



Theory Vs. Practice in Consulting Organizations

“In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.”

This quotation is sometimes attributed to Baseball Hall of Fame member Yogi Berra. There are actually several claimants, but the quote is almost certainly not a Yogi-ism.

It should be. Like many of the catcher's famous musings it is both pithy and paradoxical. It says so much by saying so little. In engineering, it has become a kind of kōan, a concept from Zen Buddhism designed to help students understand the unity of opposites.

So, are theory and practice simply unified opposites? Well, in theory yes, but in practice maybe not.

The practice of consulting

The distinction is an important one in consulting. Theory is learned. Practice is earned. Theory is thinking. Practice is doing. Practice is quickly measurable: you made the numbers or delivered the product on schedule. When theory is measured it is on a longer time scale, usually across companies.

All consultants promote both their learning and experience. In reality, consulting organizations exist on a continuum from

mostly theory-based to primarily practice-based. A research firm like Forrester Research is long on theory. A company like Marlborough Street Partners is an expert at practice. A large management consulting firm operate in multiple domains.

Theory is important in consulting because it indicates cross-organizational thinking. The best theoretical insights come from understanding what works or does not work across many clients.

Practice is important because it is the place that theory (or the lack thereof) is tested in the real world.

A good heuristic for determining where a particular consultant falls on the line is the job openings they have available. What they value in an applicant is what they exhibit as a firm.

What kind of theory and practice?

All consulting firms, even the largest, are specialized. You hire McKinsey to develop an international expansion strategy or advise on acquisition candidates. Accenture does strategy but focuses on the implementation of processes and technologies. Marlborough Street Partners focuses on strategy and process but specializes in execution.

Consulting firms also differ greatly on their planning horizon. Strategy firms focus on years and decades. Implementation companies focus on quarters and years. Marlborough Street Partners focuses on addressing immediate roadblocks under the guideline of a longer term strategy.

Consulting often comes down to inflection points. Sometimes, these milestones involve long-term solutions to strategic problems. Sometimes it is a new system that must be implemented to support growth. Often the inflection point is more specific: hiring new leadership, implementing a more efficient sales model, or getting a product out of the development queue and into the market.

The Sunday night test

Sunday night is the most dreaded time in business. It is the moment when the sales person prepares for the weekly conference call without enough deals in the pipeline. It is the time when the CEO creates the PowerPoint slide that says earnings are below projections.

It is when marketers fret about leads, development fesses up to schedule slips, human resources prepares for the layoff, and the venture capitalist gets ready to announce to his partners that the CEO of their best portfolio company just harassed an employee.

There is only one question on the test.

Who do you call on Sunday night? The consultant who understands the theory of the problem or the one who has sat in your chair and addressed the issue before? If you have to begin correcting the problem on Monday morning then you need a practice-focused consulting firm with the skills of Marlborough Street Partners. If there is time for committees, studies, and offsite retreats, then a theory-based consultant may be the right place to start.

Winning at business is a journey, not a destination. There will be many Sunday nights and Monday mornings. Inflection points come, and one way or the other, they go. The only guarantee is that there will be more of them, and if you need some help to work through them you need to find the right kind of consultant.

Give us a call some bleak Sunday night; no need to wait until Monday morning.

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