**How to Problem Solve and Position for Success in the Future**

It has become obvious that when the pandemic crisis is over, the world will be a different place.   That will be true whether you are in the manufacturing, service or healthcare industries.    When we emerge from where we are now, "business as usual" will no longer be enough to survive let alone prosper and grow.  The chronic and persistent problems that were the norm in the past can no longer be tolerated.  It is imperative that we find the root cause of these problems and implement irreversible solutions that will eliminate the problem once and for all.  Understanding the importance of this approach will place your business in a better position to survive and thrive during these difficult times and beyond.  You might think that it's easier said than done but with the right problem solving tools and focus, those persistent problems can be a thing of the past.

Lean methodology utilizes one of the most effective and well-known problem solving tools, **Plan-Do-Check-Act**. This methodology is commonly known as the PDCA cycle.   In the **P**lanning phase we identify the problem and determine the root cause and solution(s).   In the **D**o phase we implement those solutions. In the **C**heck phase we measure the results so that we know whether we need to alter our plan or solutions in the **A**ct phase, if we do not achieve the results we expect.
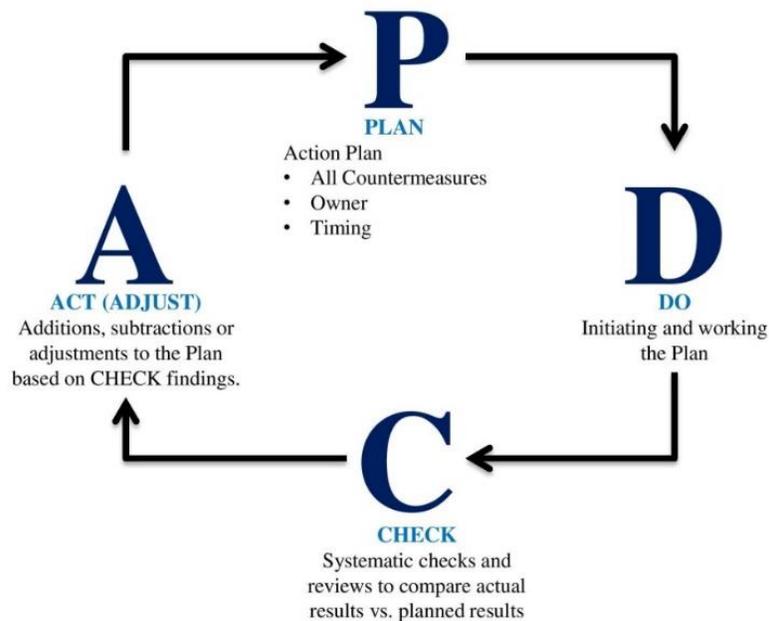
The most important part of the PDCA process is the Plan part of the cycle because without a solid plan that identifies the root cause and appropriate actions to eliminate the root cause, all else will be moot and unachievable.   All too often instead of developing a solid plan we use our experience and intuition to jump to identifying a cause of the problem without truly digging down to the correct root cause.  That logic may seem sound and make the process simpler,  but it only leads to short term improvements if any at all, or improvements that don't sustain.

In order to avoid missing the true root cause,  the first key step in any Plan is to "Identify the Problem" correctly.   Development of a Problem Statement is the most important part of problem solving.   When identifying and stating a problem it is critical that we don't infer a cause.   For example, if we state a problem as "*The nurses place the labels on the test tubes in the wrong place*" we've already identified the nurse as the cause of the problem.   As a result, we would probably start a program of re-educating the nurses on where the labels need to be placed and miss looking at all other possible causes.  Re-training  or re-education is seldom if ever the solution to a problem.   The above problem statement also doesn't contain a goal or a metric.  It should if we are to determine if we have improved or not.

A well thought out and properly crafted problem statement is necessary for a proper analysis that leads to a root cause. Upon closer study in the above situation,  it was ultimately determined that the label reading machine was only able to read 80% of the labels correctly.  With that information the problem was re-stated as "*80% of test tube labels are read correctly*". It is implicit that the labels need to be read correctly 100% of the time.  With the restatement of the problem the possible causes are expanded and everything that impacts the label reading process is identified. This includes the accuracy of the machine, the labels themselves, the quality of the tubes, the competency of the staff, and other yet undetermined influences. This problem statement also sets a goal and therefore improvement from 80% can be measured.

We can help you solve those chronic and persistent problems.   OPS is a company that specializes in Lean Training, Problem Solving and Performance improvement.  We have experienced industry leaders who are "hands-on" consultants that will educate and guide your people in process improvement techniques and solve those persistent issues forever. If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact us at www.opsinc.com or 410-871-0995.


John DeCaro
Lean Consultant
Operational Performance Solutions