



Spring Training: Practicing the Fundamentals

As a life-long Chicago White Sox fan, I remember going to baseball games with my parents and brothers and watching the Sox win (hmmm, maybe they lost more often) games back then by hitting singles and doubles, stealing a few bases, advancing on sacrifice flies, and having good defense and good pitching. When a rally started, the fans would start chanting, “Go! Go! Go!” and encourage the team to manufacture a couple of runs to secure the victory.

Nowadays it seems most teams rely on power hitting and mediocre pitching, combining two, three, or maybe even four specialists to face a few batters or just pitch a certain inning.

What happened to the fundamentals? Pitching, catching, bunting, sacrificing, stealing bases... these are all of the basic skills that are taught and reinforced in spring training. However, do any of these matter much if the team buys a handful of free agents who hit the long ball more often than the opposing team's batters?



We can take this analogy to many businesses today, starting with the business version of spring training. Do you have a new hire orientation and training program that teaches your business fundamentals? Business fundamentals include: understanding your vision, mission, and guiding principles/values; and showing how your products are made and/or how your services are provided to customers. Do you have any annual refresher workshops with your experienced employees to reinforce those same principles?

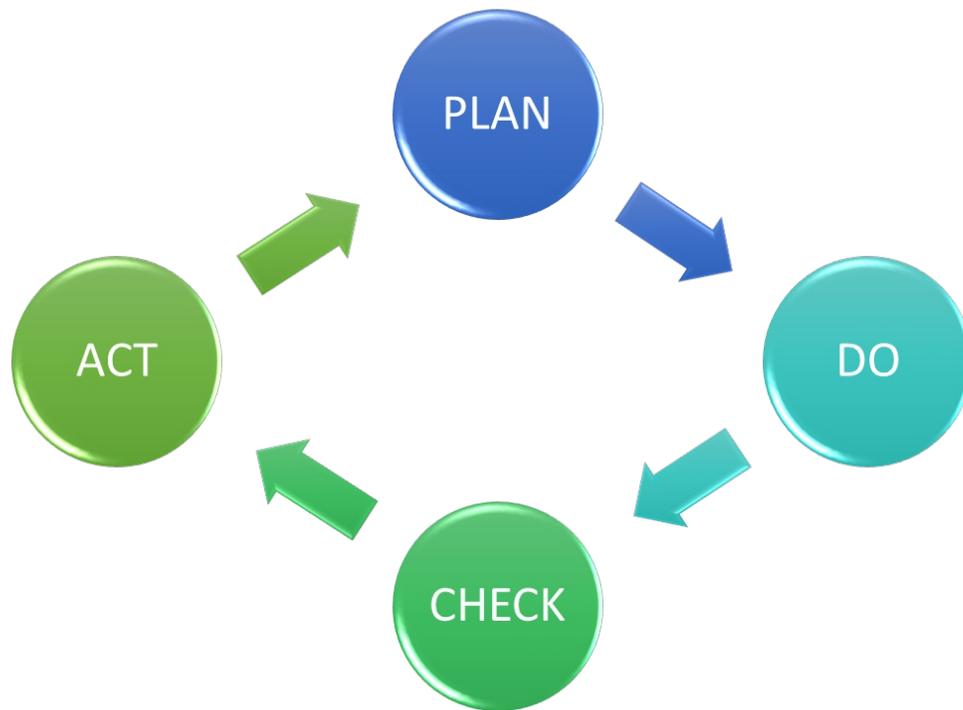
When problems occur, does your business scramble like crazy, throwing everything at the problem in a haphazard fashion, hoping the problem somehow disappears? The massive, unorganized scramble is akin to having that home run hitter standing in the batter's box when you really need him to deliver... it's a risk, and he may hit the ball out of the park, but he may also strike out or hit into an inning-ending double play.

The alternative is to follow a deliberative process, such as the PDCA cycle (see article) to define the problem, find the root cause(s) of the problem, take corrective action(s), verify results, and make further adjustments if needed. Teaching and following this disciplined approach to problem-solving is another business fundamental that should be part of your spring training.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott".

The Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) Cycle

The Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) Cycle is a sequence of activities taken to develop, execute, and routinely evaluate production and service processes, followed by responding to problems detected or predicted that impact the performance of those processes. When problems occur that impact the process, the four steps flow as follows:



PLAN

- * Describe the *improvement opportunity*
- * Describe the *current process*
- * Describe the possible causes of the problem and agree on the *root cause(s)*
- * Develop a *solution and action plan*

DO

- * Implement the solution or *process change*

CHECK

- * Review and *evaluate the result* of the change

ACT

- * Reflect and *act on what you have learned*

Here's a simple example, using a home analogy from last Friday...

PLAN

- * Opportunity = I want to solve the problem of burning my toast at breakfast.
- * Current Process = I get bread from the breadbox (yes, we have one of those), put the bread into the toaster oven, turn the timer dial about 45 degrees clockwise (from noon to about 2), and go read the paper until I either hear the bell or smell smoke.
- * Possible Causes = I didn't pay attention and/or I turned the dial too far (added too much time).
- * Solution/Action = I'll turn the dial only 30 degrees, won't start reading the paper, and stand at the counter and watch the toaster oven, beginning tomorrow.

DO

* On Saturday and Sunday I followed the action plan and my toast was a golden brown.

CHECK

* I will repeat the action plan for a few more days to see if the improvement is sticking; if not, I'll go back to the possible causes and perhaps come up with a few more reasons the toast is burning.

ACT

* If there is a lot of variability in results (maybe some bread loaves have more moisture than others?), I may get more scientific in my approach of setting the dial, or I may just look through the toaster oven window more often to visually monitor the process.

It is critical to note that data is collected and analyzed at each step in the PDCA cycle. Opinions are great, but keep them to a minimum (or drop them) until all of the relevant data is collected and you're ready to analyze it.

To collect data, there are several tools that can be used. The seven most common tools are:

- Check Sheet
- Pareto Chart
- Histogram
- Run Chart
- Scatter Diagram
- Flow Chart
- Fishbone (Cause/Effect) Diagram

To learn about or refresh your memory about these tools, my upcoming newsletters will go into each in detail. If you can't wait that long, you're welcome to contact me or you can go to the ASQ website, www.asq.org.

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