

Knowledge Worker

The Theory of Relativity - As It Pertains to Means and Ends

(June 2020)

Clearly, the title of this month's column is a bit tongue-in-cheek – but only a bit, mind you – and I hereby apologize to Albert Einstein. However, the title does highlight something that many people seem to overlook; namely, that “means” and “ends” are relative terms, not absolutes. Something is a means or an end only in relation to something else. I'll use a couple of examples from earlier Knowledge Worker columns to make clear what I'm saying.

Wanting to Feel Warmer

Not too long ago, my wife was feeling a little bit chilly and asked me to turn up the thermostat. So, I turned up the thermostat from 70 to 72 degrees, the furnace came on, warm air began to flow out of the floor registers, the room temperature rose until the thermostat sensed the room temperature to be 72 degrees, at which point the furnace was turned off. After a while, my wife said she felt just fine.

Was turning up the thermostat an end or a means? Was that state of the furnace an end or a means? Was the increase in room temperature an end or a means? What's going on here?

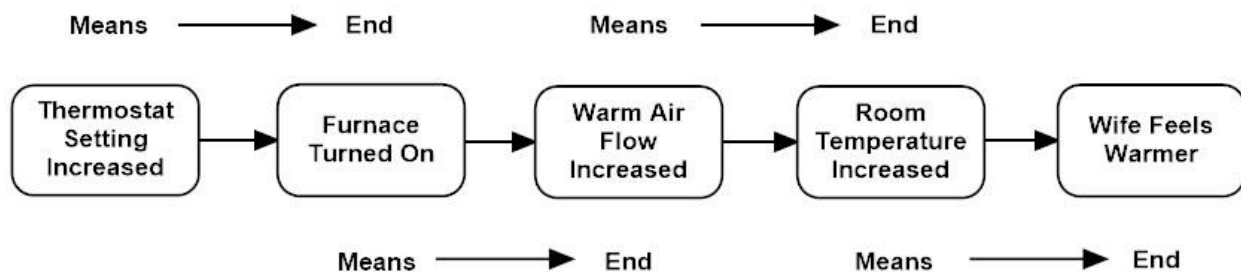
There is in this homely little example what could be termed a chain, a ladder or a hierarchy of means-end relationships.

At one end of this chain, ladder or hierarchy, lies my wife's feeling of warmth. You can define that a couple of ways: she was feeling too cold or not feeling warm enough.

At the other end was the act of turning up the thermostat; clearly a means in this context.

What about the furnace going from off to on? Well, it was an end in relation to turning up the thermostat, but it was a means with respect to increasing the amount and warmth of the air flow into the room. Okay; what about those two? Well, increasing the amount and warmth of the air flowing into the room is an end with respect to the furnace coming on but they are both means to the end of raising the room temperature. Hmm. What about room temperature? Well, it is an end with respect to increasing the amount and warmth of the air entering the room, but it is a means to the end of my wife feeling acceptably warm. This means-end chain is depicted in the diagram below.

Feeling Warmer Means-End Chain



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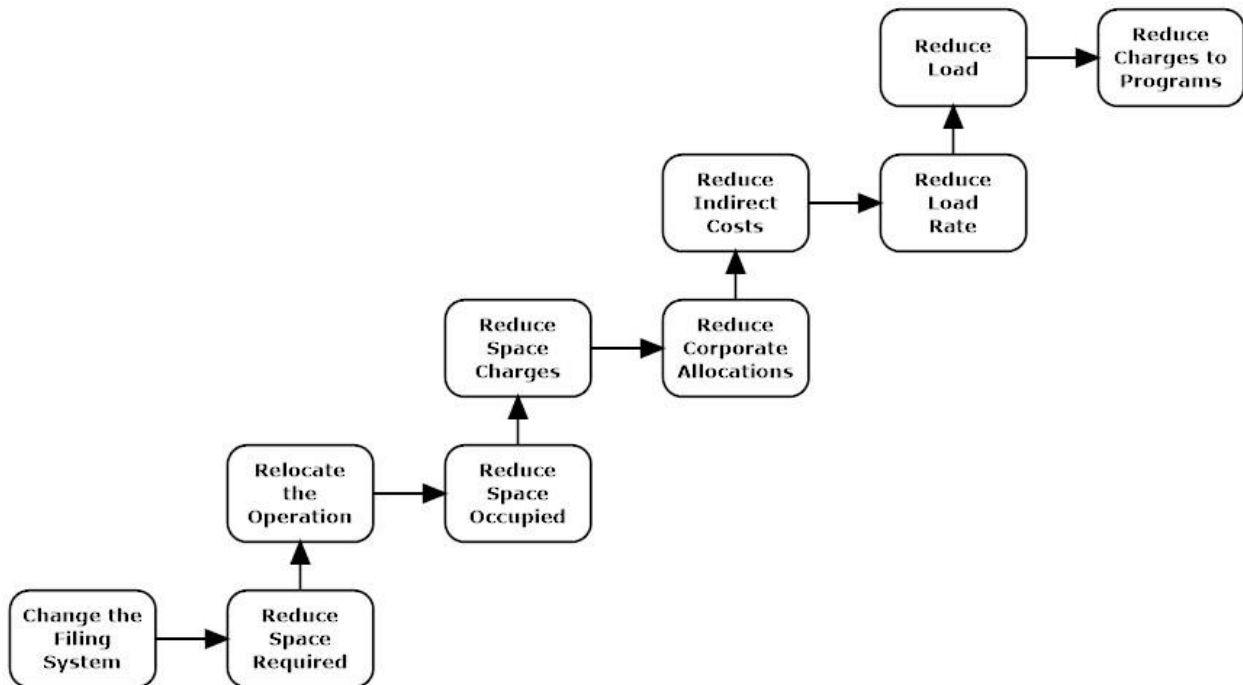
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The diagram clearly shows that its constituent elements are means or ends only in relation to something else. Is my wife's sense of feeling warmer a means to some other end? You'll have to ask her, but I believe it probably ties to her overall sense of comfort.

Reducing the Load Rate

Similar diagrams could be and have been developed for more complex situations. The hierarchy of means-end relationships shown in the diagram below illustrates the means-end relationships involved in solving a problem related to reducing the Load Rate used in determining charges to programs supported by a division I once headed up at Educational Testing Service (ETS).

The Load Rate Means-End Hierarchy



- Changing the filing system used in an operation was a means to the end of reducing the amount of space the operation required.
- Reducing the amount of space required was a means to the end of relocating the operation.
- Relocating the operation was a means to the end of reducing the amount of space my division occupied.
- Reducing the amount of space my division occupied was a means to the end of reducing charges for space.
- Reducing charges for space was a means to the end of reducing allocations from corporate.
- Reducing allocations from corporate was a means to the end of reducing indirect costs.

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- Reducing indirect costs was a means to the end of reducing load rate.
- Reducing load rate was a means to the end of reducing load.
- Reducing load was a means to the end of reducing charges to the programs.

To be perfectly honest, reducing charges to the programs was a means to the end of placating the program managers. I could go on, but I won't.

It's All Relative

Again, we see that means and ends relationships are relative. So, the next time you hear someone say that Person A has his means and ends confused, laugh and say, "You better be careful. Those terms are relative to one another and he just might have them right and you have them wrong." People are regularly chastised for confusing means and ends; however, keep in mind that something can be both a means and an end; it's all relative.

Links to Previous Knowledge Worker Columns

Earlier, I alluded to a couple of previous Knowledge Worker columns. Here are links to both for those who want to visit or revisit the examples in more detail. For those already familiar with the examples, allow me to confirm your suspicions: Yes! An Achievement Path to your objective is also a means-end chain: but not all means-end chains constitute an Achievement Path to your objective.

1. The Achievement Path (May 2018) [pdf](#) (Feeling Warmer means-ends)
2. The Achievement Path - A Workplace Example (July 2018) [pdf](#) (Load Rate means-ends)

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a 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 *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred writes this column on a monthly basis. All previous Knowledge Worker columns are accessible by clicking [here](#).