Knowledge Worker
## A Control Theory View of Goal Achievement
(October 2018)

Achieving a goal is an exercise in exercising control. It follows that your efforts to achieve a goal – any goal – are helped by knowing what control is, how a control system works, and how that translates into a structured process for goal achievement. Those are the focal points for this month's column.

To repeat: Achieving a goal is an exercise in exercising control. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Well, it is – and it isn't. It depends on the goal. Going to the grocery store and getting the items on a list is an obvious (and mundane) exercise in control. So is keeping your car in its lane while driving. But, launching a new claims processing system is quite a bit more complex; and, turning around a failing, multi-billion-dollar corporation is something else altogether.

Despite their differences, all four efforts mentioned above have in common the basic elements of control, and the basic steps of goal achievement are the same. With that in mind, let's examine the structure and nature of a control system and then let's look at the basic steps of goal achievement that grow out of this structure.

The structure of a basic control system is shown in Figure 1. A brief discussion follows.
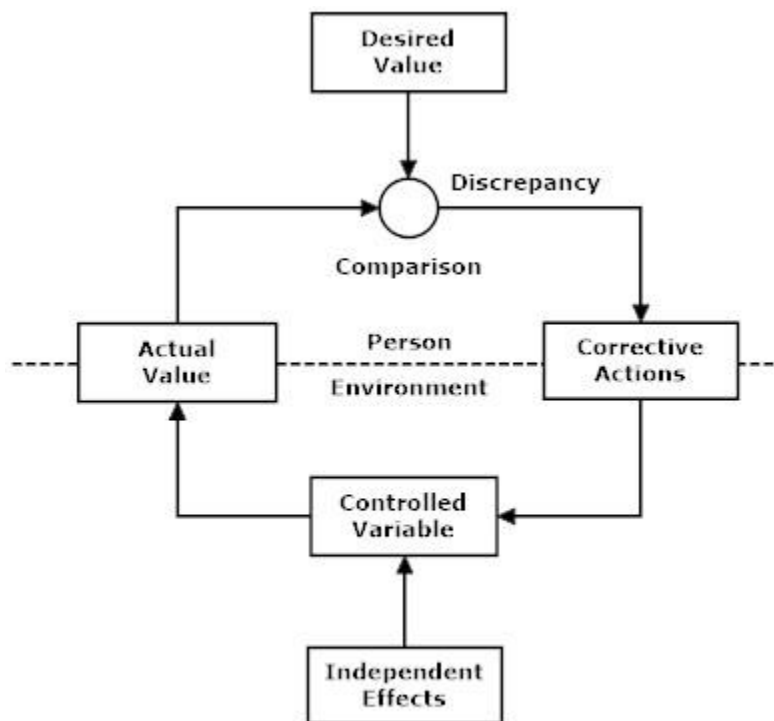
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Figure 1: The Structure of a Basic Control System

To achieve a goal is to bring some targeted variable to some specified value. In control theory, the targeted variable is typically referred to as the Controlled Variable. The Controlled Variable doesn't exist

in a vacuum; it is embedded in some larger context where there are other actors and factors that can affect the Controlled Variable. In other words, the Controlled Variable is affected by Independent Effects. The Desired Value for the Controlled Variable constitutes the goal. The Actual Value of the Controlled Variable is compared with its Desired Value and any difference constitutes a Discrepancy. An unacceptable discrepancy between the Desired Value for a Controlled Variable and its Actual Value leads to Corrective Actions. These are intended to eliminate the Discrepancy or reduce it to an acceptable level. These actions must also offset or negate the Independent Effects of any other actors and factors in the larger context in which the Controlled Variable exists.

With the basic structure of a control system in mind, let's see what a goal achievement process based on control theory and rooted in the structure of a control system might look like.

- First, you must select the variable you wish to affect, the value of which you want to bring to some specified level. (I usually refer to this as the "Target Variable.")
- Second, you must set a goal, you must specify the desired value of the controlled variable, the value you are shooting for. In problem-solving, this is often referred to as "what should be."
- Third, it is important to map the structure in which the selected or targeted variable is embedded. Doing so informs you regarding two important matters: (1) the paths open to you for affecting the value of that variable and (2) the other actors and factors that might also affect its value.
- Fourth, you must determine or take stock of the current or actual value of the targeted variable. Again, in problem-solving, this is often referred to as "what is."
- Fifth, you must identify any unacceptable gaps or discrepancies by comparing the current or actual value of the target variable with its desired or intended value.
- Sixth, you must act; more specifically, you must engage in actions that reduce or eliminate any unacceptable gaps or discrepancies.
- Seventh, at all times you are relying on feedback, "closing the loop" so to speak, so you can adjust things as required to stay on course and bring the actual value of the target variable to its specified or goal value.

The preceding discussion of a control-based goal achievement process is depicted in Figure 2.

Adjust as Required
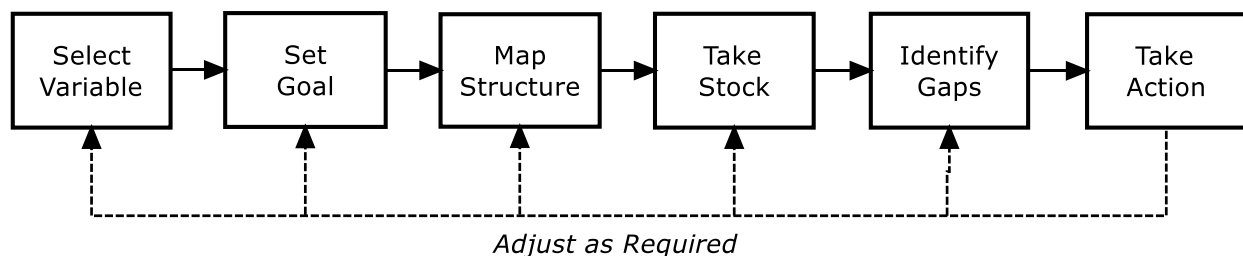
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Figure 2: A Control-based Goal Achievement Process

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Anyone with much experience in the workplace will likely be quick to point out that the key in all this is the taking action step. How are the appropriate actions determined? I addressed in previous columns this by way of examining what I call "The Achievement Path." (See this year's May and July columns.)

Finally, organizations don't achieve goals, people do, and people are "living control systems." You are, then, well-served by thinking about achieving your goals as an exercise in exercising control. For more about control theory and control systems and how they apply to individual and organizational performance, visit the Control Theory section of my web site.

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.*