# Knowledge Worker
The Achievement Cycle
(April 2018)

Those who specialize in matters related to human performance know full well that performance is defined mainly by results, by the effects or outcomes of actions taken. As Tom Gilbert (1974) put it many years ago, "If you think about it, then, it is only the accomplishments of performance that we value – never the behaviors that produce them (p.13)."

However, we also know we can't focus on outcomes to the exclusion of action; the two are inextricably intertwined; the one leads to the other. We know further, even if it seems somewhat obvious, that performance can't occur unless the outcome to be achieved is known. In addition, feedback or knowledge of results is essential; in other words, progress and achievement must be assessed. And, if we know anything at all, we know that the context or setting in which performance takes place often presents hindrances and obstacles to achieving the goal in question. The late Geary Rummler put it this way, "If you pit a good person against a bad system, the system will win almost every time (p.13)."

The preceding factors give rise to a cyclical model of achievement, what I call "The Achievement Cycle" (see the diagram below).
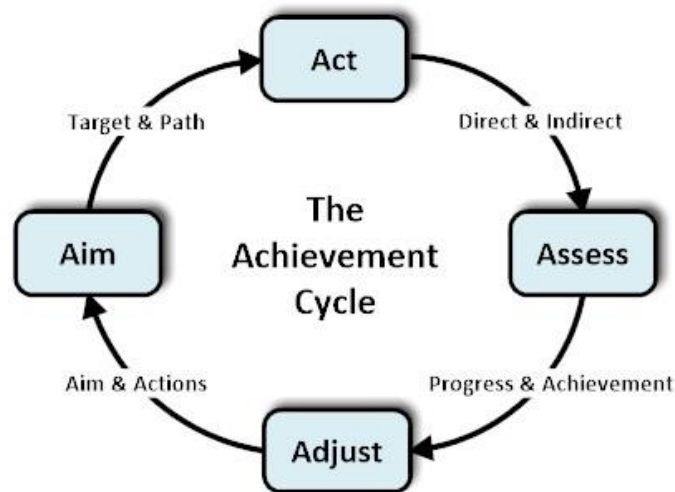
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First, we *Aim*, we target some result to be achieved. To achieve it, we must be clear about two things: (1) the target and (2) the path we will take to hitting it. The target is always some variable and our aim is to bring its value to some specific level (e.g., an error rate of less than one percent). The path to the target leads from variables we can affect through direct, immediate action through other, connecting variables to the target. I call that path "The Achievement Path" and I will be addressing it in future columns.

Next, we *Act*, we do those things we think will lead to the desired result. Our actions have direct, immediate effects and those, in turn, lead to other, indirect and delayed effects. We must be concerned with both. If we have things right, the effects of our direct, immediate actions make their way along "The Achievement Path" to the target.

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Having acted, we then *Assess*, we take stock of the effects and the effectiveness of our actions. We assess progress and achievement.

Finally, we *Adjust*, typically to unforeseen or changing circumstances and occasionally to obstacles and other hindrances. We might adjust our aim, our actions, or both. Achieving any outcome follows this cycle. And, because adjustments are almost always required, the cycle is iterative.

The iterative nature of The Achievement Cycle is shown in the diagram below. The initial pass through the cycle is the top part of the diagram. Assuming the result was not entirely satisfactory, the exit point of the Adjust segment in the top loop leads to a second pass via the bottom loop. Conceivably, that could lead to a third pass via the upper loop and so on. The iterations continue until the desired result is achieved or the effort is abandoned.
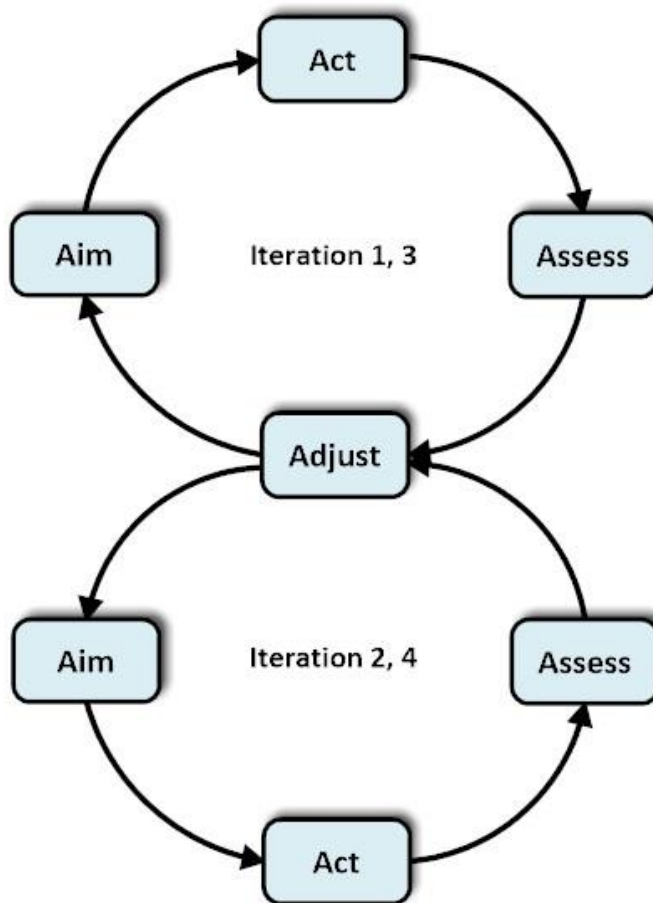
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The two diagrams above are tools that can be used to frame and guide thinking about matters related to human performance – in general and in specific instances. The four A's of achievement are also easily remembered: *Aim*, *Act*, *Assess* and *Adjust*.

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A Note About Time & Emergence

Much is being made of late about the fact that rapid change and increasing complexity prevent us from planning in great detail, and then carrying out those plans. Instead, we must grapple with emerging, evolving, ever-changing situations. Consequently, our targets also emerge, as do our aims. And, of course, our actions must be tailored to the situation at hand. So, how, then, does The Achievement Cycle fit with those circumstances? My answer is as follows.

The core issue is one of time, specifically, the time it takes to achieve a goal, to hit a particular target. The time required varies with the target, the structure in which it is embedded, and the path that must be taken to hit it. The Achievement Cycle can take a few hours, a few days, a few months or a few years, depending, as I said, on the target, the structure in which it is embedded, and the path that must be taken to hit it. Nevertheless, the Achievement Cycle applies regardless of the target, the situation, the scope and complexity of the effort, and any other factor. We can move through the cycle at high speed or at a leisurely pace, all depending on the circumstances. It is equally suited to taking a long, well-planned journey to known destinations or inching our way through unfamiliar territory. In all cases, we must *Aim*, *Act*, *Assess* and *Adjust*.

If you would like to read more about The Achievement Cycle, you can find a longer paper at this link: http://www.nickols.us/AchievementCycle.pdf. And, if you have any questions about the framework or how to apply it, feel free to contact me by email.

References

1. Gilbert, T.F. (1974), *Levels and Structure of Performance Analysis*. The Praxis Corporation Technical Series, No. 1: Morristown, NJ
2. Rummler, G.A. & Brache, A.P. (1995). *Improving Performance* (2nd Edition). Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco

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 managing partner of Distance Learning 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.