Achieving Stable Results under Varying Conditions

Managers as "Living Control Systems"

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Managers are profitably viewed as "living control systems" (i.e., as capable of bringing certain variables in their world to some specified value – and keeping them there). In other words, they can – and they are charged with – achieving stable results under varying conditions. A view of managers as living control systems provides useful insights into what it takes to achieve and maintain control of a targeted variable. In this article, the Target Model is used to examine managerial performance from a control systems perspective. The model is briefly reviewed and its implications examined.

Introduction

Let's face it: many managers have tough and often thankless jobs. They are expected to produce required results no matter what else is going on – and no excuses accepted. A key supplier just went out of business? Tough; find another. Just lost a major account? Tough again; go bag a new one. New safety regulations require major changes to the production line? Okay; make 'em and get on with it. Oh, and while you're at it, find a way of recouping those retooling costs. HR has just announced that the performance appraisal system is about to be changed for the umpteenth time? So what? It'll probably be changed umpteen more times. Senior management has launched several new initiatives, some of which conflict with one another? That's old news. Pick which ones you're really going to support, flag those you'll give lip service, tag those you can safely ignore and get back to your own work.

Another way of looking at the manager's job is to say that *managers are expected to achieve stability in results under varying conditions.* Obviously, this requires managers to vary their actions. The work of a manager cannot hang on "canned" or prefigured work routines. Managers must configure or craft their responses to fit the situation at hand; they must figure out what to do instead of simply adhering to good practice; and that, in turn, implies high degrees of autonomy, initiative and discretion.

It would be foolish to proclaim that all managerial action is ineffective or inefficient. It would be just as foolish to assert that all managerial action is as effective and efficient as possible. There is always room for improvement. In any event, if there is a central issue regarding managerial performance, it surely must be the effectiveness of managerial action, that is, the extent to which managerial action does or doesn't produce the required results.

My aim in this paper is to explore The Target Model of Human Behavior and Performance (see Figure 1) as applied to managerial performance. I hope this will provide those who are interested in managerial performance with insights into managerial behavior and with ideas regarding ways and means of improving managerial performance.

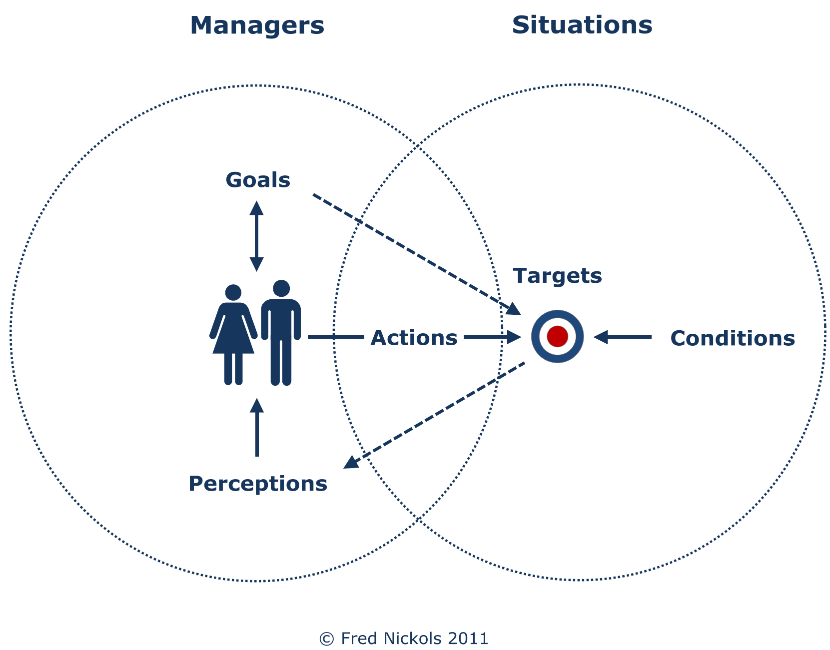

Figure 1 – The Target Model

A few words about how we'll proceed: As just stated, the focus of this paper is the Target Model, a diagram depicting the key elements of managerial behavior and performance. Central to this model is a view of the manager as a "living control system" and as an *interventionist*, as someone who changes things in the situation at hand so as to realize sought-after results. We'll make an initial pass through the model and then examine some of its implications. At the end of this paper you will find in Figure 3 a flowchart version of the control loop logic implicit in the model.

Managerial Performance: A Brief Review

Managers are responsible for achieving and maintaining results. In other words, they are expected to control certain variables. The variables a manager might be expected and attempt to control can include financial results such as meeting a budget, reducing the costs associated with an operation, or increasing revenue. A manager might also target operational results such as maintaining or increasing a specified level of production, service or quality. In any case, there are variables for which the manager is responsible and that the manager attempts to control. These targeted variables are represented by the bulls-eye in Figure 1.

To achieve the results of interest, managers take action, they do things intended to obtain and maintain the results for which they are responsible.

But there are other actors and factors at work, there are other conditions that affect the variables a manager has targeted for control. The impact of a manager's actions can be offset or even completely negated by these other actors and factors. People might not "go along with the program." Some might even resist openly. Things change. Funding might be withdrawn, budgets cut, staff members are reassigned, and units reorganized. The net effect on the targets a manager attempts to control reflects not just his or her actions but the sum of his or her actions and the effects of these other actors and factors. The effects of these other actors and factors constitute the conditions under which the manager is expected to perform and these conditions often pose "disturbances" to the targeted variables the manager seeks to control.

Depending on the targeted variable in question the disturbances posed by external conditions might be relatively minor, no more than background noise, a mere nuisance. On the other hand, depending again on the targeted variables in question, disturbances can present the manager with a degree of turbulence or turmoil that amounts to chaos. Picture the poor sales manager who is expected to boost sales while customers are defecting to a competitor with a better product – and, making matters worse, this same competitor is also hiring away the sales manager's best sales representatives. It is possible for other actors and factors to pose overwhelming disturbances to the manager's attempts to control certain targeted variables.

All any manager knows of the current state of those targeted variables or results he or she is attempting to control is known by way of the manager's perceptions. These might be based on direct observation, reading a financial or production report or talking with other people. It is the manager's perceptions or beliefs about the current state or value of a targeted variable (e.g., degree of adherence to budget) that is compared with the manager's goal for that variable. If the manager's perceptions of the target variable do not align with the manager's goal for that variable, a difference or discrepancy exists. It is this difference or discrepancy that leads to managerial action. If no difference or discrepancy exists, there is no requirement to act.

Implications of the Model

The main implications of the Target Model for managerial performance are as follows:

- Clarity regarding the variables to be controlled and the goals for those targeted variables is essential. The distinction between a goal and a targeted variable is as follows: A targeted variable is some factor you wish to control (e.g., profit). A goal is a prescribed level for that variable (e.g., profit equal to 15% of sales). Without goal clarity, there is no way of determining whether or not there is a discrepancy and, without this knowledge, the manager will not know action is required.

- It is equally important to ensure that perceptions of the targeted variable are as accurate and timely as possible. To see discrepancies where there are none or to fail to see them when they exist results in wrongheaded action – or in wrongheaded inaction.

- Because action arises from a difference or discrepancy between goals for targeted variables and perceptions of those variables, it is understandably the case that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" – and appropriately so. You see, that squeaky wheel is not supposed to squeak and greasing it eliminates the discrepancy between perception and goal.

- A manager's actions are part of the manager *and* part of the situation. It is through action that the manager is connected to the situation and it is through action in and on the situation that the manager does or doesn't realize his or her goals.

- A manager's actions aimed at changing a situation are best viewed as *interventions*, as changes made in and to the situation with a purpose or outcome in mind. Change management, then, is a key part of every manager's job and the manager's role is essentially that of an interventionist.

- Change is indirect. Changes are made at one place in the situation so as to bring about certain desired effects elsewhere. The manager, then, must be concerned with *proximate* targets and results (i.e., places where the direct and immediate effects of his or her actions will be felt) and *ultimate* targets and results (i.e., those places where results that are indirect and delayed, farther off in time and space, will be realized). This obligates the manager to identify the linkages connecting the two and doing so yields *intermediate* targets and results (see Figure 2).

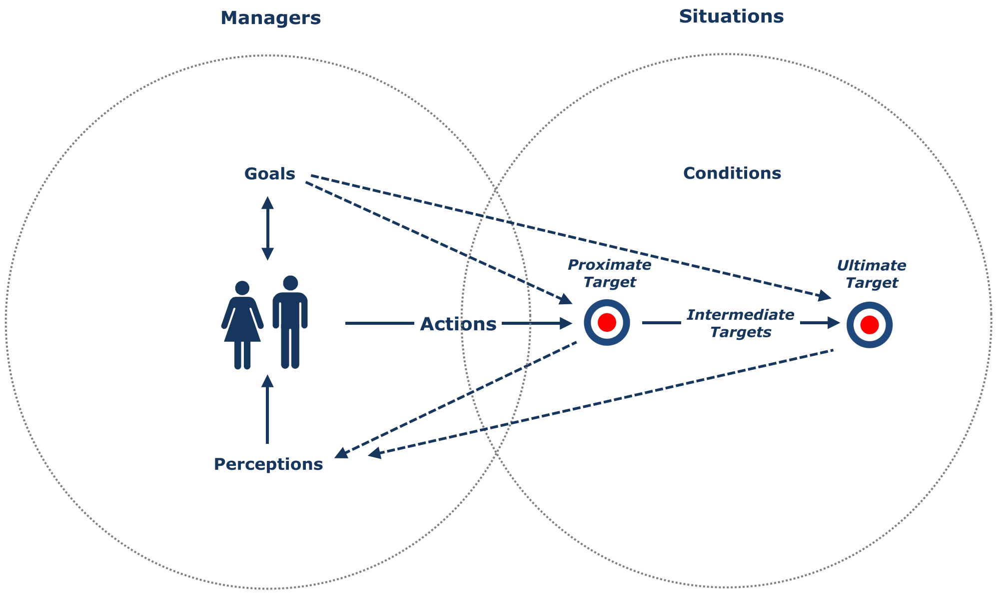

Figure 2 – Proximate, Intermediate and Ultimate Targets

- If managers are to be responsible – and accountable – for the effectiveness of their actions, they must understand the structure or architecture of the situations in which they intervene. That architecture, be it financial, operational or behavioral forms the performance architecture of the larger organization.

- Managers must occasionally "map" the structure or the architecture of the often complex and dynamic situations in which they intervene so as be able to identify the linkages between the places they can take direct action (points of intervention) and the places where the variables they are trying to control can be assessed (points of evaluation).

- Controlling a targeted variable requires that the manager take into account other conditions influencing that variable. The amount of "disturbance" posed by these other actors and factors can range from negligible through minor turmoil to major turbulence. Managing these "disturbances" or their effects is a natural part of a manager's job. For this reason, the much-lamented "fire-fighting" and "crisis management" activities of many managers owe not to failings on their part but instead to the nature of their work and the situations in which they find themselves. Moreover, achieving and maintaining stable results in an unstable environment, demands that managers must be accomplished "fire fighters."

- As indicated earlier, achieving and maintaining stable results in an unstable environment requires of managers that they vary their actions to suit the circumstances at hand. The aim of managerial action is to keep the perceived value of a targeted variable aligned with the intended value for that variable (i.e., the goal state). Managers, therefore, must gauge the effectiveness of their actions and interventions in terms of the effects they have on the variables they are attempting to control instead of relying on simple adherence to supposedly effective management practice, even if it comes bearing the label "best practice."

- When the variables a manager is attempting to control consists of aspects of the behavior of other people, the manager would do well to remember that other people, like the manager, are “living control systems” and, like the manager, other people also:

    1. target certain variables for control,
    2. set goals that define the desired state or value of those variables,
    3. perceive the current state or value of those targeted variables,
    4. detect discrepancies between a targeted variable’s goal state and its perceived state,
    5. act in ways that bring the perceived state into alignment with the goal state, and
    6. take into account and compensate for other actors and factors (including their manager).

- Managers who are inclined to micro-manage should recognize that *such efforts inevitably entail attempting to control the behavior of other people instead of their performance* and that this focus on behavior instead of performance is frequently dysfunctional – for two reasons.

    1. First, efforts to control another human being’s behavior are certain to generate conflict. Why? Because an individual’s behavior is the means to many ends, not just one. Attempts by Person A to control Person B’s behavior disrupt Person B’s ability to vary his or her behavior in ways that achieve Person B’s goals. In terms of the Target Model, micro-management by Person A constitutes a “disturbance” and, as such will be taken into account and might be countered by Person B.

    2. Second, people must be free to vary their behavior so as to achieve the results they’re after in the face of changing conditions and circumstances. This includes the results their boss is after. If you restrict people’s freedom to vary their behavior in pursuit of results, you restrict the results they can achieve.

- The main path for avoiding and resolving conflict is to communicate the organization’s or supervising manager’s goals for the targeted variables and to then develop individual or reporting subordinate goals that align with the organization’s or manager’s. Once these goals are agreed upon and the person knows what results are targeted and expected, the person can then vary his or her behavior as required so as to achieve and maintain the goal state for the targeted variable.

- It is also essential to ensure that individuals have the necessary skills, abilities, resources, equipment and support to achieve the targets that have been established.

A Few Words about Theory and an Acknowledgement

Some managers don’t like theory. They dismiss it out of hand and snort, “Give me something practical.” Some managers reading this paper might also look at the list of implications above and say something like, “I already knew all that.”

Kurt Lewin is frequently credited with saying, “Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory.” All technicians, most engineers, and many managers also know that a good diagram or schematic of the system which you are trying to operate, maintain, improve or, in some cases, repair is every bit as practical as a good theory. In this paper, all the implications above are derived from a single diagram and they are also derived from a single theory. Nowhere else in management practice is so much traceable to or explained by a single theory.

The theoretical basis of the Target Model is “Perceptual Control Theory (PCT).” PCT was developed and has been articulated by William T. Powers in several books and numerous papers. The most salient for the purposes of this paper are listed below. If you would like to know more, my recommendation would be to start with the most recent book and work your way back to the earlier ones.

1. W. T. Powers, “Behavior: The Control of Perception” (New York: Aldine de Gruyter,1973 and 2005).
2. W.T. Powers, “Living Control Systems: Selected Papers of William T. Powers” (Gravel Switch: Control Systems Group, 1989).
3. W.T. Powers, “Making Sense of Behavior: The Meaning of Control” (New Canaan: Benchmark Publications, 1998).

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a writer, consultant and former executive with more than 50 years of experience in the workplace, including 20 years in the United States Navy. His interests and consulting practice focus on three major domains of performance (organizational, operational and individual). He has authored dozens of articles, book chapters and papers and they have appeared in a wide variety of books, magazines and professional journals. His many articles are available on his web site at www.nickols.us. Fred can be reached via email at fred@nickols.us.

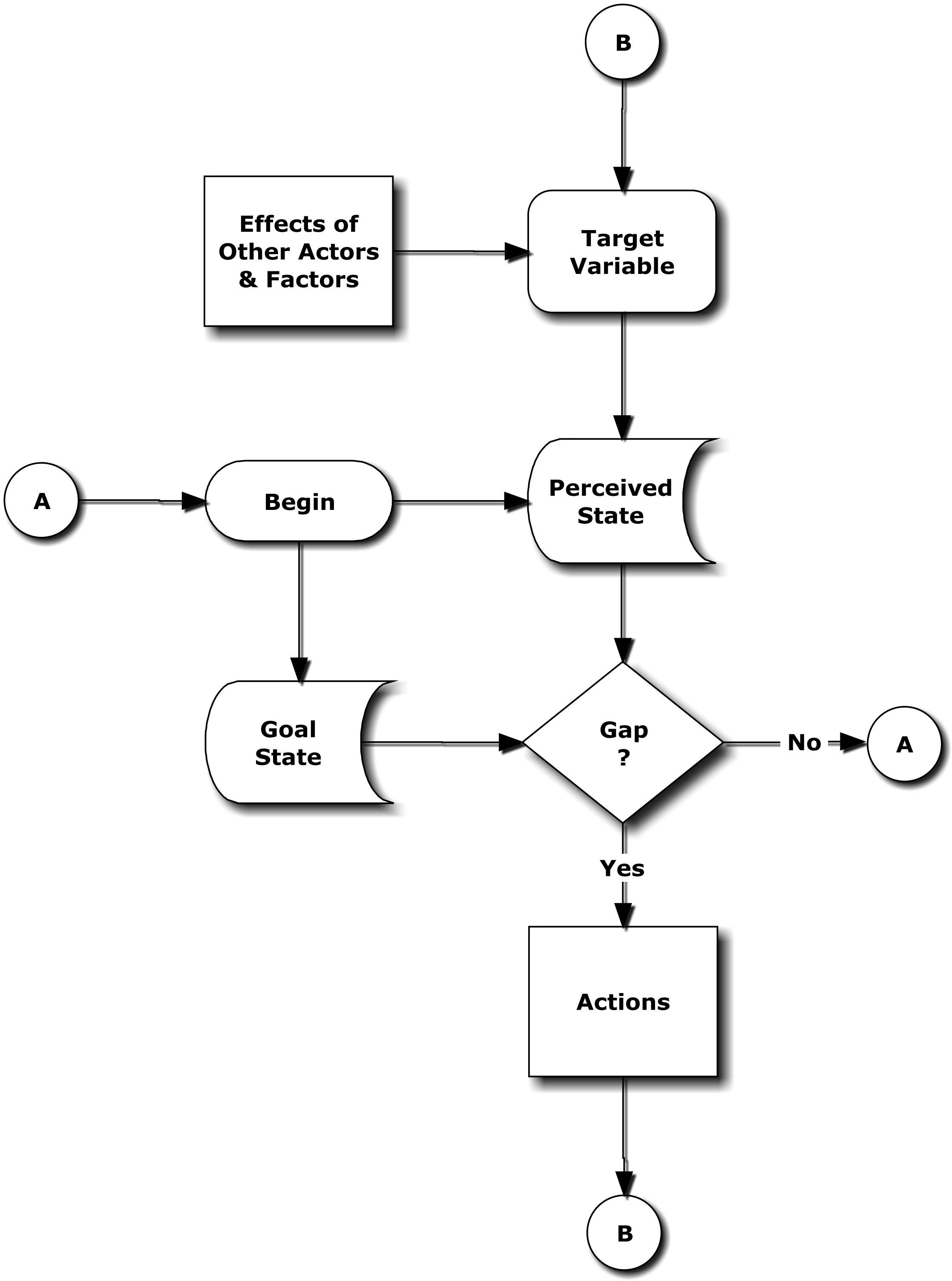

Figure 3 – Target Model Control Loop in Flowchart Form