



**ATTRACTORS  
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Have you heard the cliché, “If all you have is a hammer, all your problems look like nails?” Many organizational consultants live inside this paradigm every day. If they are great facilitators, they facilitate. If they can implement a Future Search, they and their clients search for futures. Trainers train; speakers speak; and evaluators evaluate.

So, what’s the matter with this approach, and what is an alternative?

Such hammer-based approaches lead consultants into interventions that fail far too often. A specific tool or technique defines the situation, rather than having the situation define the tool that will be most effective. Regardless of the current conditions, the consultant will provide a limited number of options for action, and changing the approach is usually not one of the options.

Even seeing the risks of a tool-based approach, I find myself sliding in that direction sometimes. Why? It is easier and more efficient to use my old familiar tools. Marketing is more effective when I can represent myself in terms of a concrete package of services rather than a collection of questions. Because I perform my core services well, I enjoy the projects and believe the client is getting greatest value. Clients like the security of a pre-planned and packaged program, and their costs can be reduced when I customize rather than invent to respond to their needs. These are serious benefits, not to be ignored as we develop projects to improve outcomes for clients.

At HSD Institute we have found an alternative that we believe captures the benefits and avoids the problems of tool-based organizational interventions. Our approach provides a theoretical foundation that supports flexibility and adaptive interventions.

When our consultants work from a coherent theory base rather than a set of tools and techniques, they can see and describe your situation creatively. They see things not in terms of the tools but in terms of how your reality compares to what is possible. When we understand your situation clearly, we select from a range of tools—or create new ones—to help you be more adaptive and effective.

Two specific examples demonstrate how a strong theory base supports flexible and practical solutions.

A city department came to HSD Institute looking for a structured strategic planning process. The leader was intent on setting clear goals, objectives, and strategic action plans to move the organization forward. We were all set to provide what was requested. In early conversations with the client, though, we saw evidence of internal conflict, turf battles, and functional silos. Our theory base indicates that there is no easy path from such a destructive locked-in pattern into a pattern that is locked in on shared outcomes. We suggested a series of emergent activities that disturbed the old patterns and then used more traditional approaches to establish new options for action.

A medical technology company wanted to bring together quality experts from around the world to build a network for continuous improvement. The client's view, and our first expectation, was that a free-flowing lightly structured exchange would meet the needs. As we collected and considered data, however, it became clear that lack of consistency and local variation were threatening the reliability of processes and policies across the company. Ultimately we recommended a structured training program that would ensure that each member of the network knew the basic expectations and procedures that would be shared by all. At some point in the future, when the critical control functions are well established, then we will help establish the conditions for formation of an emergent network.

Two different situations; two different contexts; two different needs; and two clearly different interventions designed to meet those needs. We were able to respond because we depend on our understanding of dynamics rather than on our expertise with specific tools.

If you would like to talk with us about how the perspectives of HSD can help you, please contact Julia Wolter, Director of Operations at [jwolter@hsdinstitute.org](mailto:jwolter@hsdinstitute.org).