

THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING? IT'S IN THE “STUDY”

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“Reflection is the beginning, not the end, of learning.”

Do you ever find yourself in the ongoing cycle of planning and execution? If so, you aren't alone. Many get stuck on this endless hamster wheel that is intended to drive results, encourage productivity, and help individuals and organizations accomplish goals ... and yet, this cycle is exhausting and, needless to say, doesn't position your team or organization for the most important learning to happen.

Learning is the breeding ground for innovation, collaboration, and transformation. And while some may champion the belief that learning can happen between execution (or doing) and planning for the next thing to accomplish, I believe that real learning requires an intentional pause ... something many of us tend to make little, if any, time for.

How often do you, your team or your organization set aside time — *intentionally* — to check? To reflect? To study? To learn from the progress you've made and the opportunities you've seen as you navigate toward accomplishing your goals or strategic initiatives?

If you're like many leaders, the answer is probably too few times to even spend counting.

The good news is that, no matter your approach to problem-solving and goal achievement until this point, embracing being intentional in all that you do as a leader — including intentionally pausing for meaningful reflection prior to moving on to the next action — is something you can start today. Right now. This very moment.

An intentional pause just may be the key differentiator between your team continuing to take action because it's the next step in your usual approach, and beginning to pause to study ... adjust, and then take action ... possibly even new action ... because it's the next *right* step.

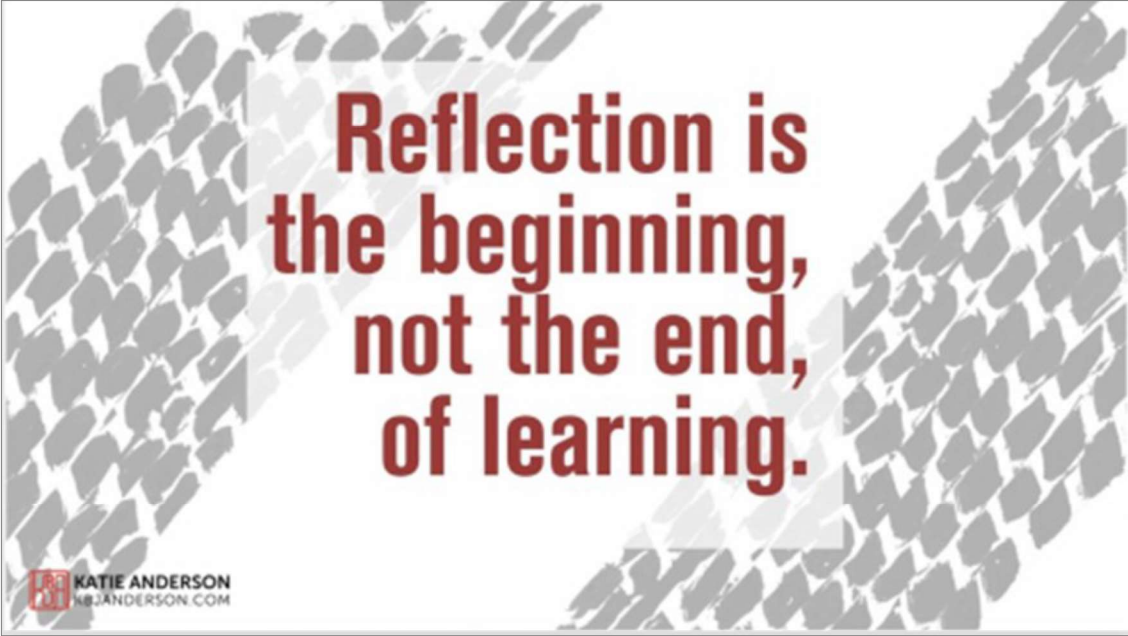
A Systemic Approach to Learning

The scientific method — also known as Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) or Plan-Do-Study-Adjust (PDSA) — is a systemic approach many organizations and leaders around the world use for projects and management. It's the foundation of the continuous improvement problem-solving approach that I've incorporated into my own work and have taught to thousands of leaders over the past two decades. And it's one that I had the opportunity to appreciate more deeply while living in Japan and learning firsthand from 40-year Toyota Leader Isao Yoshino, the subject of my book [*Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn: Lessons from Toyota Leader Isao Yoshino on a Lifetime of Continuous Learning*](#).

As I highlight in [*Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*](#), the PDCA cycle became the foundation of Toyota's approach to kaizen (continuous improvement) and problem-solving:

"In the 1950s, Dr. W. Edwards Deming, an American scholar and operations management consultant ... visited Japan four times to introduce Quality Control concepts to people in Japanese industry. From June to August 1950, Deming trained hundreds of engineers, senior managers, and scholars across Japan on concepts of quality, including the Plan-Do-Check-Adjust (PDCA) cycle."

A decade later, in the 1960s, Japan developed *hoshin kanri*, a strategic planning and checking process. In English, "hoshin kanri" has often been translated as strategy deployment and is the plan that sets the direction for the organization's true north. The



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process of regular checking and adjusting plans throughout the year is like a compass to keep teams and organizations focused, strategic, and intentional.

This method is powerful. It works. It incorporates a meaningful, and an intentional, pause to check, to study, to reflect, and to make adjustments.

As Mr. Yoshino shares in [*Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*](#), the checking and adjusting parts of the cycle are the most critical for learning:

"The check process of PDCA is considered to be the most important part of the concept. Checking helps us to learn many important things from reviewing the result and its process."

Yet, in my observation of most applications of the PDCA model, these two steps are most often missing. The cycle isn't fully utilized ... and learning is missed.

The key to creating an organization that fosters innovation could possibly be a subtle switch; one that encourages reflection at the beginning, not at the end.

Let's discuss the problems with traditional problem-solving approaches

First, it's human nature to assume

that you know the problem you are trying to solve. In actuality, jumping to conclusions could inadvertently cause you to miss the core problem altogether. You need to study the current conditions to really define the actual problem at hand.

Secondly, you assume that you know what the solution is or what it should be. But how is that even possible when you don't have clarity on what the problem is in the first place? Or better yet, you haven't defined what causes the problem!

If you think you know the problem and the solution, then you are quick to jump to implementation — to Plan-Do — Immediately. That intentional pause is likely brief ... a formality ... but isn't truly considered. Or maybe it doesn't even happen. And why would it be? You already know what you need to do, so you make it happen. Right?

This mentality encourages you to dive right into "plan" and "do" first on the cycle. And, after the "do" is accomplished, over time you likely skip the "check" or "study" step. And, if you didn't quite reach the target, go straight into the next plan-do steps, without really understanding the process you took that led to the current result.

It's like throwing darts hoping each time that you will hit the bullseye, without understanding if you are on course or off course,

and what adjustments you might need to take to get to the target. You end up looking just at the outcome and keep taking action, without understanding the process to get there.

Having worked internationally with leaders and organizations from various industries of all sizes, I constantly see this as commonality among many. Rest assured, you are not alone!

Don't get stuck in the Plan-Do-Plan-Do cycle (or just Do-Do-Do...)

Besides being exhausting, it's just not fully effective. Real learning happens when intentional reflection is not just accounted for ... but planned for ... and it is needed to navigate progress, overcome obstacles, and create teams that leverage their chain of learning for individual and organizational growth.

While an outcome is a goal, continuing to throw darts at a target isn't going to help identify if you are on course or off of it altogether. The process is critical. And taking time to "check" the process shouldn't be seen as merely "checking a box" activity, but rather it should be seen as an opportunity for learning.

What some may see in the beginning as "checking" for missteps, mistakes, or opportunities to highlight what's wrong will likely evolve into ongoing opportunities to take risks and learn from them as well as develop a culture where learning can happen ... and should happen ... in real time and in real ways. And, in doing so, new opportunities arise, new solutions unfold, and innovation is readily available.

How can we "check" to learn?

It's not as hard as it may seem.

First, it starts with seeing "checking" not as a "check the box" activity, but a process for learning and reflection. In fact, as I describe in the [Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn Workbook](#), "In the 1980s Deming modified the cycle to

include "Study" instead of "Check" to emphasize the importance of reflection. For this reason, I prefer using PDSA — or even better, SAPD, to emphasize that the cycle starts with learning."

And second it starts with pivoting the cycle to begin at a different starting point. Try starting NOT with "Plan-Do" but instead with "Study-Adjust."

Let's shift to "Study-Adjust-Plan-Do" as our starting place: SAPD!

Some may argue where you start the acronym doesn't matter as the cycle is continuous ... and that planning should include understanding the current state. Yes, the cycle is continuous and planning should include understanding the current situation before jumping right into planning and doing.

However, in my experience, it doesn't. We remain stuck in Plan-Do-Plan-Do.

A subtle shift in where you begin — SAPD — is a powerful shift in mindset and actions.

The very nature of starting the cycle with "Plan-Do" can encourage the "Plan-Do" broken record. Embracing "Study" and reflection as the beginning sets the stage for the development of a learning culture. And that's a culture where individuals and teams feel empowered.

Let's put the SAPD cycle in action.

I've been afforded the opportunity to see the SAPD cycle in action — and to put it into practice. This cycle of learning is what I advocate as one of the fundamental patterns of thinking and action to accelerate learning and impact.

SAPD - Study - Adjust - Plan - Do ...and repeat!

Start everything with reflection. If you do, you will uncover learning that informs meaningful adjustment. This is where continuous improvement accelerates.

Study what is happening. Understand the real problem needed

to be solved.

Determine the adjustments needed to be made. And then put the plan in place. See it as an experiment for learning. Execute ... do ... and continue the learning process.

This is the foundation of effective problem solving.

Problem solving is about recognizing that there are problems in the first place, welcoming "bad news" as opportunities for innovation and change, and leading with a "no problem is a problem mindset."

Problem solving is about understanding the real problem — not just the messy problematic condition you are experiencing. It's about thinking deeply and helping others do the same.

And it's about coming up with possibilities and helping others tap into their creativity and come up with ideas to solve problems.

And, of course, it's also about testing and leveraging the Study-Adjust-Plan-Do (SAPD) cycle and reflecting, learning, and adjusting along the way.

Accelerate Your Learning Today by Starting With Studying

Ready to give the SAPD process a try? Here are a few questions to reflect on as you do.

Take a moment to study your current situation with the intentions to understand and define:

- What is happening now?
- What does "better" look like?
- What should be happening?
- What are some of the problems or the possible causes of the problem?

Only after this deep reflection can you (and should you) create a plan and test it out by doing. As you do, ask yourself:

- What do you expect to happen?
- When are you going to try the new idea — and take action?

Then do. From your actions as an experiment. A hypothesis.

And, once again, take the opportunity to “study.” Ask yourself:

- What was the difference between what you expected to happen and what actually happened?

And then what adjustments do you need to make to move towards your target or goal?

A Word of Caution: Don’t ONLY study

Studying without action won’t move you forward. Don’t get stuck in analysis paralysis or inaction because you don’t have the perfect target or know the perfect next step. As Mr. Yoshino once told me:

“A practical style is more important than precision when setting targets. Precision doesn’t matter in the beginning — you need the direction to go, and then you can learn and improve it. Spending weeks and weeks of doing nothing is worse.” - Isao Yoshino in Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn.

Forward momentum – with learning – is the name of the game.

Everyone is better at solving actual problems when the starting point isn’t with a solution in mind, but rather a process gap to be closed. Many times, your ideas may actually be the needed solution (and it’s great to be creative and generate many possible ideas that you can try), but you first need to test them out, and study if they had the impact you anticipated, before you know they are the actual solution.

Do-Do-Do or Plan-Plan-Plan without the “study” and “adjust” parts of the cycle are just as ineffective.

In fact, any one component of the cycle is not effective independently. It needs the other critical pieces of the method. Without it, the solution might not eventually be discovered. The actual problem might not really be solved.

It’s important to run experiments to learn more and to be intentional that “plan” and “do” is to learn more about your current condition and your problem. The best

hamster wheel to be on is the SAPD-SAPD-SAPD one, where real learning is happening over and over.

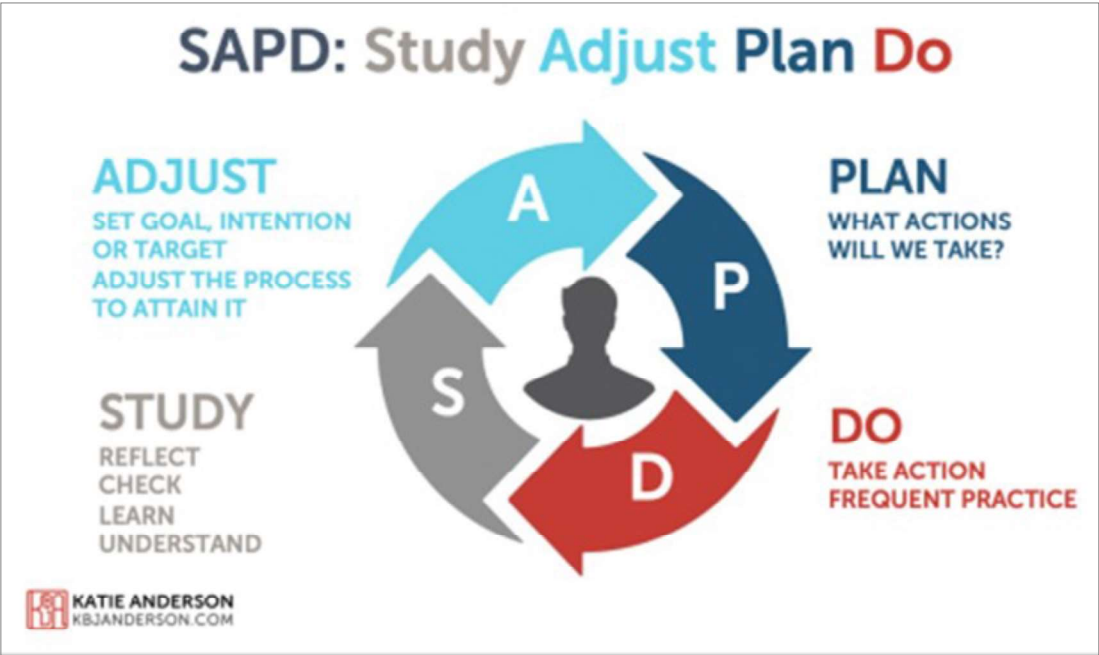
As I wrote in [Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn](#): “learning is never perfect, and it is never complete.”

And that “reflection — through studying — is the beginning of learning, not the end, of learning.”

If you find yourself starting with planning — or with a solution in mind — before understanding what problem you are trying to solve, I encourage you to ask yourself the following questions:

- For this idea of a solution — the action I want to take or thing I want to implement — what would improve if I took these steps? What would be improved if I did this idea or implemented this solution?

Reframing your “solution” in this way helps inspire time for reflection and study, allowing you the chance to actually understand the problem you are really trying to solve, instead of jumping forward with urgency to take action.



SAPD: Start with reflection!

When in doubt, choose reflection first. Make it a priority. Because reflection is the source of learning, and learning is the catalyst to amplifying your impact (as well as your team’s and your organization’s)!

Remember, learning is the most important thing, and it is the true secret to success!

Start with Study-Adjust and then Plan-Do. And then keep going!

Join the #SAPD movement and strengthen your chain of learning through reflection today. ■

