

Knowledge Worker

What's in A Name?

(August 2019)

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Shakespeare had Juliet answer the question by saying, "That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet." That might be true of roses but it's not true of problems. The name we place on a problem very much changes how we see it and how we approach it.

Background

Despite some 50 years of persistent laments by human performance technologists, those darn "training" problems just won't go away. Despite plenty of evidence to the effect that many so-called "training" problems are really problems of feedback or consequences or expectations or of the design of the work itself or simply a case of having the wrong tool for the job at hand, problems bearing the label "training" keep cropping up.

Why? The answer is simple: "Training" is a safe and useful way to name or label a problem. Other labels are fraught with risk and much less useful. To understand and appreciate the safety and the utility of the "training" label, it helps to understand the role the name or label given a problem plays in solving it.

Problems, Labels, Models and Problem-Solving

A problem exists when action is required but the required action is not apparent. Hence, the notion of problem-solving as a search activity. But search where and for what? Unless you are inclined to look everywhere and anywhere in a hit-and-miss fashion (an approach known to technicians of my generation as "Easter egging"), the search for a solution must take place within some set of boundary conditions, within what Newell & Simon (1972) termed a "search space."

The boundaries defining the search space for a given problem are determined primarily by the model or representation of the problem used by the problem solver. A performance technologist investigating a "performance" problem, for example, is likely to use a model containing constructs or factors such as desired performance, actual performance, feedback, consequences, and so forth. These factors and their relationships define the relevant search space for a performance technologist. A computer programmer investigating a "production" problem is likely to use a model containing variables or factors such as inputs, outputs, and processing routines (and he or she is likely to wind up reviewing source code, line by line). Again, these factors define the search space; they determine where the analyst will look and for what. In both cases, the purpose of the model used is to focus the investigator on those factors relevant to the problem at hand.

The selection or construction of a model to use in guiding the search for a solution is determined in large part by the label placed on the problem. The label classifies the problem. In classifying the problem, the label also specifies the class or classes of solutions that will be appropriate. The role played by the problem label, then, is to fix the locus of the problem and to focus the effort to solve it. In short, the problem label directs and focuses attention. Consider, for example, the shifts that might occur in your own thinking if you were to hear of the following kinds of problems: a "financial" problem, a "business" problem, a "performance" problem, a "feedback" problem, a "production" problem, a "motivation" problem, a "training" problem or an "attitude" problem.

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Obviously, when labeling a problem, we should use a label that invokes a model useful in solving it. Less obvious is the importance of not labeling the problem too early in the process. If a problem is labeled too soon, those working on it run the risk of invoking the wrong frame of reference and they might find it difficult to shake off this set of blinders later on. Even less obvious is the idea of deliberately changing the problem label to enable examination of the problem from a different perspective. Varying the label on a problem helps vary the frame of reference being used; it is a way of getting “outside the box.”

The Main Point

The essential function of the names or labels we place on things is to categorize them and thereby invoke what is hopefully an appropriate frame of reference. In the case of problems, labeling them serves to direct and focus attention. Those who are interested in directing or focusing attention during the course of a problem-solving effort are or ought to be interested in problem labels and their purposeful manipulation. They also ought to be interested in the second order effects of label manipulation; that is, in what else is manipulated as a result of manipulating the problem label.

Looking Forward

In next month's column, I'll provide an example illustrating why the “training” label is so useful.

Reference

Newell, A., and H. Simon (1972). *Human Problem Solving*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs.

About the Author

Fred Nickols is an organizational generalist, 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 at [Distance Consulting LLC](#), where he is the *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer*. His web site 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 is available [here](#).