

Learning & Development

How to make a lasting contribution

By Tad Waddington

Tad Waddington is director of performance measurement for Accenture.
tad.waddington@accenture.com

Most executives are, by definition, great at *executing*—at getting things done. But do their accomplishments matter? Do they achieve the ephemeral or the enduring? The trivial or the significant?

The question for all of us is this: How do we make a lasting contribution?¹ And the answer is: We *cause* it. But causing a lasting contribution is obviously a complex matter in a world of constant change and limited resources. How can we best think, plan and act to cause the kind of contribution that lasts?

Thinking about causes

Some 2,300 years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle offered a framework for thinking about causality. Aristotle argued that it is useful to think in terms of four causes:

1. **The material cause**—what a thing is made of. Clay is the material cause of a brick. Steel is part of the material cause of a car.
2. **The efficient cause**—the action that brings something into being. The gathering and firing of clay are the efficient cause of a brick. The workers on an assembly line are the efficient cause of a car.
3. **The formal cause**—the idea or plan of a thing. The steps put in place to prepare a mold and fire the clay are the formal cause of a brick. The engineer's design is the formal cause of a car.
3. **The final cause**—why a thing is, or the sake for which a thing is done. A final cause of a brick is to make a wall. The final cause of a car is to help you get from here to there.

These four causes can serve as a kind of blueprint for setting your goal—your lasting contribution—and then for creating a plan, marshalling resources and taking action.

Dealing with complexity: Efficient cause

Efficient causation is about taking action. Sometimes action seems simple. You do one thing, and one thing results. More often, however, a single action does not result in a single effect.

Systems theorists tell us that the world is a "complex adaptive system." A single action most often results in multiple effects, and new things can enter the picture to change the nature of the system entirely. Thus, the first part of the blueprint of meaningful contribution is the realization that one must "act complexly"—with knowledge of the multiple effects any single action can produce. Practically speaking, that means you must gather as much information as possible, and generate as much feedback as possible, which is then reflected back into changes in your actions.

Taking effective action also may mean *not* taking action in some cases. Consider Ted Williams, the last baseball player to bat over .400. He calculated that there were 72 different paths along which a ball could pass through his strike zone. He reckoned that he could hit five of them—and he swung at *only* those five. Legendary investor Warren Buffett has labeled this "strategic inaction." Deciding what *not* to do may be crucial to your plans to make a

¹ This point of view is adapted from Tad Waddington's book, *Lasting Contribution: How to Think, Plan, and Act to Accomplish Meaningful Work* (Agate 2007)—a winner of a National Best Books 2007 Award.

lasting contribution.

Your resources: Material cause

Material cause involves what you have to work with: your resources. Perhaps you command legions or can throw millions of dollars at a problem. Perhaps not. Whatever other resources you may have (or may lack), you unquestionably have a mind—which means you have the capacity to acquire enough material cause to make a lasting contribution.

Several aspects of your own intelligence are particularly critical when it comes to the material cause of your lasting contribution. One is perception—a talent that must be cultivated. A bird watcher learns to see a rare species where others see only a mass of green leaves. By developing your powers of perception, you will be able to see and seize opportunities that others miss.

A second important concept is expertise. When scientists began to study expertise, they first assumed that experts must be smarter than novices. Over time, however, they learned that the key difference between experts and novices is not raw mental power, but accumulated knowledge. That is good news. It means that your confidence in making a lasting contribution need not be daunted by the realization that others may be smarter than you. Anyone can acquire knowledge, which means anyone can become an expert in something.

A final concept here is mastery. I think of mastery the way the Japanese think of *sasuga*—the idea that if you are a master of one thing, then you are a master of all things. Once you have reached mastery, even of a small task, you have an advantage. Having achieved mastery once, you have a sense of how it feels, and this sense can guide you as you tackle new tasks.

Good planning: Formal cause

The formal cause is your plan for putting your resources into play in the service of your goal. This is an important part of your effort to make a lasting contribution, because the formal cause changes the nature of the equation. Think of the checklist that pilots use before takeoff. If they were certain they could never make a mistake, they would not need a checklist. Knowing, however, that few people are perfect all of the time, a good pilot sensibly decides to use a list that was prepared by experts.

Similarly, a good plan helps you to make a lasting contribution, because it gives you a view of the big picture, which helps you with two things related to the formal cause:

- **Goal coherence:** Mapping your goals so that they include what you are trying to accomplish, as well as what you want to prevent from happening and the existing things you want to keep from disappearing.
- **Resource allocation:** A plan helps to show you what is possible and what is not. Of all the things you *can* do, the plan will tell you what you *must* do to succeed, as well as what you can do without, if necessary—which helps you allocate resources more effectively.

Embodying your goal: Final cause

The goal you are trying to achieve is the *final cause*. Being aware of this goal helps you to make a lasting contribution, because it focuses your attention in the right places.

Yet it is unlikely you will succeed if you take a dispassionate approach to pursuing your goal. There is an underlying spirit to your actions, and that spirit captures the essence of the final cause. The final cause of washing your baby isn't just a clean baby; it is demonstrating that you love your child. Final causes provide the motive force to your actions. Final causes should stoke the fires of your soul and provoke your passions.

You do this, in part, by consciously mythologizing the causal process. Religion scholar Mircea Eliade once observed that for us to have meaningful lives, we must put our lives into a narrative, a story, a myth. Seeing yourself as the hero in your own story is a key to making a lasting contribution, because a good final cause must give you the motivation you need to succeed.

Conclusion: Multiplying your contribution

A key to successfully using the four-cause framework to make a lasting contribution is coordinated action. When you get all four causes to work together, you are more likely to succeed in your endeavors.

Consider this thought experiment: Imagine that you have 12 points of effort to put into an action. Many people put all of their effort into the efficient cause (the actions themselves) and largely neglect the other three causes. This can be represented by the following:

Efficient cause = 9; Material cause = 1;
Formal cause = 1; Final cause = 1

But since it is the output of the entire system that matters (which can be represented by the product of the elements), the result is $9 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 = 9$ points of effect. On the other hand, if you were seeking to maximize the output of the system, you would allocate your effort evenly—distributing 3 points of effort to each cause.

The result would be $3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3 = 81$, a nine-fold increase in efficacy. This example suggests that you will get the greatest return for your efforts by not fixating on just one cause, but by harmonizing among all four.

Consider this your own blueprint for making a lasting contribution: Pursue a worthy goal (final cause), master your resources (material cause), have a plan for maximizing your efficacy (formal cause), take sophisticated action (efficient cause), and coordinate the four causes so that they work together toward your desired end.

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