

Knowledge Worker

The Heart of Achievement: Figuring Out What to Do

(September 2018)

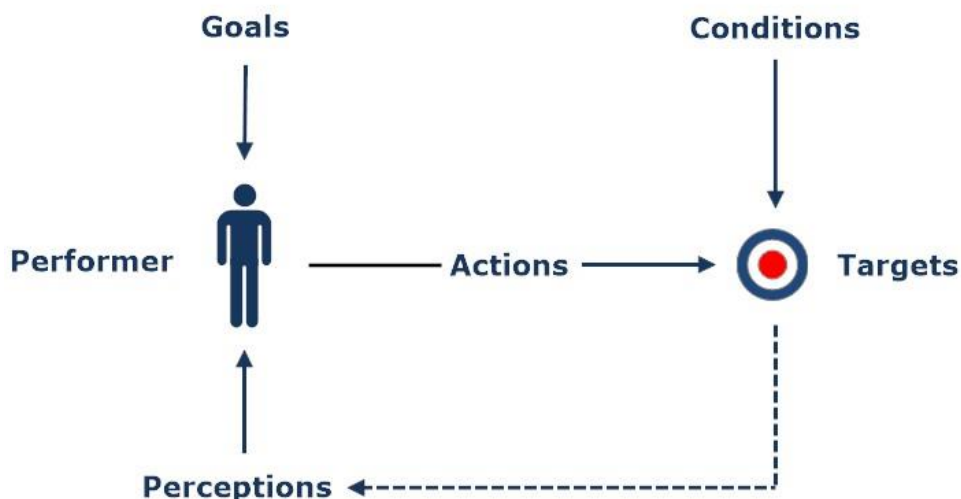
Achievement Hinges on Control

Let me begin by stating the obvious: To achieve a goal, any goal, we must exercise control over the relevant factors. It is useful, then, to examine control as exercised by human beings.

The GAP-ACT or Target Model depicted below presents a straightforward view of control as it pertains to human behavior and performance. The model is based on Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) as developed and articulated by the late William T. Powers. It also provides a nice framework for what I call “The Art of Achievement.” A brief explanation follows.

- We have goals. These are desired states of affairs. More specifically, our goals specify a desired or intended value for some targeted variable.
- We compare our perception of the current value of the target variable with our goal, with what we want it to be and, if there is an error, an unacceptable gap, we act to close that gap.
- Neither we nor the variables we aim to control exist in a vacuum. There are other actors and factors that can independently affect the same variables we wish to control. To achieve our aims, then, there are other conditions with which we must be concerned.

The GAP-ACT Model



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The Heart of the Matter

All that sounds simple enough – and it is – but it doesn’t tell the whole story. The heart of the matter lies in the actions we take. The results we seek are often far removed from us in space and time. The path from our actions to the variables we wish to affect can be long and circuitous, indirect instead of direct, and confounded by interference on the part of those other actors and factors (known in PCT as “disturbances”). In short, it is often the case that there is no obvious action we can take; instead, we must figure out what to do. Figuring out what to do is at the heart of achievement.

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Figuring out what to do is first a matter of identifying a path that leads from your direct, immediate actions to the target variable, resulting in the desired change in its value. This path is typically marked by three other categories of variables.

1. Driver Variables are those that directly affect the Target Variable.
2. Accessible Variables are those you can directly affect.
3. Connecting Variables link the Accessible Variables to the Driver Variables.

This arrangement is depicted in the diagram below.

The Achievement Path



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The second task of figuring out what to do entails determining the changes that must occur in the Driver, Connecting and Accessible Variables to realize the desired change in the value of the Target Variable. This is best accomplished by working backward from the Target Variable through the other variables to determine the necessary direct, immediate actions on your part.

The Heart of Achievement – Figuring Out What to Do – is marked by these three steps:

1. Identify the Achievement Path, including the Target, Driver, Connecting and Accessible Variables.
2. Identify the required changes in the values of the Driver, Connecting and Accessible variables.
3. Identify the actions necessary to realize those changes.

A fourth step is to do what you have figured out but that's a separate matter.

A Grain of Salt

Truth be told, each and every day there are countless instances where what has been outlined above is not necessary. Indeed, it would be a waste of time and energy. Most or at least much of the time, we know what to do and we do it. No lengthy analysis is required. Careful, detailed planning is not necessary. No goals or objectives need to be expressly, formally defined and communicated. But, on other occasions, the actions required of us are not immediately apparent and it is in these circumstances that we must figure out what to do to achieve our goals and objectives. It is in these circumstances that what has been laid out above applies.

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Further Reading

For more about the GAP-ACT or Target Model, Perceptual Control Theory, The Achievement Path and The Heart of Achievement, visit the [Control Theory](#) and the [Training and Human Performance](#) sections of my web site. The more than 200 articles, papers and book chapters that can be found on my web site are all freely available.

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, a fire control technician. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, he is the Managing Partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' 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](#).