

PDCA and the Forgotten Stakeholders

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<https://github.com/dirkengel/>

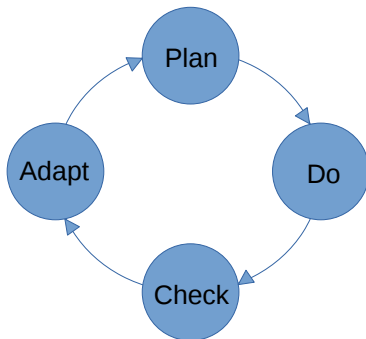


Fig. 1: The PDCA cycle

The PDCA cycle (Fig. 1) is the base of many continual improvement processes. While the single steps of the cycle are obviously reasonable, I don't like this illustration as it shows the cycle as a closed loop. A closed system isolated from the outside world. So what if you have overlooked some stakeholders in your process design? There is no way for these forgotten stakeholders to take any influence. For the same reason, I don't like the term process owner. Sure, in the end you need someone to be responsible, but all stakeholders should see themselves as owners and take care of the process. Coming back to the overlooked stakeholders,

is this a real issue and if so, who are such forgotten stakeholders?

Lost in time

One group of forgotten stakeholders are those process participants who have no opportunity to give immediate feedback to the other stakeholders. Their feedback is taking too long to have any relevant effect. For example, if you are unhappy with something in your community and the local authorities ignore your ideas, you will have to wait until the next election. The same applies to products that have very long release cycles (years). You may have spent a lot of money on a disappointing product, but nothing will change for along time and your feedback does not really matter, all you can do is try a different product from a different supplier next time.

Lost in space

With this group I am referring to those participants who do not have a direct feedback channel to the other stakeholders but need to take an extra hop to communicate. For instance, when you want to provide feedback on a part that is considered a third-party element and your inputs get stuck somewhere in the communication system and never reaches the actual producer. It always happens when you do not have a chance to get in touch with right people or do not even know who they are.

Lost in number

You are just one individual in a large *stakeholder* group, but nobody really cares about your specific feedback. "Sit down. Have a scone. Make yourself at home...". However, that's an error in reasoning. First, even single minds can have great ideas. Second, a single person giving feedback could stand for a much larger, silently annoyed group.

Well, none of these three groups can take part in the improvement process – does this matter? I think yes, it is important for both sides, the forgotten outsiders and the insiders.

The outsider's perspective

I guess you know the situation where you almost cannot believe how bad a certain process is. It is so annoying that you think about it for a long time and come up with different ideas on how to improve the whole thing. Perhaps all the good ideas are gone after a while when things have calmed down again. But sometimes an idea seems too convincing, you cannot drop it, but you like to share it. You try to find the right contact to

submit your idea, but you do not find any or cannot get past the gatekeeper when finally found one. This, in turn, can be extremely unsatisfactory. All you can do is share your thoughts with someone in a larger community, and maybe if you are lucky and it falls on fertile ground, you will get some appreciative feedback.

The insider's perspective

If you are afraid of getting too many suggestions, you may already suspect or know of some gaps in your processes. If not, but you are still worried about too much spam, you could add some formal hurdles someone has to go through when he/she wants to send you a suggestion for improvement. If he/she is willing to take that hurdle, the proposal should be worth reading. It is free, adds a fresh point of view, and therefore could be the key for a bigger step forward. Otherwise, you run the risk of continuing to live in a bubble where everything seems perfect.

So what?

So what can you do? In the best case you provide a dedicated feedback channel for process improvements that is also accessible from the outside to reach the inner circle of process *owners*. Or you filter out that information from other multi-purpose channels (e. g. social media). If you want to make someone happy, then respond to the suggestions given in good time. However, it is crucial to check from time to time whether some stakeholders have been forgotten or undervalued in the past. To support this awareness, I propose a small additional arrow (Fig. 2) representing the external inputs that should be regularly checked along with the internal KPIs. That little arrow turns the (inner) 'O' circle into a 'Q' like Quality.

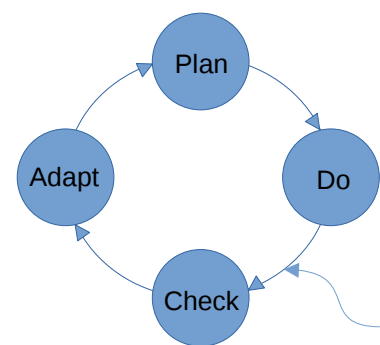


Fig. 2: PDCA cycle as Q