Knowledge Worker
Knowledge Work: First, Define Your Terms
(January 2014)

Knowledge work consists of actions that are *configured* in response to the situation at hand. Knowledge workers must figure out what to do instead of simply carrying out *prefigured* routines. "Figuring out what to do" lies at the heart of an activity known as problem solving and that is the subject of this and some future columns.   Much of what we performance improvement professionals do amounts to solving a class of problems known as "performance problems" whether of organizations, processes, systems or human beings. In this column, I intend doing what the age-old counsel in the title of this column calls for; namely, defining some terms that will be used throughout the remaining columns in this thread. In later columns, I'll delve into the process of solving problems in more detail.

When it comes to problem solving – or solving problems – the words themselves are quite illuminating. "Problem" comes to us from the Greek and Latin *problema*, both of which are akin to the Greek *proballeina*, meaning to throw or move forward. "Solve" traces to the Latin *solvere*, which means to loosen or free up. To solve a problem, then, is to loosen up and move forward. Implicit in that notion are two additional thoughts: (1) being stuck and (2) having a destination or goal in mind.

We are confronted with a problem when we have a goal – we want something – but we don't know what to do to get it. We are stuck. As John Dewey (1910) pointed out so long ago, problem solving begins with some kind of "felt difficulty." Or, as Newell and Simon (1972) wrote much later, "A person is confronted with a *problem* when he wants something and does not know immediately what series of actions he can perform to get it (p.72)." To solve a problem we must figure out what to do and, equally, important, we must get it done. No solution is ever really a solution until put to the test of implementation.

Some of you reading this might be asking yourselves, "But what about gaps? Don't gaps constitute a problem?" After all, didn't two leading authorities, Charles Kepner and Benjamin Tregoe write that, "*A problem is a deviation from a standard of performance* (1965; p.44)." My answer is that such deviations or gaps don't constitute a problem – at least not by themselves[1]. Gaps (i.e., discrepancies between *what is* and *what should be*) are limited only by our ability to envision, imagine or require a state of affairs that differs from what already exists. Not all gaps are important. Not all gaps warrant our attention; resources are limited and we can't tackle them all.

A gap might offer an occasion for action but a gap by itself does not constitute a problem. Why? Because if you are certain as to what to do to close the gap then all you need to do is get on with it. If you're not stuck, if there is no "felt difficulty," if the actions to take are clear, there is no problem to

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[1] To be fair to Messrs. Kepner and Tregoe, they were writing about problems related to situations in which what was wanted had earlier been achieved and then lost, owing to the effects of some unknown, unwanted change. However, even in these cases the gap or deviation is problematic only if you don't know what to do about it.

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solve. There is nothing to figure out, merely an occasion for doing what you already know needs to be done.

One more word is deserving of our attention as we set out to examine problem solving and solving problems: "Solution." A solution is a course of action that, once carried out or implemented, leads to the achievement of the goal or what some call "the solved state." Figuring out what to do is called "problem solving" but that is only half the puzzle; the other half entails doing it. Together, figuring out what to do and getting it done constitute the act of solving a problem.

Experienced performance improvement professionals know full well that there are many factors influencing performance and any or all can lead to a gap between actual and desired performance. In the next column we'll take a look at some of the factors influencing human performance and how they can guide our efforts to solve problems of human performance.

References

1. Dewey, J. (1910), *How We Think*. D.C. Heath: Boston
2. Kepner, C.H. and Tregoe, B.B., (1965), *The Rational Manager*. McGraw-Hill: New York
3. Newell, A. and Simon, H.A., (1972), *Human Problem Solving*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs

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