Knowledge Worker
The Achievement Path
(May 2018 - Modified)

Last month's column focused on the Achievement Cycle or what I sometimes call the "Four A's of Achievement": Aim, Act, Assess and Adjust. This month's column focuses on the action portion of the cycle: the "Achievement Path." Its importance is highlighted by this assertion: There is a single question you can ask yourself and your answer will tell you if you are likely to achieve an objective you are pursuing. The question is this: "Can you correctly specify the Achievement Path?" If your answer is "Yes," you are likely to achieve your objective. If your answer is "No," you are not likely to achieve it.

At this moment, you might be scratching your head and saying, "What the heck is the 'Achievement Path'?" This month's column examines and explains the concept of "Achievement Path."

The Concept of Achievement Path

At the heart of all objectives lies a variable along with a specification of its intended or desired value. Consider, for example, room temperature. Room temperature is a variable and its intended value can vary quite a bit, as can its current value.

Right now, the thermostat in my living room is set to 69 degrees. As sometimes happens, my wife feels a wee bit chilly and asks me to turn up the heat, usually to 70 degrees. Shortly afterward, the furnace kicks in and warm air begins to flow through the ductwork and out the registers. After a while, the room temperature, as sensed by the thermostat, reaches 70 degrees and, from then on, that temperature setting is maintained. The thermostat turns on the furnace whenever it drops below 70 degrees and turns it off whenever it reaches 70 degrees. Once the room temperature reaches 70 degrees, I generally ask my wife if she's feeling warm enough and she usually indicates she's fine. Her objective of feeling warmer has been achieved.

The Achievement Path – for my wife wanting to feel warmer and for any other objective – begins with direct action that affects some variable. In this case, I can't directly affect room temperature or my wife's feeling of warmth, but I can alter the thermostat setting. The variables we can directly affect are known as *Accessible* variables.

At the other end of the Achievement Path lies the *Target* variable. In this case, the *Target* variable is my wife's sense of warmth. Clearly, I can't directly affect that, either. However, something that does directly affect her sense of warmth is the temperature of the room. Any variable that directly affects the Target variable is known as a *Driver* variable. Room temperature is a Driver variable in relation to my wife's feeling of warmth.

Although I cannot directly affect room temperature, I can directly alter the thermostat setting and that causes the furnace to come on and blow warm air into the room via the ductwork and registers. The warm air affects room temperature. Variables between Accessible and Driver variables are known as *Connecting* variables. In this case, the furnace status (on or off) and the amount and warmth of air entering the room from the registers are Connecting variables.

The diagram in Figure 1 below illustrates the concept of Achievement Path using the example just discussed.

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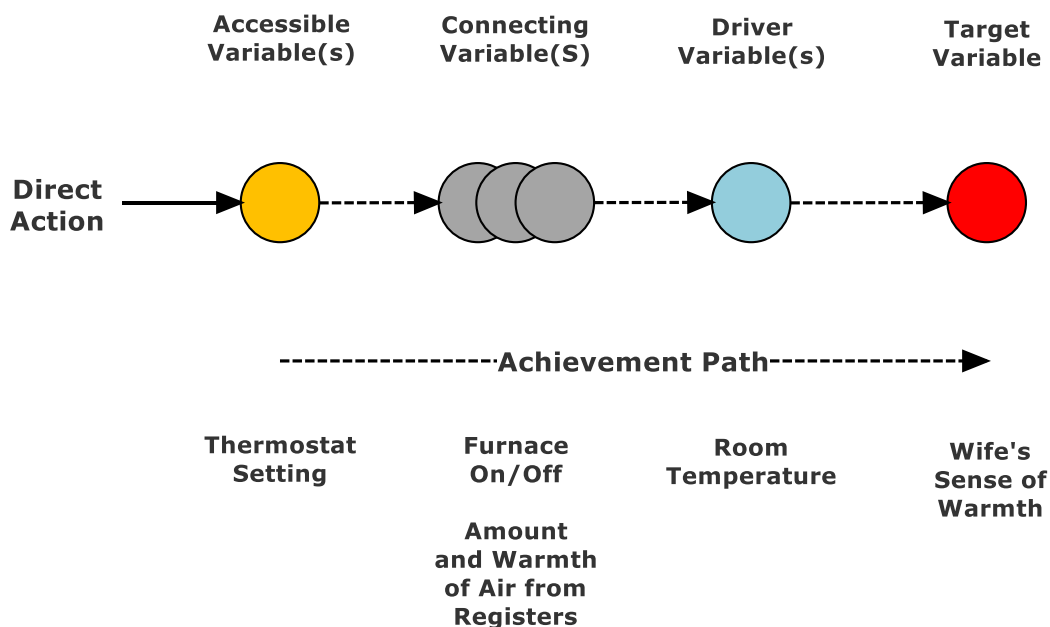## The Achievement Path
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Figure 1: Feeling Warmer Achievement Path

Recap

The Achievement Path for all objectives runs from the Accessible variables we can directly affect, through Connecting variables to the Driver variables and they affect the Target variable. This sequence suggests, as we have known for a long time, that effecting change in organizations is often indirect; that is, you don't directly affect the variable that is at the heart of your objective, instead, you alter the value of other variables and the effects of those changes then ripple through the structure of the network in which those variables are embedded, eventually making themselves felt in the form of changes in the value of the Target variable.

The heating system in my house is a given and I am quite familiar with such systems. In other words, I don't have to give much thought to how best to achieve my objective (raising the room temperature), thereby achieving my wife's objective (feel warmer). The Achievement Path requires little or no analysis on my part; I simply operate the heating system. The same is true of many situations in life and at work. But many other situations, especially some of those encountered in the workplace do require thought, often considerable thought and analysis, to identify an effective Achievement Path for an objective.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of identifying the Achievement Path is lurking in the following portion of a statement from the first paragraph in this section: "… you alter the value of other variables and the effects of those changes then ripple through the structure of the network …" Identifying the Achievement Path for a workplace objective entails identifying and analyzing the structure of the network in which the Target variable is embedded. Also embedded in that same structure are the

Accessible, Connecting and Driver variables. With that structure or network of variables identified, you can then examine it, looking for an Achievement Path.

In next month's column, I will examine the concept of Achievement Path using a workplace example from my time as Division Director of the Custom Operations Division (COD) at Educational Testing Service (ETS). We will see just how it is an Achievement Path can be identified. Stay tuned!

In the meantime, here's a little exercise for you: Think of a objective you're trying to achieve and ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the Target variable I am trying to affect?
- What is its desired or Target value?
- What are the Driver variables, those that directly affect my Target variable?
- What are the Accessible variables, those I can directly affect with my actions?
- What are the Connecting variables, those that connect Accessible and Driver variables?
- What does the Achievement Path for my objective look like?

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*.