Knowledge Worker
Goal Clarity
(April 2015)

If knowledge workers can be said to do anything, it is that they engage in that mysterious mental activity known as "thinking." I'm a knowledge worker and lately I've been thinking about a topic near and dear to the heart of managers, executives and, of course, performance improvement professionals: *goal clarity*. In this month's column, I'll share that thinking.

You don't have to look very far to note that many writers focused on work, management, performance, achievement and accomplishment emphasize the important of goal clarity with respect to workplace goals and objectives. Obviously, no one can perform to expectations if they are not clear about the goal to be achieved. But just what is goal clarity? Is it a statement so crisp and unambiguous that it requires no elaboration? Is it the end product of conversations between boss and subordinate? Is it a set of standards and measures for assessing goal attainment? Does it reduce to simple adherence to the SMART acronym? Well, those are all worthwhile notions but I have something else in mind.

Let's start with the obvious: A goal reflects some result to be achieved. And here is where it gets interesting because there is an aspect of results that is not so obvious.

A result is defined by the desired value of some workplace variable. That variable might be financial (e.g., earnings per share, unit cost, or sales volume in dollars). It might be operational (e.g., the error rate in a particular process, the percentage of waste, or units produced per hour). Or it might pertain to people (e.g., the retention rate in a job specialty or the span of control in a particular unit).

It is helpful to think about results as having two components: (1) the target variable and (2) the target value for that variable. A defect rate offers a good example. The target variable is the defect rate. The target value of that variable might be something like 3 defects per million.

The point being made here is this: At the heart of all goals for results to be achieved is a *variable*, quite literally, something that varies. Also at the heart of the matter is the desired value of that variable.

That you are out to achieve a particular result means that the current value of the variable in question does not match its intended or required value. There is a gap to close.

Chances are the gap isn't going to close itself. You are going to have to do something to close it. You will have to change something. But what? Where to look and for what?

- *Where* you look is in the structure of the situation in which your target variable may be said to be embedded.
- *What* you're looking for are other variables that affect the one you have targeted – and you're looking specifically for other variables you can change as the result of direct and immediate action.

Knowledge Worker
Goal Clarity
(April 2015)

You can't directly change the error rate in a process but you can change something else that affects error rate; perhaps the quality of the input materials or the accuracy of a given step in the process. My point here is that change is typically indirect; you don't change *it*, you change something else and *it* changes as a result. Consequently, the search is always for variables you can change as a consequence of direct and immediate action. In turn, the effects of those changes ripple through the structure of the situation in which your targeted variable is embedded and make themselves felt on the targeted variable in the kinds of changes you want to see there.

To sum all this up, goal clarity exists when you are clear about the following:

1. The variable whose value you are out to change.
2. The desired or required value of that variable.
3. The structure in which the targeted variable is embedded.
4. Other variables related to the targeted variable.
5. Variables you can affect directly.
6. The paths connecting the variables you can affect directly to the one whose value you are out to change.

 If you are clear about those six factors the odds of achieving the result you're after is as good as it gets.

The preceding discussion is reflected in the diagram on the following page which illustrates six factors affecting goal clarity.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Worker's Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available here.

Factors Affecting Goal Clarity

© Fred Nickols 2015

The curved lines in the diagram above indicate two necessary avenues related to achieving a goal:

(1) Identification of the target variable, the desired value of that variable, the surrounding structure in which the target variable is embedded and related variables that affect the target variable.

(2) Identification of the related variables to which you have direct access and can alter, and the paths that connect these influencing variables to the target variable.

With this knowledge in hand you can be said to be clear about the goal to be achieved, and how to achieve it. Without it, goal clarity simply doesn't exist.