

PDCA aka Applied Common Sense

Lean Consulting



Why do people make 'Lean', seem so difficult. It isn't. The 'Holy Grail' for the success of Lean is found in the PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act) cycle first put forth by W. Edwards Deming to help rebuild Japan and its reputation for producing quality products that were 'export worthy'. PDCA is simply a logical, repeatable, and simple method to continuously improve ('kaizen' in Japanese). Even though there are tons of books out there about it, the fact is, we all practice these principles all day, every day without even realizing it. It's what we would otherwise just call, '*common sense.*'

I'll prove it to you. What was the very first semi-conscious thought you had when your alarm went off this morning? Be honest. Was it, *hit the snooze button! Fast.* And after 2-3 times swatting at the button didn't you finally conclude you had to get up? Am I right so far? As you began to become conscious, you started '*grasping the situation*' as it's referred to in Lean vernacular. This is simply collecting facts relative to the situation at hand. You finally decided to get up based on grasping those facts. You asked yourself questions like; *What time is it? What's the weather like? Where do I have to be today? How shall I dress? Do I have to take the kids to school? What will the traffic be like?* And the most important question of all, *Is the coffee on?*

From collecting those facts you started to formulate a 'plan' based on what we call, 'deciding needed action'. Think of all these facts being dumped into a funnel. What comes out the end is what will formulate your plan! That's it! All this was probably going on before you even got out of bed!

OK, so once you made your plan, you carried it out, right? That's what we call the 'do' phase. Maybe we should call it the 'DUH!' phase. You put together your outfit, got the kids up, made coffee, checked the traffic, etc. It's all common sense so far, isn't it? But things rarely go according to plan so we adjust throughout. Sometimes we even say '*time for Plan B*'. This is our way of acknowledging that sometimes things just don't work out as you planned them. You have to take a detour if there's a construction delay, but your destination hasn't changed. So even in the 'do' phase you have to monitor your results according to your plan. You'll need that information later.

When your day is done, don't you ask yourself '*what happened today?*' Without calling it so, this is the '*check*' part of the cycle. In the 'check' phase all you are really doing is collecting OBJECTIVE data. Mr. Spock loves this phase. Maybe you found a new short cut to work, a cool new restaurant. Maybe you were late for work. *How did that happen?*, you might ask. If you keep a Blackberry where you check off what you got done and move to the next day what you didn't, you're using a PDCA tool! The key thing here is to think about it as a judge would in court. Just the facts!

With me so far? OK, here's where it gets interesting. In the above 'check' step you are simply figuring out what exactly happened. You are comparing actual results to your plan. But now, in the 'act' phase, you want to ask yourself '*so what?*' You will standardize the positive results and problem-solve the gaps. Let's say you went to a meeting and were asked for data you didn't have, you probably said (hopefully to yourself), '*Note to self... next time bring data!*' Or if it went really, really bad, you might say, '*Time to dust off my resume.*' By the way, some renditions of

PDCA call this the 'study or adjust' phase so as not to confuse it with the 'do' phase. I prefer to think of it as the '*react*' phase. Think about it. Why collect data in the first place if you don't intend to do anything about it? Why get on the scale every morning, scream bloody murder and swear like a sailor if you're not dieting, exercising, or doing something to promote weight loss. Unless you believe in the fat fairy, chances are nothing good happened during the night. But, if you are watching your calories, etc., then you DO want to see what the results were!

So if you had a salad for dinner last night instead of your usual mountain of pasta, you'll want to see what results you may have achieved. So the 'act, adjust, study' step in the cycle is where you LEARN! PDCA is not a 2-dimensional disc as much as it is a slinky where you spiral up with each cycle. Lots of people and companies do a good job at PDC but a poor job at A. Many of my clients also have a PD 'CYA' system in place but that's a blog for another day.

Here's the big finish. If PDCA is the Holy Grail, then 'A' is the holiest of the holy! With deliberate, systematic 'post-mortems' at the end of your cycle, you'll know what and how to improve. The best part is, it allows you to FAIL! Think about it. If you have solid learning routines in place, like a net under a trapeze artist, you can take risks and innovate. If not, you better do it right the first time!

Is any of this mysterious? Difficult to comprehend? Complicated? I hope you say '*no, this is easy. I can do this*'. In the end, PDCA is no more than 'applied common sense'. TIP: Consultants can help. Just make sure that they don't try to make it more complicated than it is. If it hurts your head, it's not being done right. Find somebody else.

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