



THINK AND PLAN BEFORE YOU TAKE ACTION

by Leigh Wallinger

Despite the popular belief that the best way to achieve your goals is to get into action quickly, there is considerable value in making sure, before you launch into an all-out action frenzy, that what you are about to do is, in fact, the right activity.

Certainly, one of the biggest problems some sales people have in achieving their goals and targets is procrastination – the art of looking busy without actually ever achieving anything of significance. There is a risk with procrastinators that laying out the Think-Plan-Do strategy means they can spend all their time at the Plan stage and never Do anything.

The biggest risk, however, of launching into action too soon is that the activity you decide to undertake is unnecessary, or of low-value, in relation to achieving your goals. Why would you want to run the risk of doing a task to completion and doing it really well, only to find that it was the wrong task?

20% of your efforts produce 80% of your results

Richard Koch, who wrote about the Pareto Principle (or the 80/20 Principle), highlighted the ease at which low-value tasks can leave you busy but achieving little. The Pareto Principle states that 80% of results come from just 20% of inputs. Put slightly differently, this means that 80% of your outputs are generated from 20% of your time. You waste the remaining 80% of your time achieving just 20% of your outputs.

Logically, you need to analyse your activities and categorise them as high impact (the 20%) and low impact (the 80%). Then, you should focus on trying to do twice as much of the 20% tasks and drop as many of the 80% tasks as you can. By doing this you can easily become twice as effective in less time. The 80/20 Principle is incredibly powerful.

The Think-Plan-Do strategy is the most effective way to reach your goals. The thinking and planning stages are crucial. During these stages, you identify exactly which are the high value tasks that you need to do if you are going to reach your goals.

Brian Tracy, in one of his many books, wrote that every minute spent in the planning stages of a project could save up to 1 hour in the execution or implementation stage. Given most people in the Western world are “time poor”, the time you invest in analysing and planning the task ahead can save a huge amount of time in the implementation stage.

If, however, your planning is poor and you end up doing the wrong (low value) activities really well, you have wasted valuable implementation time doing low value “stuff”. Rushing into action too soon can ultimately be a great waste of time.

Don't rush tasks

When you do take action, be sure to give enough time to the task to allow it to be done correctly first time. How often do you see a job that is rushed due to lack of time, only to see things go wrong and find the job has to be repeated? The overall completion time will extend way beyond original estimates. Remember the saying ‘there's never time to do it correctly, but there's always time to do it again’.



Here's the basic Think-Plan-Do approach to successfully completing any task or achieving any goal:

1. Understand what you are trying to achieve. Write it down clearly and unambiguously.
2. Think about all the action steps you will need to take to complete this task.
3. Write down all the steps. The process of writing will help you spot any additional tasks.
4. Review each step and break it down into smaller "bite-sized" steps
5. Put all the action steps into sequence – by priority and by required completion date
6. Start with the first action step. Work on it until it is completed, then tackle the next one in sequence.

If you start to procrastinate, just commit to work on the next action step for 15 minutes. This gives you some momentum and moves the project forward a little. Keep working on the most important task you can identify.

Break big tasks into smaller pieces

For extremely large tasks or goals, break them into smaller pieces and plan out how you will complete each piece of the jigsaw using the above method. Sometimes, despite all this advice, you will just get stuck. Sometimes you will feel very little forward progress is being made.

When this happens (and it will happen at some stage), step back from the project and review things in detail. Look at the breakdown of action steps, their priority and sequencing. It could be that with a bit of adjustment, you will regain your momentum. Sometimes the problems will arise because of poor planning. Just go back and re-plan in more detail. The issue might be as simple as when you first drew up the plan, not all the tasks could be captured with sufficient detail. By revisiting them with the knowledge you now have, it is almost certain you can improve on the plan.

Sometimes, the task you are attempting is so large that it does have some unclear aspects. Occasionally it won't always be possible to determine all the action steps at the beginning or put them all in the correct order. You will always be able to determine enough action steps to allow some progress to be made. Keep reviewing and revising your plans in the light of both progress and experiences.

Always reflect on which tasks are the 20% of tasks which produce 80% of the results. Focus your energies on those 20% tasks so that your time is spent on high value tasks. Always track your progress against your plan so you can readily spot when you are veering off track or falling behind schedule.

So you THINK about the action steps that need to be undertaken in order for you to meet your goal. You PLAN each step in detail and focus on the 20% of tasks that leverage 80% of the results. Then you can take ACTION, to move yourself towards your goal.

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