

PDCA and Effective Leadership Development

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Last week, I shared that the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) considers three aspects when evaluating the effectiveness of any leadership development effort: assessment, challenge, and support. This information comes from their Handbook of Leadership Development. (Please look for the article "Effective Development" at <http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.html>)

I advocate ongoing leadership development processes, not only one-time events (like training classes). Let's look at how the elements of assessment, challenge, and support are embodied in extended leadership development efforts.

First, let's look at a simple model that describes repetitive systems. A Bell Laboratories statistician named Walter A. Shewhart developed the model back in 1939. Ten years later, W. Edwards Deming, a U.S. State Department employee and student of Shewhart, took the model to Japan as he helped rebuild that country's economy after World War II.

Today this continuous improvement process is widely known as the PDCA cycle. The four sequential steps are **PLAN-DO-CHECK-ADJUST**. This iterative model guides the leadership development process I recommend and embodies the CCL criteria of assessment, challenge, and support.

PLAN. I use a commercially available assessment tool to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the individual in 67 attributes of leadership. The individual, his or her boss, and I (along with the Human Resource Manager when desired), evaluate the gaps between present skills and the skills needed in anticipated future responsibilities. Two or three focus areas are selected for building a year-long development plan.

The boss and HR Manager help identify an appropriate level of challenge, based on the real needs of the business and the capabilities of the individual. By being involved at the planning stages, these individuals will likely be supportive as the individual implements the plan.

DO. The execution of the plan occurs throughout the year. Sometimes the leadership development activities (like reading a book, attending a class, interviewing an expert, or conducting an experiment) are sandwiched in between "real work" activities. More often, the developmental activity is executed while doing the person's real work (like turning around a struggling department). Having good support often gives the confidence required to take on more challenging assignments.

CHECK. This is the evaluative step, where results of the developmental efforts are compared to the expectations generated in the planning stage. I usually encourage another assessment be conducted about nine months to a year after the initial self-assessment. This time, I encourage the assessment be done by others who know the individual well, such as the boss, direct report(s), customer(s), peer(s), and/or supplier(s). These individuals often have a quite different perception of the leader's strengths and limitations. A good facilitator of the feedback process ensures that the assessment content is delivered with the proper balance of truthfulness and caring.

ADJUST. This is the time for reflection and for putting learnings about the individual into a broader context. New focus areas for growth are chosen, made with the support of the boss and the HR professional. The needs of the organization and the interests of the individual should be considered. Can the individual tolerate more challenging assignments in the coming year, stimulating more growth and improvement?

The process repeats itself on approximately an annual basis. The individual should review progress monthly with the boss (or at least quarterly), both for accountability and support.

My experience with this kind of iterative, ongoing development process is that it greatly leverages improved results throughout the organization. The high level of assessment, challenge, and support yields rapid growth of leadership skills, a healthier culture for the organization, and more effective achievement of the organization's mission.