

See – Plan – Do – Check – Fix

A Refresher on Continuous Improvement

Michael Zigarelli



A school sees a jump in its SAT scores and in graduation rates, and at the same time, a decrease in delinquency.

A business introduces a novel product, penetrating a new market segment and substantially increasing its profitability.

A coach takes a team from a mediocre record to the conference championship, with essentially the same players as last year.

A pastor and church board celebrate a significant increase in Sunday attendance and a doubling of the youth group.

A middle-aged man finally makes progress losing weight and has kept it off for a year.

A couple begins to enjoy a closer, more fulfilling marriage. Their kids are becoming better behaved as well.

The Process for Getting Better Results

What do these scenarios have in common? Each is a result of the same continuous improvement process, a time-honored approach that traces its roots to W. Edwards Deming and Peter Drucker, arguably the best management thinkers of the 20th century. It's an approach that will pay dividends for you as well, both personally and professionally.

The process may seem so obvious, though, that at first glance it's a bit disappointing. Much of it appears to be common sense. But for various reasons, it's too seldom common practice. So here's a refresher of the model you probably learned in business school: See-Plan-Do-Check-Fix.

These are five disciplines — five habits — each equally important. With all of them you have meaningful change; with four of them, you probably don't.



Step One is to **see** the future—where you want to go and what’s in the way. Gain a clear vision for the possible, for genuine success, for your aspiration or calling. Step Two is to create a workable **plan** to get there, a plan that includes appropriate goals and a wise strategy to achieve them. Step Three, quite logically, is to execute the plan. **Do** it and do it with zeal. Don’t let anything get in your way. Step Four is to **check** your progress regularly to ensure that you’re on track toward the goals. And Step Five, have the courage to **fix** what’s not working. You’ve identified a gap between the goal and the results; now close that gap, despite the opposition and despite your paucity of resources.

Indeed, the model is straightforward. The implementation is not. So let’s look at each element, as well as what’s in the way of doing this right.

First, though, let me suggest how you can get more out of this article. Pick one or two things in your life that you’d like to see improved—a relationship, your career, your physical condition, the number of customers you have, the quality of your product or service, a nonprofit organization you care about. Pick something challenging, to really test this process. Then, as you read, connect the dots between these ideas and your situation. See for yourself how you might achieve permanently better results.

See

Pastor Paul leans back in his office chair and rubs his eyes. He's got a lot going on, a schedule that has long undermined his leadership. Paul's church has been stagnant for a decade—same people, same mundane programs and services, same petty squabbles and frustrating roadblocks to progress year after year. He's also Board Chair of the school that the church started forty years ago. But the steadily dwindling enrollment makes him wonder whether the school is even sustainable. On the home front, his marriage is okay—it's probably a B minus or so—and he has good kids, though deep down he knows that he could be leading them better.

Shaking off his brief reflection, Paul turns back to the more urgent task at hand, figuring out what to say this coming Sunday. These other issues, as usual, will just have to wait.

The Outcome: A clear and exciting vision for what's possible.

The Overview: Vision is one of a leader's most important attributes. With it, there's hope of making real progress. Without it, the organization meanders or even backslides.

As a husband, Paul needs to have a clear vision for what a healthy marriage looks like. Otherwise he and his wife are less likely to get there. As a father, he needs to have a vision for who his children should be when they leave the nest. Then he can make better choices to keep them on that path. As a leader of two vital organizations, he needs to have a vision for what they'll look like in five to ten years, and for how they can keep adding value to people's lives. Then he can build toward that future. And as a Christian, he needs to have a vision for God's calling on his life. Then and only then can he pursue it in earnest.

“It is not enough to do your best; you must know what to do and then do your best.”

W. Edwards Deming

“If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.”

Lewis Carroll
(as spoken by the Cheshire Cat in
Alice in Wonderland)

This is axiomatic: If we have the vision—if we “see”—we’re in a position to move in the right direction and bring others along with us. If we don’t have the vision, we only make progress by chance or by providence.

Vision-casting is not done in vacuum, though, and it’s not done overnight. Consider a business or a nonprofit like a school or a church. Each benefits from a *team* of leaders who invest the time and resources to analyze the external environment (the competition, the economy, the customer needs and motivations, the industry and so on) as well as the internal environment (the organization’s strengths and weaknesses, for example) as antecedents to vision-casting. Collectively, this team develops an achievable vision—one that comports with the realities of the marketplace and with their own capacity.

Similarly, in a household, the vision for the marriage and for the family is best done in *partnership* with one’s spouse, rather than handed down by fiat. We get better ideas when we work collaboratively, and we get more buy-in, too. That doesn’t mean abdicating leadership; it simply means sharing it for a time.

In other areas of life—the advancement of health or career or spiritual growth, for instance—we might be able to best identify an attainable, energizing vision *in conjunction* with wise friends or specialists. Humility is the key here. With the proper disposition, we can learn from others what long-term targets might be ideal for us.

Overall, and in all things, we “see” clearly by relying on God to reveal His will to us, through Scripture and circumstances and spiritually-mature friends. Insofar as we can discern it, God’s vision ought to be our vision.

The Obstacles: What’s in the way of seeing the best future? Lots of things, but let me just mention three. Impatience is a major hindrance, especially for driven people. An incisive vision seldom arrives on our timetable, but if we force it, we risk wasting a lot more time changing course later on. So take the time to do this right. When it comes to vision-casting, “fast” is often the enemy of “great.”

Time may be a scarce commodity, though, as it is in Pastor Paul’s case. This is a second major obstacle to discovering the best future. Over-extension eclipses vision, since we’re too busy thinking about today to think about five years from now.

Ego, however, may be the biggest stumbling block of all—our prideful perception that we know precisely what must be done and where we need to go. That’s a common trap, since we listen neither for God’s voice nor the voice of anyone else who can help us. Humility, again, is the antidote and the entire foundation of effective leadership, so if you find yourself developing a vision alone, stop. That’s a major red flag. It’s time to seek advice.

Plan

At the annual denomination conference, often a profoundly uninspiring weekend for Pastor Paul, he's suddenly intrigued by what might be a breakthrough idea. A speaker whose church is thriving implores the audience to "Be the best in your community at something. Pursue excellence, produce real quality, don't tolerate mediocrity. Steward well what God has entrusted to you. Turn the five talents into ten and then into one hundred!"

The message resonated with Paul. "Maybe this is the core problem," he thought. "Complacency. We settle for ordinary when we should be extraordinary. We're merely making our budget when we could be making a difference."

Excellence. Quality. It's an exciting prospect for him, one that could breathe new life into both his church and his school. Maybe even his family. But now what does he do with it? How can he make this fresh vision a reality?

The Outcome: The mission, the overarching goals, and a pragmatic strategy to achieve them.

The Overview: Many of us have practiced "planning" since the days when we were building block cities or preparing tea parties for stuffed animals. So what's to explain here?

On one level, not a lot: Create some goals, select a pathway to achieve them, move on to execution.

However, years after we've put away the blocks and donated the tea set, things are more challenging. At age three, we simply start over when our tower falls down. And stuffed animals always do what they're told (except, perhaps, in Narnia). But at age 43, you have to build it right the first time—and some of the animals you work with have both convictions and claws.

So here's the abridged version of Planning 101: mission, goals, strategy. The mission is the central purpose of the organization (or the project or the team or your life or whatever you're seeking to change). It's why the whole endeavor exists and, importantly, it identifies our major goals.

**"A goal properly set is
halfway reached."**

Abraham Lincoln

**"A goal without a plan
is just a wish."**

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The Girl Scouts mission, for example, is to “build girls of courage, confidence and character, who make the world a better place.” That turns out to be a fantastic tool for getting the right things done and for avoiding tempting distractions. Written in this way, the Scouts’ mission focuses them, quite obviously, on four primary goals. Then, having narrowed their purpose to these four, they can develop an efficient strategy, an approach to building courage, confidence, character, and a better world.

The point? The cornerstone of the planning process is to define your mission. Then use it to clarify your goals and to filter what you’ll do from what you won’t do. That applies equally to a company, a nonprofit, a sports team, a music group, a family, or any other organization. Even on an individual level, the importance of “defining one’s purpose” is so powerful that it elevated the book *The Purpose-Driven Life* to be the bestselling book in history, aside from the Bible itself. So begin at the beginning.

Returning to Pastor Paul, then, for him to make the “quality” vision a reality requires planning and it may even mean re-conceptualizing the entire purpose of his church and school. If he learns how to craft that new mission wisely—that is, so it plainly implies the non-negotiable goals they must pursue—he’ll be well on his way.

The Obstacles: Leaders, especially visionary or passionate ones, are notorious for ignoring the time-consuming work of planning. For many it seems superfluous. They’re far more prone to scribbling down some targets on a lunch napkin than they are to formalizing the process. In doing so, they risk some serious misalignment, much wasted effort, and lots of rework later on.

In other environments, the major obstacle is people, in particular those who have a vested interest in the status quo. Changing the mission and goals changes their world, possibly depriving them of control. Be patient with these folks, but be shrewd as well. They’re far less tame than those stuffed animals.

Do

Paul’s new mission and goals insist on quality in everything that’s done, and his strategy—his proposed way to get there—is for the church and the school to “simplify,” to become more “focused.” Both organizations, he thinks, are trying to do too much with their limited resources, stretching them too thinly and breeding mediocrity. The alternative, developed after long and sometimes contentious deliberations with his leadership teams, is to cut away programs that aren’t adding much value. They will no longer try to be all things to all people, but instead, focus on doing fewer things with more excellence.

He's even considering using this approach at home, since the simplicity principle seems to apply there too. "Busyness and hurry are stealing our quality time as a family," he lamented to his wife, acknowledging some culpability for the problem. "I'd like to talk about making some fundamental changes, before it's too late."

Back at the office, he's again pensive and anxious. "These are great ideas," he thinks to himself. "Great plans. Now, if we can only make them happen."

The Outcome: Results. Ideally, goal achievement.

The Overview: Some years ago, *Fortune Magazine* undertook the audacious task of researching "Why CEOs Fail." They looked at dozens of top executive failures—managers who had been pushed out of their job, whose companies were swallowed up by others, or who "left a company that had simply lost its way."

Their conclusion? Although many factors can contribute to a leader's downfall, one stands out. It's not their intelligence, their dedication, their vision or their vision. Rather, "[m]ost unsuccessful CEOs stumble because of one fatal shortcoming ... It's bad execution. As simple as that: not getting things done, being indecisive, not delivering on commitments." Then they punctuated their confidence in the research with: "The results are beyond doubt."

Execution (or "implementation" or simply "doing what you planned to do") is elusive, even to some of the highest paid managers in the world. Perhaps this explains, at least in part, the phenomenal success of the back-to-basics book *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*. In some environments, it's "execute or be executed." In others, like where Pastor Paul works, it's a little less dramatic, more like "execute or else."

Or else what? Or else mediocrity. Patchy performance. Under-served constituencies. Poor stewardship.

You can have a wise and inspiring vision, a well-crafted mission statement, aligned goals and an elaborate strategic plan to achieve them, but if you don't get the job done, none

"The value of an idea lies in using it."

Thomas Edison

"Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked. Leadership is defined by results, not attributes."

Peter Drucker

of that matters. That may be why Peter Drucker's penetrating wisdom connects with so many of us: ultimately "leadership is defined by results."

Pastor Paul, therefore, and every other leader who's serious about change, must lead in a way that causes people to follow. There are countless, scientifically-tested leadership methods from which he can choose, many that comport with Biblical guidelines and some that are, in fact, exegeted directly from Scripture. The Appendix to this article provides a brief bibliography. One thing should be obvious, though: Executing the plan will require Paul to be a persuader, a salesman, an energetic cheerleader for change. Leadership that gets results means making the pursuit of those results a full-time job. To succeed, we may need the same evangelistic zeal for the vision that Pastor Paul's namesake had in the New Testament.

The Obstacles: Looking at the *Fortune* study, as well as similar research published in places like *Harvard Business Review* and *Forbes*, we see plenty of obstacles to execution, among them: not setting proper expectations, failure to be decisive, excusing poor performance, not creating consequences, aloofness, few measures of progress, eagerness to please and to be liked, risk-aversion, poor influence skills, not finding good people or not putting them in the right roles, overconfidence in one's own abilities, naively assuming that people will follow, and under-estimating the forces working against us.

Condensing the dizzying list, much of this boils down to three drivers of leadership failure: lack of humility, poor people skills, and inattention to results. Or, stated positively, to execute with excellence, a leader is well-advised to personify humility (making this about the organization rather than himself or herself), to nurture and empower people, and habitually attend to (i.e., steward) the outcomes. And Pastor Paul is in luck—all three happen to be Christian virtues.

Check

This was the hard part, at least for a relational guy like Paul whose strengths were people skills, community-building and conflict avoidance. The new "focus" and "quality" initiatives might be working, and he had some anecdotal evidence to indicate as much, but then again, how would he really know? Besides that uncertainty, he felt increasing pressure at the church and at the school to restore what he had eliminated in the name of simplicity.

It's one thing to set some goals and work hard toward them, it's quite another to know whether you're achieving them, and it's still another to have everyone around you

moving in the same direction. Is there really a way, Paul wondered, to make all that happen?

The Outcome: A set of measures that (1) identify gaps between goals and results and (2) produce new behaviors because they publicly communicate what really matters.

The Overview: To fly a plane properly, a pilot needs an instrument panel. To operate a car, we check our dashboard regularly. To manage a sports team, coaches review statistics that track team and individual performance. To know if our diet is working, we step on a scale each day. To advance a business, we look at balance sheets and income statements and production quotas and sales numbers and a hundred other metrics.

The concept is easy to grasp, because we use it in everyday life: Track your progress. Set up your goals in a way that's measureable and then do the hard, sometimes tedious, sometimes uncomfortable work of actually measuring those goals. As such, we can see more clearly the performance gaps.

Continuous improvement is inherently about fixing problems, but we can't fix what we don't know is broken. A "scorecard" or "dashboard" (or whatever other metaphor you might want to use) is the tool you need here. Set the target, shoot for the target, evaluate whether you hit the target. Then, as we'll see in a minute, if you missed the target, figure out how to get closer to it the next time. As Henry Ford said, "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently."

There's another reason for tracking progress, as Pastor Paul is sensing: "what gets measured is what gets done." In other words, people attend to those behaviors that are observed and publicly disclosed. They begin to understand that the leadership is indeed serious about the goal, so perhaps they should be as well.

This sort of accountability has a way of powerfully and permanently modifying behavior. But without it, as might be the case in Paul's church and school (and even in his home), people may attend to their own agenda more than to the leader's agenda. They may even *push* that personal agenda, as Paul is experiencing. Whether in your professional or personal life, or anywhere else where you have leadership responsibility, make a habit of evaluating how things are going. As another classic adage says, "it's hard to manage what you don't measure."

"Know thyself"

Socrates

"What gets measured
is what gets done"

Management Adage
(original author unknown)

The Obstacles: Sometimes goals do not lend themselves well to quantitative measure. Consider character development or employee morale or teaching effectiveness or customer perception. Such things are at best intangible, lending themselves only to crude estimates. Other times the obstacle is resources. It may require lots of time and money to generate valid measures.

But these hindrances are dwarfed by the 800-pound gorilla who will mercilessly stomp your progress: *fear*, especially your own.

Measuring results potentially reveals our inadequacy: we see where we've failed. Beyond that, when we measure we're more-or-less obligated to do something with that information. Once we ask our wife (or employees or customers) "how am I doing as a husband (or as a boss or as a service provider)?" we've created an expectation that we'll change. And that may be arduous. Safer not to ask—not to "check"—than to ask and then have to adjust.

Of course, that's a major reason for the stagnation in marriages, ministries, and major corporations alike. The root problem is not a scarcity of metrics or resources, but a scarcity of leadership *courage*. If you're not properly evaluating the goals, you might want to ask whether the primary obstacle is really you.

Fix

Any delusion that Pastor Paul had about rapid or sweeping changes died quickly. The status quo is a powerful enemy, with handmaidens everywhere. But he pressed on, relentlessly and effervescently communicating his vision for a brighter future.

As a result, that vision of "quality" and "focus"—of uncompromising stewardship of the church and the school—was getting some traction. The metrics had helped people see what was working and what wasn't, and they inspired some key people to get on board with the initiative. Now it was time to take the next big step, a bold one: making the painful adjustments implied by the measures.

This time it would be more controversial than were his lofty goals and modest program changes. As his dashboard revealed, "fixing the problems" necessitated restructuring and personnel replacements, which would no doubt anger some valuable donors in the process. Undaunted, he told a friend that "occasionally a revival starts not by getting new people in, but by getting some of the old people out."

The Outcome: Essential improvements.

The Overview: You set the goal, you pursued the goal, you made progress but missed the goal. As the longstanding Confucian wisdom suggests, the goal may not be the problem. Once you're sure of that, dive in to make the necessary adjustments.

Conceptually, this is obvious, especially for the pragmatists among us: Identify a problem, solve the problem. However, in practice, leaders often stumble here, taking down with them any hope of continuous improvement.

For one thing, in their haste they misdiagnose. Remember, measuring a result does not mean you know its cause.

But curiously, many go charging ahead anyway, armed with all sorts of alleged panaceas.

Don't let that be you. One of Drucker's most astute lines was this: "There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all." Slow down and properly diagnose the problem before you try to solve it.

This tends to be more science than art. We can typically gather enough data to sort out what's really going on. But after that, art may trump science—in particular, the art of influence. Just as valid measures don't guarantee that we'll know what to do, knowing what to do doesn't mean that we'll be able to do it.

Sometimes it's resource limitations that confound us, sometimes it's cultural constraints. In Pastor Paul's case, even if he needs to make some long-overdue personnel changes, impediments like policy or culture or the law may stand in the way. Or it may be even harder than that. Perhaps the person who needs to be removed is a close friend of his wife. Perhaps it's some wealthy but intractable church board members, or a popular but ineffective school principal. Clearly diagnosis is not enough.

Stand firm. Continuous improvement is ultimately about making the tough choices to achieve that improvement. It values advancement over comfort, the future over the past, getting on over getting along, and as such, it takes guts. Be courageous, anticipate

“When it is obvious that the goals cannot be reached, don't adjust the goals. Adjust the action steps.”

Confucius

“Watch the little things; a small leak will sink a great ship.”

Benjamin Franklin

considerable opposition, and prepare yourself for it. Here's a rule of thumb: if you think you're pursuing meaningful change but you're not angering anyone in the process, you may want to question whether anything is really changing.

The Obstacles: These are inherent in what we've just said. And they're formidable, which is why enduring change is so rare.

Whether it's the challenge of diagnosing the actual problem, or the lack of resources to effectively solve the problem, or not having the authority to make the necessary changes, or simply being too pusillanimous to do what it takes, or a million other potential hurdles, *focus on what is controllable*—the obstacles within you. Set aside the pride of casually assuming you have all the answers and get some advice. Set aside fear of people and fear of change and trust God. And set aside any rationalizations that you don't have the time for all this. If it's important, find the time; if it's not, then drop the goal altogether and attend to something that actually does matters.

Continuous Improvement, A Way of Life

As the term implies, and as the graphic on page 2 depicts, continuous improvement is an ongoing process. It doesn't end with some sort of "fix," no matter how well-conceived, but instead brings us back to the discipline of scanning the environment to "see" further opportunities.

Think about it as a way of life—an exceptional approach to work, to business, to ministry, to education, to scientific inquiry, to military prowess, to athletic ability, even to relationships and personal development. We are not seeking perfection, as Kim Collins wisely advises. That is almost always unattainable. Instead, we are making a habit of learning, striving to get better and better.

“Strive for continuous improvement instead of perfection.”

Kim Collins,
world champion sprinter

That's pretty good advice. It turns out to be pretty good theology as well. Whether it's doubling the Master's investment (Matthew 25:14-28), or running all the way through the finish line of life (e.g., Hebrews 12:1, Philippians 3:14), or the call to lifelong character development (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Galatians 5), or simply living “to

please God ... more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1), the Judeo-Christian scriptures are consistent in their counsel: *strive*.

Strive for progress. Don't be idle or complacent; don't languish in your comfort zone or settle for “good enough.” Instead, be intentional and steadfast about growth, about stewardship, about enduring transformation. In faith, pursue continuous improvement—a striving for excellence—in everything you do.

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APPENDIX

Some Leadership Resources

Ken Blanchard, *The One Minute Manager*

Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*

Robert Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*

Jim Collins, *Good to Great*

W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis*

Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive*

Peter Drucker, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*

James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*

From an intentionally-Christian worldview:

Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus*

Max DePree, *Leadership is an Art*

Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*

Michael Zigarelli, *Influencing Like Jesus and Management by Proverbs*