

Knowledge Worker

Tom Gilbert meets Douglas McGregor & Kurt Lewin

(February 2019)

I once attended an ISPI chapter presentation in which considerable attention was placed on Thomas F. Gilbert's distinction between two factors affecting performance: (1) the performer's repertory of behavior and (2) environmental supports. As Gilbert (1978) put it:

"For any given accomplishment, a deficiency in performance always has as its immediate cause a deficiency in a behavior repertory (P), or in the environment that supports the repertory (E), or in both" (p.76).

Gilbert further observed of such deficiencies in performance:

"But its ultimate cause will be found in a deficiency of the management system (M)" (p.76).

Earlier, Douglas McGregor (1967) drew essentially the same distinction when he wrote:

"...the performance P of an individual at work in an industrial organization is a function of certain characteristics of the individual I , including his knowledge, skills, motivation, attitudes and certain aspects of the environmental situation E , including the nature of his job, the rewards associated with his performance, and the leadership provided him" (p.5).

McGregor went on to express his remarks in a now-famous notational form which states simply that performance is a function of individual and environmental variables:

$$P = f(I, a, b, c, d \dots E, m, n, o, p \dots)$$

I would be remiss if I did not mention Kurt Lewin's even earlier (1951) observation that, "In principle it is everywhere accepted that behavior (B) is a function of the person (P) and the environment (E), $B=F(P, E)$, and that P and E in this formula are interdependent variables" (p.25).

There are some clear implications of the distinctions drawn first by Lewin, then McGregor, and then Gilbert:

1. Training is suited for addressing some individual variables, most notably deficiencies of skill or knowledge.
2. Other individual variables such as capacity, attitudes and motives are not readily affected via training. Instead, managerial actions tied to recruiting, selection, placement and incentives are more effective.
3. Environmental variables are addressed via interventions such as communicating expectations, ensuring properly designed processes and seeing to the availability of required tools and materials.
4. It is typically the case that both individual and environmental variables must be addressed in order to realize improvements in performance in a particular role or job.
5. Training, therefore, must almost always be accompanied by other interventions in order to realize improvements in performance.

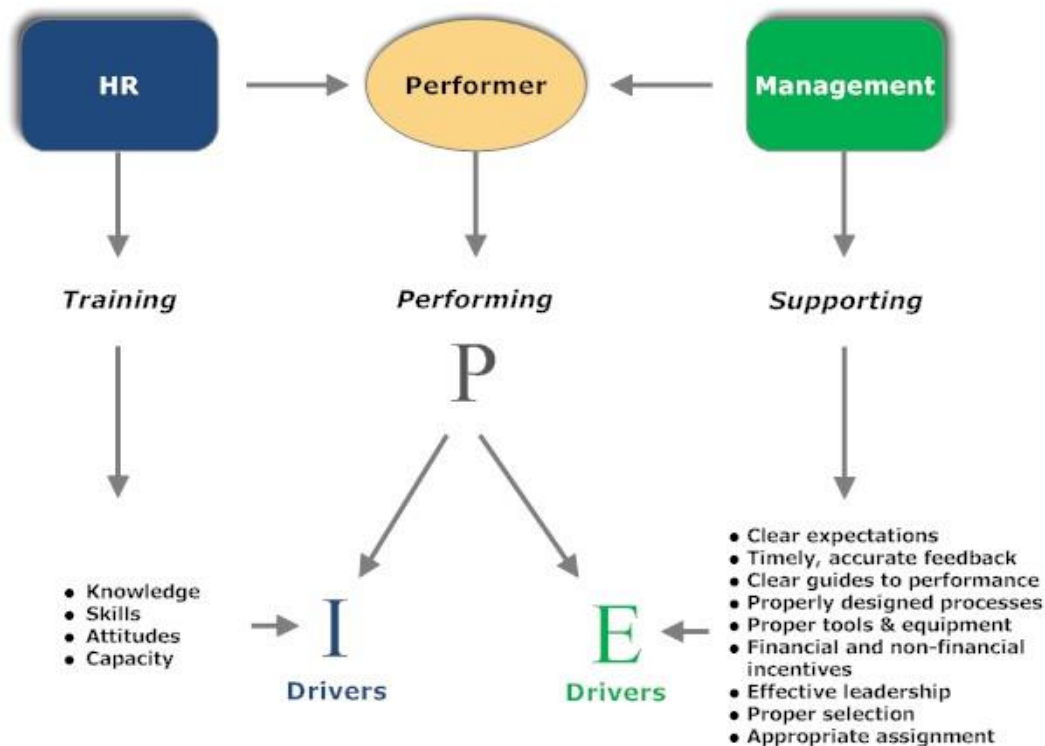
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6. Yet, trainers are regularly expected to realize improvements in performance through training alone. Rarely, will that prove to be the case. Moreover, rarely do trainers have the authority to address the environmental factors affecting performance. They can draw these to management's attention but, as Gilbert indicates, the ultimate responsibility is management's. As the diagram below illustrates, trainers can take some of the responsibility for learning, but management must do the managing and the supporting.

Performance = f (I...E...)



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References

1. Gilbert, T.F. (1978). *Human Competence: Engineering worthy performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
2. Lewin, K. (1951). *Field Theory in Social Science* (D. Cartwright, Ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill. (Note: The quote above is from Chapter 1, titled "Formalization and Progress in Psychology." Chapter 1 is a reprint of a paper published by the University of Iowa in 1940. It is worth noting that all the chapters in the book are reprints of earlier papers published from 1939 to 1947.)

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3. McGregor, D. (1967). *The Professional Manager* (W.G. Bennis & C. McGregor, Eds). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Further Reading

For more articles about training and human performance visit that section of my web site by clicking [here](#).

Those interested in how various theories fit together might appreciate the June 2016 Knowledge Worker column which depicts my integration of Kurt Lewin's Force-Field Theory with B. F. Skinner's reinforcement theory. To access it click [here](#).

About the Author

Fred Nickols 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 Consulting LLC](#). 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](#).