



Git 'er Done When is 'Done' Done?

Dear Drew,

I saw a number of visual devices on recent tours of organizations that took the form of 'To Do - Doing - Done'. Envision a simple board with three columns. Ideas for improvement or problems that need to be resolved are posted under the 'To Do' column, using cards made for this purpose or simple Post-it notes. Often there is a 'vetting' process of new items where a decision is made on each item to proceed or not to proceed. The cards or notes are moved to the 'Doing' column when action on the item begins. They are then moved to the 'Done' column when the action has been completed. Simple enough.

At one organization I selected an item from the 'Done' column, and asked a manager how he knew that it was 'done'. He went on to describe how they had a meeting of the necessary parties to decide on how they wanted to address a particular quality issue that had occurred in production. They agreed on the solution and several people were tasked with implementing the change. He went on to say that relevant procedures were updated to reflect the change. I asked if we could 'go see' the changes. Together

we went to the production area that was involved. We discovered that the change was never actually implemented in the process, though the procedure was revised. There was no reason given, but the task was certainly not 'done'. The manager was quite upset by this news. We returned to the board, and I said let's select another. The manager said, "I know that this one is done, we had a follow-up meeting about it." Going to a different department we discovered that the change was indeed initially implemented, but problems were encountered and the solution abandoned. The manager grew irate at his team. I said let's look at the To Do-Doing- Done process.

I asked a different question. "What does 'done' mean to you?" The manager said, "When the change has been implemented, of course." I asked if he was familiar with Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) improvement methodology. "Yes, of course", he responded. "What you describe as 'done' covers which steps of PDCA?" After a few moments, he said, dejectedly, "Plan and Do."

Interestingly I had similar conversations at two other organizations around the same time. In one situation we took a card that was in the 'Done' column and followed up on it. We found that the change was indeed implemented and sustained. During further discussion, one department supervisor described how the change added 30 minutes of additional work each day for each team member. I asked if the supervisor had informed anyone of this fact. He said, "Why bother, the change was already made. There is nothing we can do about it." I turned to my host and said, "This is an example of 'Plan-Do-Act'. A new standard has been made and we never 'Checked' the effect of the change."

It's About the PDCA Process

Therein the issue lies, and a common one at that. Teaching PDCA over the decades, I have had numerous similar discussions. After a review of PDCA, I often ask people to reflect on their typical approach to improvement or problem solving. Many times people will admit to 'Plan-Do' or even just 'Plan'. Less often I hear 'Plan-Do-Act' like the last example. Few describe complete PDCA practice. Perhaps this is a reason for less than expected results in many organizations.

People and organizations must follow deliberate and correct practice. No skipping steps purposely or by mistake. To help avoid this common pitfall, I suggested that the visual device, 'To Do-Doing-Done' boards in these cases, be revised to reflect the PDCA process. The 'Doing' column was divided into four sub-columns, each reflecting a step in the PDCA process. A column for 'Plan', one for 'Do', another for 'Check', and of course one for 'Act'. A different definition of 'Done' was now clearer to everyone. No more moving to 'Done' when the PDCA process remains incomplete. But is there still a chance of this happening? There was another important lesson to be learned from the examples provided earlier. A critical aspect of proper PDCA practice.

Always 'Go See' When Practicing PDCA

In all of the examples described, a common missing element was for managers, supervisors, the people involved in the change to 'Go See'. This should not just be practiced at the beginning of the PDCA process, but throughout. True it is necessary to 'go see' to grasp current conditions, gather facts from the process, and generally to learn what is really happening (all part of 'Plan'). It is equally important to 'go see' when the changes are made and the 'experiments' begin ('Do'). Leaders need to be supportive of the changes

being trialed, identify real obstacles, and lend assistance where necessary. Further, how else can we 'Check' if we do not 'go see'? We cannot effectively check from meeting rooms or the boss' office as several of the examples described. There is really no other way to truly learn from the change or experiment, but to personally go see it in practice. Even during 'Act', a strong dose of 'go see' is required. How else can we be assured that the changes made, the effects of which were verified, are sustained over time? Old habits are hard to overcome, as the saying goes. Persistent 'go see' can help insure that the changes have become the new norm.

One company added a reminder to their revised 'To Do - Doing - Done' boards to 'go see' at each step. It is a simple but effective means to convey the standard of proper PDCA practice.

There is More Than Just Getting Things Done

During the visits, I observed discussions about particular ideas or 'problems' noted on the cards. The focus of these discussions tended to be 'tactical' in nature. "When can we make that change?" "Who do we need to get involved?" "How much will it cost?" Quick decisions were made on whether to follow through on a suggestion or not. "We want to respond to these in a timely manner", one manager stated.

I began asking questions. "What problem are you trying to solve with your suggestion?" "How do you know this is a problem?" "How often does the issue arise?" "Help me understand how this idea can benefit you, the process, or the organization." Most often there was no clear statement of the problem, and a vague idea of potential benefits. After a review of and dialogue around several idea cards, it became clear to me that there was little consideration of

PDCA thinking. While things were getting 'done', a great opportunity for personal development was being overlooked.

A key objective of Lean is to develop the problem solving and process improvement skills and mindsets of all associates over time. Each idea or suggestion represented an opportunity to do just this, even if the idea will not be pursued. Unfortunately, it was overlooked in the rush to make a decision or to take action. No dialogue to understand the thinking behind the idea or suggestion. In one example, a manager quickly dismissed an idea as being 'ridiculous'. I asked if we could speak with the initiator of the idea. Without getting into the details, the initiator explained the reasoning behind his idea, and the data he gathered on his own time to validate it. By the way, the idea was clearly aligned with the business objective of potentially growing the business. The manager jumped in and said, "It is too expensive", throwing out an estimated figure of the cost. The initiator thought about it for a moment, and offered a creative solution that would cost just one-tenth of the initial estimate.

Whether the organization goes forward with the idea or not, it was clear in the discussion that this team member was exhibiting the proper thinking, thinking that should be encouraged and reinforced. If it wasn't the proper thinking, the discussion would lend itself to important coaching of the individual. The really unfortunate thing about the scenario described was that the manager was going to dismiss the idea without even a thorough discussion with the initiator. A true opportunity would have been lost forever.

Summary

We must always remember that there is a 'bigger game' to be played when practicing continuous improvement. Yes,

we want to make changes and achieve results. But we also want to develop the problem solving and process improvement capabilities of members of the organization. People want to 'grow', learn new things and improve their skills. In doing so, the long term prospects of the organization improve substantially. Opportunities that arise to do this must be seized. So don't view a suggestion or idea offered as simply something to possibly do (or not), but a developmental opportunity. After all, we are never really 'Done' when it comes to Continuous Improvement.

Best Regards

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