

MAKING IMPROVEMENT CONTINUOUS

During a recent project, a colleague asked why our client, a large public sector organization facing restrictive Federal mandates and rising costs, embarked upon their resource-intensive focus on continuous improvement. "Compliance and cost containment weren't enough," answered the CEO, "We seek every chance to improve because we *have to*—it is a matter of survival."

Another client launched improvements because of the waste and confusion caused by inefficient processes. A non-profit Executive Director reasoned, "I finally have the brightest, most hard-working team I've worked with—and I want to keep them." A mid-career manager told me that having decided to stay in the Federal system, she was determined to help her agency be a place where she and others would flourish.

Once these leaders decided to make continuous improvement a central feature of their business, how did they start? A simple framework that helps leaders to explain, exemplify and promote continuous improvement is called the PDCA cycle: **Plan, Do, Check, Adjust.**

Plan. When people in organizations seek improvement in everything from internal processes to product or services, disciplined reflection is the essence of planning: What is working and why? What would be ideal? What are the gaps? Who are our customers? What do we do best? A doctor asking such questions of his health care organization discovered long patient wait times. Another client's staff told him that they didn't feel adequately informed about emerging programs; as a result, they constantly scrambled to react. These "ah-ha" moments mark opportunities to plan a change.

Do. Some of the keys to successful "doing" include providing timely information about impending changes and providing skill-building to those who must do things differently. In a large organization *ReVisions* helped to re-organize, my partner and I are now providing all leadership teams with training in PDCA cycles, annual planning, team accountability and system interdependence.

Check and Adjust. The "check" in PDCA involves information gathering as well as study and reflection. One of my clients devotes the annual all-company retreat to reflecting upon key business processes such as budgeting, strategic planning and business unit coordination. Then they identify areas needing adjustment. If, when you are at the beginning of a PDCA cycle doing planning, you set measurable outcomes and mechanisms for monitoring these outcomes, then in the checking phase you have objective ways to compare performance against targets.

As I complete improvement projects, I document the process, results and remaining gaps. Such documentation provides a road map for moving into the next PDCA cycle. Year after year, winners of the Malcolm Baldrige award prove that improvements go deeper and grow more focused in repeated PDCA cycles. The yields are excellent performance and a well-earned sense of teamwork.

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Clients on the continuous improvement path

- Stone Environmental, Inc., Montpelier, VT
- USDA Forest Service, Green Mt Finger Lakes National Forest, VT and NY
- Champlain Valley Area Health Education Center, St Albans, VT
- NH School District 34
- Addison County Transit Resources, VT
- VT Alliance for Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (VACCRRRA)
- Umbrella, Inc., St. Johnsbury, VT

Whole systems change

In 2003 *ReVisions* also assisted with improvement projects *pro bono*

- Human Resources expert on an assessment team for the Vermont Council for Quality. VCQ uses the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence to assist organizations that are improving every aspect of business performance
- Logistics facilitation team member for VT Agency of Human Services whole-system conference to seek ways of serving clients better