Knowledge Worker
The Domino Theory of Results
(May 2016)

As knowledge workers, our grasp of the structures in which we intervene is far from perfect or complete. If it were perfect, we could employ the "Domino Theory of Results." We could line up our "dominos" (i.e., the factors that determine the results we're after), set the first one in motion and then sit back and watch things play out as intended. The desired results would materialize on time, on schedule and on budget.

But our grasp of the structures in which we intervene is not perfect and so we can't simply set things in motion and watch them play out as planned. Instead, we turn to our backup position – we take our best shot – we do what we know how to do and what we think will work, drawing on what we've been taught, what we've learned and what our intuition tells us. Therein lies an unfortunate mistake; we abandon the Domino Theory too quickly and move on to something else too soon.

Our grasp of those structures in which we intervene might not be perfect, but it is far from inconsequential or useless. We know more than we think we do. We can indeed employ – and with no small amount of success – the Domino Theory of Results.

We are talking here about three things: (1) results, (2) control and (3) change, so let's spend a little time on those subjects and let's start with results.

Results are the effects or outcomes of action. That's it, plain and simple. Results might or might not be as desired but whatever they are they are the outcomes of action. Because we want results to be as desired, we do our best to exercise control over the outcomes of our actions. Now let's turn our attention to control and to the primary means of control at our disposal: our behavior.

Behavior serves purpose. We do what we do because it serves our purposes. Our purpose, whatever it might be, always involves control over some aspect of the world of which we are aware.

In turn, control is always against some standard, a reference for what should be the case, which we can compare with what we perceive to be the case. We act so as to bring what we perceive to be the case into alignment with what we want to be the case. Our actions change things so now let's look at change.

To be effective, our actions must change the right things in the right way. This leads to some basic questions:

1. What do we want to see?
2. What do we currently see?
3. What has to change?
4. How can we change it?

Change, in complex systems such as organizations, is typically indirect; we change something "over here" in order to realize some effect "over there."

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"Over here" is where you can take direct, immediate action (e.g., topple the first in a row of dominos). "Over there" is what you are ultimately trying to effect (e.g., toppling the last in a row of dominos). Both places are part of the structure of the situation confronting you. This leads to some more basic questions:

1. What does the structure of the situation confronting you look like?
2. What are the variables making up that structure?
3. Where in that structure is "over there," the variable that is your ultimate target?
4. Where in that structure are the variables you can affect via direct, immediate action; that is, where is "over here"?
5. What are the intermediate variables connecting "over here" with "over there"?
6. What are the connections and relationships between and among all those variables?

If you don't already know the answers to those questions then you must study, analyze and map the structure of the situation; you must develop a picture or diagram of the relevant variables and their relationships to one another. Armed with the answers to those questions you can identify one or more pathways connecting the variables you can affect via direct immediate action with the variables that are your ultimate targets. You are then able to employ the "Domino Theory of Results." You can change things with a result in mind and be confident of realizing it.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For a more in-depth treatment of identifying pathways to results, see "Results Architecture: Identifying Pathways to Results."

For some examples of pathways to results, see "Solution Paths: Getting from Here to There."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer, consultant and former executive who spent 20 years in the United States 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 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.*