



ATTRACTORS
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I met with a team last week to complete the first annual review of a strategic plan for information technology. The organization is over one hundred years old, and its many parts have done strategic business and technology planning in the past. Last year, however, marked their first effort to consider and document enterprise-wide strategic uses of technology. Recognizing that business and technology change quickly, the planning team recommended an annual review and revision cycle to ensure that the strategies and tactics remained relevant. As we completed this first annual review, I was reminded of many of the delights of self-organizing patterns in human systems.

Delight number 1. Many accomplishments of the past year were aligned with the strategic plan, even though they were not explicitly included in it. If we thought a plan was like a mechanical design, we might ignore or discount these rogue events. Because we expect self-organizing behaviors in human systems, we understand that the process articulated patterns, defined possibilities, and initiated conversations that could generate new opportunities for action beyond those explicitly outlined in the plan.

Delight number 2. In spite of our best efforts at continuity, the membership of the team changed drastically over the year. Of the original team, only half were present for the review and revision meeting. The others retired, changed jobs, or merged into other roles during the year. In addition to the veterans, the review team included new faces and perspectives resulting from other personal and organizational changes. Because of the changes in the team, the assumptions and conversations that shaped our work in 2004 were mostly forgotten, and new foundations had to be established before the work could even begin. Where is the delight in this self-organizing pattern, which a friend calls “meeting at a bus stop”? The original conversations were full of the accumulated frustration from years of un-strategic thinking. The fresh points of view established a new baseline for assessment and planning that might not have been accessible from those who remembered the ins and outs of last year’s talk.

Delight number 3. New structures give foundation for moving forward. Prigogine calls them “dissipative structures” because they replace disorder (entropy) with self-organized frameworks or patterns. The strategic plan established the conditions for new organizational and governance structures to emerge, including an Executive Systems Team, a Cross-Systems technical team, and a position for a Manager of IT Strategic Planning. As we considered revisions to the plan for the coming year, these structures were available to implement and establish accountability for new strategies and tactics in ways that were impossible just a short twelve months ago.

Delight number 4. Summary versions of the original plan made revision and communication efficient. The initial planning process had created a complex document to capture what the team saw as critical differences and issues to be addressed. Even though this document was long, it was already a boiled-down version of the wide-ranging conversations of the original planning team. To simplify communication after the plan was published, the complete plan was condensed into a summary form, with key points highlighted and detailed background excluded. During the year, the longer form was used for

implementation, while the shorter version supported communication and action on of high-level strategy. As we began the review and revision process, it became clear that the shorter, simpler document would be the better framework for our work because so much of the detailed descriptions were not relevant any more. The evolution of the document contributed to an efficient and effective adaptation of the strategies and tactics.

Delight number 5. People changed their minds. Over the course of the year, general skepticism and frustration were replaced with hope based on specific frustrations and clear options for action. Both veterans and new members of the team were able to identify specific issues and recommend specific tactics to move the organization toward its next phase of strategic action.

Delight number 6. New technological and organizational strategies and tactics have to be included to meet next year's challenges. The world continues to evolve while we focus on our plans and projects. Those self-organizing processes do not stop just because we are looking the other way. Periodically we have to climb up onto the balcony and look for patterns that are emerging beyond our own organizations. We also need to watch for surprises that warn us of patterns that may emerge even farther into the future.

Any point-in-time snapshot of this particular planning process might make these delights seem like signs of failure. If we were looking for a predetermined and predictable planning process, we would have been sorely disappointed. But we weren't expecting predictability, and neither were our clients. We all know that the world today is constantly changing in ways that are neither knowable nor controllable. Our most productive choices are to recognize the self-organizing processes, be prepared for what they bring, and make good use of the opportunities and delights that they create for us, our clients, and our organizations.

Our network of certified HSD professionals can help you imagine and implement change processes that work with the natural dynamics of your organization. Bring your organizational challenges to us! To find out how, contact Julia Wolter, Director of Operations, at jwolter@hdsinstitute.org.