rule has changed. It also illustrates how hard it is to predict the behaviour of complex adaptive systems. To get the most out of this game, it is important that the facilitator has some understanding of systemic change and complex adaptive systems, in order to lead the debriefing of the game. Section 4, Principle 1 of the MSP Guide provides a good introduction.

NB: This game is also known as 'Friends and Enemies'. In some cultures, many people don't like to use the word enemy in a group (even in games). Therefore, we use 'friends and strangers' instead.