

The Plan, Do, Check, Act Personality

Why is it so hard to follow this simple cycle?

W Edwards Deming called it the Shewhart cycle, giving credit to its inventor, Walter A. Shewhart. The Japanese have always called it the Deming cycle in honor of the contributions Deming made to Japan's quality improvement efforts over many years. Some people simply call it the PDCA—plan, do, check, act—cycle.

Regardless of its name, the idea is well-known to process improvement engineers, quality professionals, quality improvement teams and others involved in continuous improvement efforts. The concept is simple to teach and understand: Plan the work, carry out the plan, check on the result and then take action to improve performance. Repeat the cycle to improve continuously. The PDCA cycle is now included in section 0.2 of the ISO 9001:2000 standard.



It's described in the context of business process management as follows:

- **Plan.** Establish the objectives and processes necessary to deliver results in accordance with customer requirements and the organization's policies.
- **Do.** Implement the processes.
- **Check.** Monitor and measure processes and product against policies, objectives, and requirements, and report the results.
- **Act.** Take action to continually improve process performance.

Despite the simplicity and power of the approach, we've all seen too many cases characterized by plan, plan, plan and plan some more. Or, the approach might be to do, do, do and do some more with no useful balance being reached. Is there something about human nature that makes this so difficult? As it turns out, there is.

Personality refers to the psychological qualities that bring continuity to an individual's behavior in different situations. Personality traits are the stable character-

istics that guide a person's thoughts and actions under various conditions. Many psychological theories of personality describe the distinction between extroverts and introverts. Extroverts are characterized by their inclination to action. They are described as energetic, bold, active, daring and vigorous. Introverts are characterized by their preference for analysis. They are described as shy, quiet, reserved, inhibited, withdrawn, timid, and bashful. Each of us has a personality type that's predominately either extroverted or introverted. Although we're responsible for our own actions, by the time we reach adulthood, it's no easier to change these personality traits than it is to change our eye color.

Extroverts have the inclination to do, do and do. Introverts are inclined to plan, plan and plan. Because these tendencies are intrinsic personality traits, people of one personality type can never fully appreciate what motivates the other. Frustration quickly results.

It gets even uglier. Because introverts see analysis as an obvious, natural and necessary activity, they may not give it a second thought. They may assume the value of planning and other analysis is entirely obvious to others. They're baffled when extroverts skip over the investigation work that seems so essential and natural to them. Similarly, extroverts are puzzled when the introverts take so long to get going. It can become like an argument between a couch potato and a marathoner over whose leisure activity makes more sense. They can easily dismiss the other person by thinking, "He just doesn't get it."

It's easy to determine whether you're an introvert or an extrovert. Read each of the following eight statements and decide if you agree or disagree:

1. I generate a lot of enthusiasm.
2. I have an assertive personality.
3. I'm sometimes shy and inhibited.
4. I'm full of energy.
5. I'm reserved.
6. I'm outgoing and sociable.
7. I tend to be quiet.

8. I'm talkative.

Extroverts tend to agree with statements 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8. Introverts tend to agree with 3, 5 and 7. Asking someone who knows you well to decide which statements describe you can provide additional verification.

The natural reaction of introverts is to dismiss their activity-prone colleagues with a disparaging complaint about "ready, fire, aim again" as they continue their planning. Extroverts are inclined to vent their frustrations and blame their thoughtful colleagues for the "paralysis of analysis" while they go off and do something. People of each personality type can be more helpful and effective by avoiding these emotional responses.

So what can be done? First, it's helpful to recognize that each of these biases are inherent and are not the result of malicious intent, laziness, ignorance or carelessness. Second, it may be useful to ensure some introverts in the group are assigned to planning and checking activities and some extroverts to doing and acting activities. It may be beneficial to repeat the mantra "analysis precedes action." Remind the introverts that the very best analysis has no effect until it results in action. Remind the extroverts that hasty action based on rumor, first impressions, impatience and superficial symptoms (often called tampering) can do more harm than good.

Finally, remind team leaders that leadership requires leveraging the talents, points of view, skills and experience of all of the personalities on the team. Effective team effort results from the skillful integration of the strengths each person brings to the team.

About the author

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