AQIP NEWS TO USE

The Higher Learning Commission NCA

a forum for quality advocates in higher education

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Improving AQIP: Helping Organizations Check to Make Sure Their Action Projects Made a Difference

AQIP is considering changes in how it asks institutions to register and update their Action Projects, and wants your advice on whether its ideas would actually benefit its stakeholders and avoid some problems they have encountered in the past.

First, a little background about Action Projects and why AQIP has them.

AQIP's fundamental purpose is simple: helping the organizations it serves improve their performance. Because we see improvement *projects* as the keys steps to take to improve *performance*, we therefore want institutions to take on as many significant Action Projects as possible, and do each one as quickly as possible. AQIP expects participating colleges and universities to share publicly at all times at least *three* current Action Projects on which they are working. Knowing about an organization's current Action Projects provides AQIP assurance that its ongoing commitment to continuous quality improvement is genuine. More importantly, *doing* Action Projects moves institutions toward AQIP's fundamental purpose: helping the organizations it serves improve their performance. We arbitrarily limited the number of projects an institution can share with us to three (or four) because we were afraid that allowing more to be registered might overload our capacity, particularly the software we created to managed the **Action Project Directory** that lists information about each projects and allows people to search the database of projects.

Creating a Systems Portfolio and having AQIP review it through a Systems Appraisal helps colleges and universities pinpoint where *their* opportunities for improvement may exist, and the Strategy Forums help them think through and focus the Action Projects that create the mechanisms and momentum for real improvements to occur. They still need to put together teams of creative, thoughtful, and energetic people to come up with the ideas about how to do things differently — how to take an existing process and tweak and mold it so it operates more consistently and effectively, or how to invent a new process that does what existing processes can't. But higher education is filled with creative, thoughtful, and energetic people who want their organizations to perform outstandingly, and eager when given the chance to roll up their sleeves to work together to make improvement happen by following the complete plan-do-check-act (PDCA) improvement cycle (also called the Shewhart or Deming cycle).

Planning and implementing a process change may not, by itself, solve a problem. It would be nice if energy, imagination, dedication, and teamwork were all it required to create improved performance. But the fact is that sometimes even a team composed of the best and the brightest comes up with a awful solution.

Implementing it doesn't end an Action Project. You have to **check** to make sure the improved results you wanted actually occur. If you don't, you may join the ranks of what Phil Crosby (who wrote *Quality is Free*, and many other fine books on improvement) called

Pee-Pee-Do-Do organizations: those trapped in a continual sequence of planning and implementation, never paying attention to whether the things they've planed and done made the differences they intended.

In *How Toyota Became #1: Leadership Lessons from the World's Greatest Car Company* (New York: Penguin Books Portfolio, 2007, pp. 43-44), David Magee explains how a successful organization stresses this aspect of the PDCA cycle.

"There is not a day I don't think about what Dr. Deming meant to us," said Soichiro Toyoda, son of Kiichiro Toyoda and a Toyota director and honorary chairman. "Deming is the core of our management."

"Some of Deming's ongoing contributions to Toyota are hard to quantify, such as commitment to quality and to people. Others are more specific and evident, such as his version of the improvement cycle, Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA). The PDCA principle is as vigorously at work at Toyota today as it is when it was first introduced. Most people in business follow only a sequence of Plan-Do, an abbreviated cycle in which someone decides what should be done and does it. According to the PDCA principle, if you continually work only in Plan-Do sequences, you never get a chance to appraise your mistakes and determine what isn't working. As a result, action is never taken to fix problems, and performance rarely improves.

By following the complete PDCA sequence, standards continually rise, providing a higher starting point for each cycle and yielding continual improvement. The result of PDCA is illustrated by a rising spiral, while those practicing just Plan-Do, who are unwilling or unable to check performance and take corrective action, spiral in circular motion in exactly the same spot, unable to move upward because they never raise their starting point.

Certainly Deming's business principles have been well-studied by many corporations around the world. Thousands of organizations have implemented various aspects of Deming's methods just as has Toyota. At Toyota, however, these practices are taken very seriously and have not been abandoned after years of practice. Quite frequently at meetings in Toyota offices from Tokyo to Toyota City, managers ask their employees, "Have you done your PDCA?"

Recognizing the centrality of PDCA thinking to successful Action Projects, AQIP would like to modify the use of its Action Project Directory to better fit the desire of participating organizations to check whether their Action Projects have caused the performance changes they sought.

One possibility is to create a new status of "checking" to go along with those already in use: "current," "retired" or "cancelled." The "checking" status would allow an institution that created an Action Project that led to the planning and implementation of a new approach to keep the project current while collecting evidence that it accomplished what was intended. What we've heard is that organizations are loath to retire projects until they are sure they have accomplished their goals, and while they're waiting to see the results of the checking phase, there's no real value in getting feedback through the Annual Update Review process. If it turns out that another PDCA cycle is needed to get performance up where it should be, the organization could change the status back to "current."

Another possibility is for AQIP to allow institutions to identify within the Action Project Directory the Action Projects (a minimum of three) it wants to receive feedback on through the Annual Update Review process each year. A project in the checking stage could continue to be listed, but with the "no feedback desired" option selected.

AQIP would appreciate indications from participating institutions on this topic: how should we modify the Action Project Directory to help you communicate your action agenda within your institution and, at the same time, make the most valuable use of AQIP's feedback on Annual Updates. Send your ideas and comments to AQIP@HLCommission.org with the subject line "Action Project Directory."