How is Continuous Improvement made?

The term seems fairly simple, but how does it really play out? What does continuous improvement look like when it is implemented in a business environment?

The most commonly used model is PDCA: Plan, Do, Check, Act. Walking through these four steps can bring improvements to any process.

Plan

In this first step, the focus is on defining the problem and coming up with an approach that you will test in order to solve the problem, asking questions like:

- What is the scope?

- What is the target?

- What is the best approach for the outcome you are trying to achieve?

This includes defining a team and planning a timeline.

Do

You can use this step to execute a full plan, or to implement a pilot solution at a smaller scale. Either way, this is the opportunity to experiment; try something new to see if and how it works. The key here is to record the steps taken in the process and collect data and feedback along the way.

Check

This is the opportunity to study the chosen approach and evaluate the results, compared to your expectations when planning. Ask questions like:

- Was the approach successful / effective?

- Did it work as planned? Why or why not?

- What worked and what didn't work?

If the approach was unsuccessful, you can go back to the first step (planning), considering what you learned and why it didn't produce the intended results. If it was successful, you can proceed to the next step.

Act

Now that you've taken the learnings and feedback from the previous steps, it's time to implement the new solution fully. Remember, this doesn't mean it's the final solution or the only approach. Instead, it becomes the new baseline against which you will continue to measure for future improvements.

Much of the importance of continuous improvement lies in what a business does after they've cycled through the steps outlined above. In a typical business environment, when improvements are made in a process, those improvements become "the way things are," not to be questioned until something goes wrong. In continuous improvement methodology, every improvement becomes the new baseline for the next.