
Lasting Contribution

HOW TO THINK, PLAN,
AND ACT TO ACCOMPLISH
MEANINGFUL WORK

Tad Waddington

A B2 Book

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I

Getting Started

THINKING CAUSALLY

The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.

—WILLIAM JAMES

Sooner or later every thinking person asks the immortal question: have I made a difference in the world? If you ask this question later in life, your next step is an exercise in ethical accounting: you once spilled tea on your friend's new shirt, but made up for it by saving his life after he was in a car wreck. If, however, you ask this question sooner, then your next question is: how do I make a difference? Actually that shouldn't be your next question, because it is easy to make a *difference*. A single match can burn down a forest and what a difference that makes. A better question is: how can I contribute to the world?

There are many answers to this question. You can run errands for your elderly neighbor, pick up litter in the park, or leave a generous tip for your footsore waiter. But while these activities are important, they point to the limits of the question. Imagine that cars always speed near a certain playground, and it's only a matter of time before a child is killed. You could make

the world a better place if you were to stand by the road and wave a flag at the speeding cars to encourage them to slow down, but your contribution would stop the moment you stopped waving the flag. Or you could post a sign that says, “Slow.” For this to be a contribution, however, drivers would have to read and heed the sign. The sign is ineffective, because the speeders might be driving too fast to see it. So you decide to change the nature of the equation. You get a speed bump installed. The speeders slow down, and the kids are safer.

So the question isn't just: how do you contribute? The question is: how do you make a contribution that lasts? Unfortunately the solutions to most of the world's problems aren't as easy as installing the occasional speed bump, so the question becomes: given that the world is big and complex, how do you make a lasting contribution? In other words, how do you accomplish something that matters? How do people like you and me achieve not the ephemeral, but the enduring; not the trivial, but the significant? The answer is that just like everything else in the world—from tea stains to speed bumps—lasting contributions *are caused*. Simply put, you *cause* a lasting contribution to happen. The problem is that the way people usually think about causality does not serve them well when it comes to thinking about taking action.

People tend to think of causality as one billiard ball striking another that ricochets into another and another. On a wintry mountain a squirrel drops an acorn. It falls and dislodges some snow. The snow slides, knocking free yet more snow, causing an avalanche. The distant roar of the avalanche startles you as you pour tea. It

spills on your friend's new shirt. You apologize to your friend, but in a sense, it was the squirrel that caused the tea stain.

But even if the world does work this way, this may not be the best way to *think about* taking meaningful action. Suppose you want to help people by healing them. You plan to use your existing skills and knowledge to attend medical school to become a doctor. This thought raises some problems with our notion of billiard-ball causality: healing people, which started the whole chain of events, hasn't happened yet. Does this mean the future causes the past? Probably not. Maybe it is your *desire* to help people that starts the chain of events. But is your desire caused or is it free will? Aren't your existing skills and knowledge, your passion to contribute to the world, and your plan of going to medical school all part of the *cause* of your becoming a doctor?

When it comes to human action, skills, passions, and plans are part of causality. Some 2,300 years ago, Aristotle argued that it is useful to think in terms of four causes:

1. *Of what* a thing is made, also called the **material cause**. Clay is the material cause of a brick. Steel, rubber, and plastic are part of the material cause of a car.
2. *How* something is made, also called the **efficient cause**. The efficient cause is billiard-ball causality, the action that brings something into being. It is the gathering and firing of clay to make a brick. The workers on an assembly line are the efficient cause of a car.
3. *What* a thing is, also called the **formal cause**. The formal cause is the essence, idea, or plan of a thing.

The essence of a brick is that it is an expression of an idea of the right size, shape, and strength of an object needed for building. The engineer's design is the formal cause of a car.

4. *Why* a thing is, the sake for which a thing is done, also called the **final cause**. The final cause of a brick is to make a wall. The final cause of a car is that it helps you get from here to there.

What is the cause of climbing a mountain? The material cause is your climbing gear—oxygen, ice axes, and tents. The efficient cause is putting one foot in front of the other. The formal cause is the route you plan to take. The final cause, explained British mountaineer George Mallory, who died on Everest, is “because it is there.”

Bricks, cars, and mountains, however, are simple. How do the four causes work in a complex, dynamic, and messy world such as the one in which we live? The intent of this book is to help you make a lasting contribution to the world, because when doers think before acting and when thinkers take action, remarkable results follow. When doers don't think before acting and when thinkers don't act, good people's efforts fail to achieve their full impact. It is not that that doers are stupid or that thinkers are lazy; they merely lack a theory to guide and facilitate their actions. Using Aristotle's four causes to guide and facilitate your actions can help you to think more clearly and act more effectively, which will help you to achieve lasting results—results that are worth achieving.

At this point, you may be concerned that you are not

talented enough to make a lasting contribution. In the course of this book, I will show that this concern is chimerical, but for now, here is an example of the sort of lasting contribution that is within your reach. It comes from Peter F. Drucker's book, *The Effective Executive*:

A new hospital administrator, holding his first staff meeting, thought that a rather difficult matter had been settled to everyone's satisfaction, when one of the participants suddenly asked: "Would this have satisfied Nurse Bryan?" At once the argument started all over and did not subside until a new and much more ambitious solution to the problem had been hammered out.

Nurse Bryan, the administrator learned, had been a long-serving nurse at the hospital. She was not particularly distinguished, had not in fact ever been a supervisor. But whenever a decision on patient care came up on her floor, Nurse Bryan would ask, "Are we doing the best we can do to help this patient?" Patients on Nurse Bryan's floor did better and recovered faster. Gradually over the years, the whole hospital had learned to adopt what came to be known as "Nurse Bryan's Rule"; had learned, in other words, to ask: "Are we really making the best contribution to the purpose of this hospital?"

Though Nurse Bryan herself had retired almost ten years earlier, the standards she had set still made demands on people who in terms of training and position were her superiors.

Every person is capable of accomplishing as much as Nurse Bryan.

Finally, a word of warning. You will be disappointed if you believe that contribution is a nail, and this book a hammer. The world and what you must do in it to make a lasting contribution are far too complex for such a simple perspective to be effective. This book was written to help you not in the way a hammer helps you to build a house, but in the way a blueprint does. It prepares you for action.