



2/9/2018

The Achievement Cycle

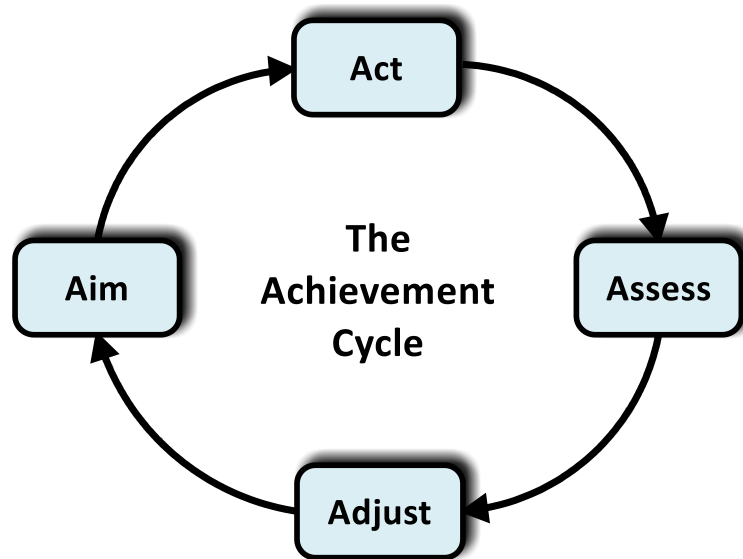
Aim, Act, Assess, Adjust



Fred Nickols
DISTANCE CONSULTING LLC

The Achievement Cycle: Aim, Act, Assess, Adjust

Among the more helpful tools used by knowledge workers are the frameworks they use to guide and shape their thinking and actions. These frameworks often take the form of diagrams, like the one shown in the figure below. Diagrams are often simplifications of what can be very complex and complicated situations; however, in their simplification lies their value: they keep you focused and they keep you from losing your way in those frequently confusing mazes posed by reality. This piece describes one such tool: The Achievement Cycle.



© Fred Nickols 2017

The Achievement Cycle is marked by four A's: Aim, Act, Assess and Adjust. First you aim, you target some result or outcome, a change in the value of some variable. With your aim clear, you act, you do things meant to achieve your aim. Next, you assess the effects and the efficacy of your actions. Finally, if necessary (and it usually is), you adjust your actions – and perhaps your aim – then cycle through the loop again. The cycle is iterative, it repeats until your aim is accomplished or until the effort is called off. More on the iterative nature of the cycle in a moment.

A Couple of Examples

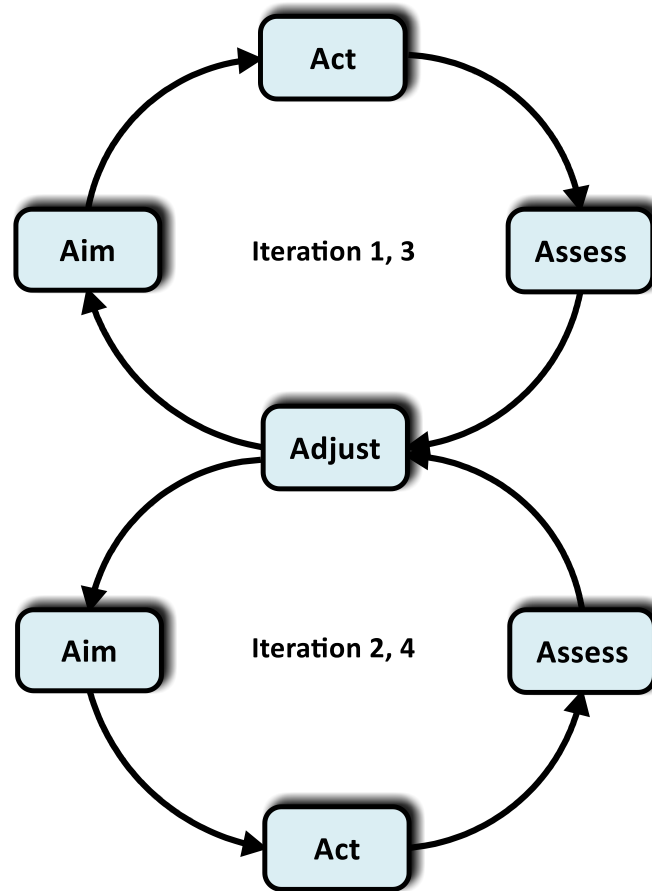
The four A's are easily illustrated using just one aspect of the activity of driving an automobile: staying in your lane. When I am the driver, one of my aims is to stay inside the lines marking my lane. I also aim in a literal sense by aligning the left front fender of my car with the left lane marker. When I act I can be seen turning the steering wheel left or right or holding it steady. I visually assess the position of my car in its lane on a continuous basis and I continuously adjust the steering wheel left or right to keep the car centered in my lane.

I could also use obeying the speed limit as another example. My aim or intent is to obey the speed limit. I aim at or target various speeds (e.g., 25 mph, 35 mph, 70 mph or whatever the limit happens to be in my current location). I assess my actual speed by keeping an eye on the speedometer and I accelerate or decelerate depending on whether I am under or over the targeted speed.

The Achievement Cycle: Aim, Act, Assess, Adjust

Other examples include driving safely, avoiding road hazards, avoiding other drivers, and maintaining a safe distance between my car and the car in front of me. Examples abound. The four A's are pervasive – in our daily lives and in our lives at work.

The iterative nature of The Achievement Cycle is illustrated in the figure below. Assuming the desired result is not achieved during the first pass through the cycle, adjustments made in the first iteration lead to a second iteration. Again, if the result is not achieved, the adjustments made lead to a third iteration and that could conceivably lead to a fourth iteration and perhaps more. The cycle repeats until the desired result is achieved or abandoned.



© Fred Nickols 2017

Now, let's look at each of the four A's in a little more detail.

Aim

Two matters are important here. First, is your aim as that term refers to your intent or purpose, the goal or outcomes you seek. Second, is your aim in a literal sense, that is, what variable or variables are you aiming at? It helps to keep in mind that an outcome or result is achieved by changing the value of some variable. Some relevant questions related to Aim are listed below.

- What is your aim, your intent, your intended outcome?

The Achievement Cycle: Aim, Act, Assess, Adjust

- What is the variable at which you are aiming and intend affecting or altering its value?
- What is its current value?
- What is your intended or desired value?

Remember: Even the best marksman can't hit the bullseye if he doesn't know where the target is. Successful achievement begins with clarity regarding your aim. With your aim clearly defined and in mind your next step is to act.

Act

To act is to do things meant to achieve your aim, to bring some targeted variable to a specified value, to hit the bullseye as it were. To do that, you must change things. If the result you're after is something achievable through direct, immediate action, accomplishing it is quite straightforward. For example, if you want a fresh cup of coffee and there is none, you can quickly and easily make a pot. However, if what you want is a banquet for a lengthy list of guests, matters are not so simple. Now the result you're after cannot be achieved solely through your own direct, immediate actions. Many other factors and people are involved and achieving your aim will likely take some time. Here, too, there are questions to be asked. Below are listed some of the more obvious ones.

- Is this something I can accomplish on my own or are the efforts of others involved?
- Is the result I'm after something achievable through direct, immediate action, or must I set in motion other actors and factors?
- What does the larger structure or network of variables in which the targeted variable is embedded look like?
- What are those other variables?
- How are they connected to one another and to the targeted variable?
- What is the path that connects the variables you can affect through direct, immediate action with the targeted variable?

Assess

To assess is to take stock and you want to take stock of several things. These, too, are reflected in questions you can ask.

- Are we making progress?
- Have we achieved our aim yet?
- Is everyone doing their part?
- Do we have enough resources?
- Are they the right kind of resources?
- Are our actions having the desired effects?
- Where have we been surprised and by what?
- What are we learning?

Adjust

The Scottish poet Robert Burns famously wrote, "The best laid plans o' mice and men gang aft aglay," meaning that things often don't go as intended. Surprises in the form of unforeseen circumstances crop up as do the effects of erroneous assumptions. Failures in execution also occur. But not all is dreary. On occasion, we surprise ourselves with how well things are going. This, too, can call for an adjustment.

The Achievement Cycle: Aim, Act, Assess, Adjust

We might adjust our actions, resource levels, expectations, timing and timeframes. The one thing you can usually rely on is that some kind of adjustment will prove necessary and, once made, the cycle starts again: confirm your aim, act, assess and, oh yes, perhaps you will need to make additional adjustments.

Conclusions

To achieve an outcome – any outcome – you must do four things: Aim, Act, Assess and Adjust. These four A's constitute a cycle of achievement – *the* cycle of achievement. Get it right and you are certain to succeed. Get it wrong and you are certain to fail.

The Achievement Cycle and its four A's constitute a simple, yet useful and effective tool for thinking through and thinking about what you want to achieve and how to achieve it. Aim, Act, Assess and Adjust. It's as simple as that.