Manage Your Own Performance

No One Else Can

Fred Nickols

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Ever since Peter Drucker called many conventional management practices into question owing to what he saw as a shift to knowledge work, managers and executives have been scratching their heads trying to figure out how to manage the knowledge worker. The short, blunt and ugly answer is they can't. But this new fact of managerial life doesn't tie to a shift to knowledge work; instead, it ties to a shift from highly visible materials-based work and prefigured or "canned" routines to information-based work and impossible-to-supervise configured or "crafted" responses. The bottom line is the same: the only one who can really manage your performance is you. This article explains why this is the case and points to some things you can do to manage your own performance.

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Peter Drucker (1973) wrote of the knowledge worker, "No one can direct him. He has to direct himself. He is the guardian of his own standards, of his own performance, and of his own objectives" (p. 279). Drucker's call for the self-managing or "responsible worker" as he termed it has gone largely unheeded in the more than 35 years since he issued it. The hierarchy and its focus on compliance still reigns supreme, managers still believe they can control the behavior and performance of those who work for them, and they still rely on the carrot and the stick to do so. To some extent they succeed but they have to rely as much or more on the stick as they do the carrot and they seem not to recognize or care about the hidden and long-term costs of that strategy. This paper, then, is not directed to management. Instead, it aims at those who are interested in managing and improving their own performance.

I don't intend to get caught up in what seems to be a vexing debate over who is or isn't a knowledge worker. Nor is the issue whether or not there has been a shift to knowledge work; instead, the issue is the nature of work itself. In that regard, there was indeed a large-scale, fundamental shift during the last half of the last century. For many, if not most people, work shifted from a materials-base to an information-base and working activities shifted from prefigured or "canned" routines to configured or "crafted" responses. These two shifts mean that many people must now figure out what to do instead of simply doing what someone else figured out earlier. It also means that people doing this kind of work are devilishly difficult to supervise because they are working with their brains instead of their brawn. Their working activities cannot be directly observed, hence Drucker's assertion that they cannot be supervised. More important, compliance becomes irrelevant because the working activity cannot be specified in advance; there is no pre-existing procedure or routine with which to comply. The worker must manage his or her own performance because no one else can. Fortunately, people are quite good at doing that; getting what they've set their sights on is an innate human capability.

People, or so I believe, are what William T. Powers (1989) calls "living control systems," which is to say they target certain variables in the world about them, they establish preferred levels or values for those variables and they then behave in ways that bring the targeted variables to their preferred levels and keep them there. In short, they set and hit performance targets. They control selected aspects of the world about them and their behavior is their chief means for doing so. This is an integral part of life.

At work we are paid to hit targets too. Management would love to set performance targets and then have you and me hit them. In the era of repetitive, materials-based, manual work, management was able to pretty much do that. The work could be prefigured, typically by an industrial engineer, and management could then supervise what were highly visible, materials-based working activities and enforce compliance with a prefigured or predetermined model of how that work should be performed. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, that's no longer how it works. When a target is imposed on me without any involvement on my part, my commitment to hitting that target is much less than when I've had a say in setting the target. And I sometimes do as I've done on more than one occasion which is to show the person who set the target for me (a) why it couldn't possibly be hit or (b) why they really didn't want to hit it.

For me to hit a performance target it helps greatly if I have had a say in setting that target and if I have had a say in how to hit it. Indeed, in many cases, I am the only one who can do these two things in a meaningful way. My input is far more important than anyone else's because I have to manage my own performance. So do you and so does just about everyone else, especially the higher up the corporate ladder they go and the more their work depends on figuring out what to do instead of simply doing what someone else has figured out. This is true regardless of where they stand on that ladder.

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The focal point of this article is *The Target Model*, a model of human behavior and performance that is based on Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) as articulated by William T. Powers in numerous books and articles over almost four decades but most notably in *Behavior: The Control of Perception* (1973). I have written and published about *The Target Model* before (Nickols, 2010) but from the perspective of using it to examine, understand and improve someone else's performance. In this article, my focus is on how you can use *The Target Model* to examine, understand and improve your own performance. Whether or not you choose to do so and under what conditions is up to you and that is as it should be. After all, you are responsible for managing your own performance. So let's begin there – with the nature of performance.

The Nature of Performance

Performance has two components: (1) actions and (2) the effects of those actions. When the effects of our actions are as desired and intended we can say that our performance was good. When the effects of our actions are not as intended we are less inclined to pat ourselves on the back. Sometimes there is a mix of effects; some are as intended and others are not, in which case we can be heard mumbling something about unintended consequences or side effects. As Chester Barnard (1947) pointed out a long time ago, our actions are *effective* to the extent that they produce the desired or intended effects. Our actions are *efficient* to the extent that the value of the intended effects is not offset or negated by the costs of any unintended effects. Performance, then, is about effective, efficient action (i.e., producing and realizing the value of only or at least primarily the desired or intended effects).

Like performance, the results or effects we seek have two components: first, there is some variable that we wish to affect, a variable we have targeted for control; second, we want that targeted variable to be in and stay in some predetermined, predefined state. We might, for example, want the error rate in a certain process to be no more than three parts per million; we might want gross sales to average $3M per month; or, in a much simpler vein, we might want something as seemingly mundane (but often surprisingly important) as arriving at a meeting on time. Three target variables: error rate, average monthly gross sales, arrival time. Three preferred states or goals: three parts per million, $3m per month, on time. All performance targets can be and usually are expressed in terms of some targeted variable and some preferred value for that variable.

To perform – to hit a performance target – is to control; more specifically, as stated above it is to bring some variable to a specified value and to keep it there. Successful control requires continuous information about actual conditions compared against desired conditions. That brings us to *The Target Model*.

The Target Model

The Target Model is shown in Figure 1. Its theoretical basis is the Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) of William T. Powers. The assertions rooted in this model are as follows:

- Performance includes your actions and the effects or outcomes of your actions.
- Performance occurs (or doesn't) as a result of you being able to control some targeted variable (e.g., sales, error rates, production volume, costs, etc).
- To "control" a target variable is to bring it to some specified value and keep it there. This "specified value" is known as a "goal state."
- You compare your goal state for a target variable with what you perceive to be its current or actual value. If an unacceptable gap exists, you act so as to bring the perceived value of the target variable into alignment with the value specified by your goal state.

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- There are other actors and factors – external or surrounding conditions – that can also affect a targeted variable. Your actions must accommodate and compensate for these other conditions. Assuming these other conditions do not overwhelm you, you can achieve and maintain the specified value for the targeted variable.

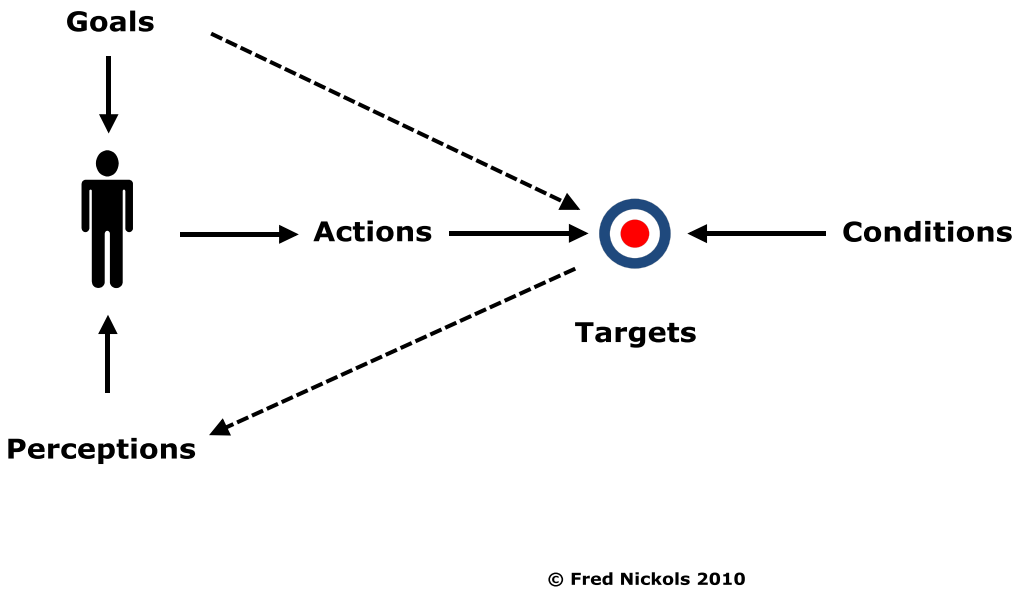

Figure 1 – The Target Model

To recap: The bulls-eye serves to identify the target variable, the variable that is the focal point of your efforts to control it. Your actions are meant to act on the target variable in such a way as to bring it to and maintain it at some specified value. That value is specified in the form of your goal state for the target. You perceive the actual state of the target variable and compare that with the intended or goal state. A gap or discrepancy between the goal state for the target variable and its actual state is an occasion for you to take action and you will continue acting until such time as any discrepancy is either eliminated or reduced to some acceptable value.

Consider for illustrative purposes the simple act of driving to work with the aim of arriving on time. The target variable is arrival time. The goal is on time. Your perceptions of the current time, location and progress of your car inform you as to the likelihood of hitting your target of on-time arrival. Your actions involve a complicated yet, for most people, a mostly automatic process of getting in the car, starting the engine, driving to work and parking. Along the way are actions like steering, accelerating, decelerating, braking, turning, and many more. There are also other, intermediate, targets involved; for example, the position of your car in its lane, the distance between your car and other vehicles, and your speed to name some obvious ones.

There are other, surrounding conditions that affect your targets along the way and thus can interfere with achieving your ultimate goal of on-time arrival. Some of these other actors and factors include

other motorists, road conditions including construction, and even weather conditions such as wind and rain. But you adjust and adapt; for example, if the wind blows your car to the left, you turn the wheel to the right to counter the effects of the wind or another driver cuts you off and you apply the brakes. More often than not you arrive at work at the intended time. You control your performance.

Few workplace performances are as simple as getting to work on time. Driving down the error rate in an important processing operation is not a simple undertaking; neither is bringing in your department's budget on the mark when corporate allocations are varying wildly; and neither is hitting your sales target when a competitor has successfully launched significantly better products at noticeably lower prices, thus affecting the customer buying decisions that undergird your sales. On occasion, the other conditions that affect a target variable can overwhelm your best efforts and you find yourself unable to bring the target variable to its intended value let alone keep it there. But, for the most part, we are able to offset or negate these other influences. Were we not able to do so, no one would ever turn in an acceptable performance.

Let us look now at two very different kinds of performance – what I will call "Proximate" and "Ultimate" performance.

Proximate and Ultimate Performance

The effects of your actions can be direct and immediate – nearby in space and time ("here and now") – and they can also be indirect and delayed – far removed in space and time ("over there later"). The direct and immediate effects of your actions constitute *Proximate Results*.

It is often the case that the results you seek are far removed in space and time. If you're trying to turn around a division you cannot accomplish that as the direct and immediate result of any actions you take. There are intervening variables. On the other hand if all you're trying to accomplish is to clarify your expectations with a particular direct report you can probably get that done as the result of direct, immediate action. Any results you seek that are far removed in space and time from your immediate actions are known as *Ultimate Results*.

Yet, even though you might be aiming at some distant target, whatever you accomplish begins with your actions in the here and now. To be sure, you can set things in motion, so to speak, but you must begin with your immediate actions. There is, then, with respect to *Ultimate Results*, a linkage issue you must address; namely, the linkages or connections between *Proximate* and *Ultimate Results*.

When I was the division director of a multi-million dollar operating division, I had a standing goal of coming in on each year's budget within a plus or minus five percent tolerance. To aid me in achieving that goal I had a young fellow on my staff develop a spreadsheet-based financial model of my division. Armed with that model I could play "what if" games throughout the year and quickly see the budgetary impact of any actions I might be contemplating. That spreadsheet incorporated the linkages between my actions and the intended results. (In my last year as division director we came in within $700 of budget.) To again illustrate how we adjust and adapt, consider the following example.

In the course of moving into new, more expensive space (and acquiring almost 25 percent additional space), it was clear that my budget was going to be blown to bits. The obvious response was to look for ways I could offset the increased charges from corporate, especially the charges for space. Ideally, if I could reduce the space my division required I could thus reduce the corporate charges to my division for space. After looking at the way my division occupied and made use of space it was clear that one

operating area had a rather large footprint owing to its extensive use of tub files. This resulted in a large horizontal demand for space. Shifting to a vertical filing system greatly decreased the size of the operation's footprint. In turn, this made it possible to eliminate the additional 25 percent of space acquired during the move. It was turned back to corporate and my budget was back on track.

The ultimate result I aimed at was reducing charges for space. I couldn't do anything about the new, increased rate for space but I could do something about reducing the amount of space utilized. To do that I had to find ways of reducing the amount of space required to perform the work.

As the diagram in Figure 2 below illustrates, there are linkages between the direct and immediate or proximate effects of your actions and the downstream or ultimate effects of those actions. If you are to succeed in hitting ultimate targets you must identify those linkages so as to be able to connect your actions in the here and now with the results you seek later on and elsewhere. Connecting them gives you a solution path, a route from proximate results to ultimate results.

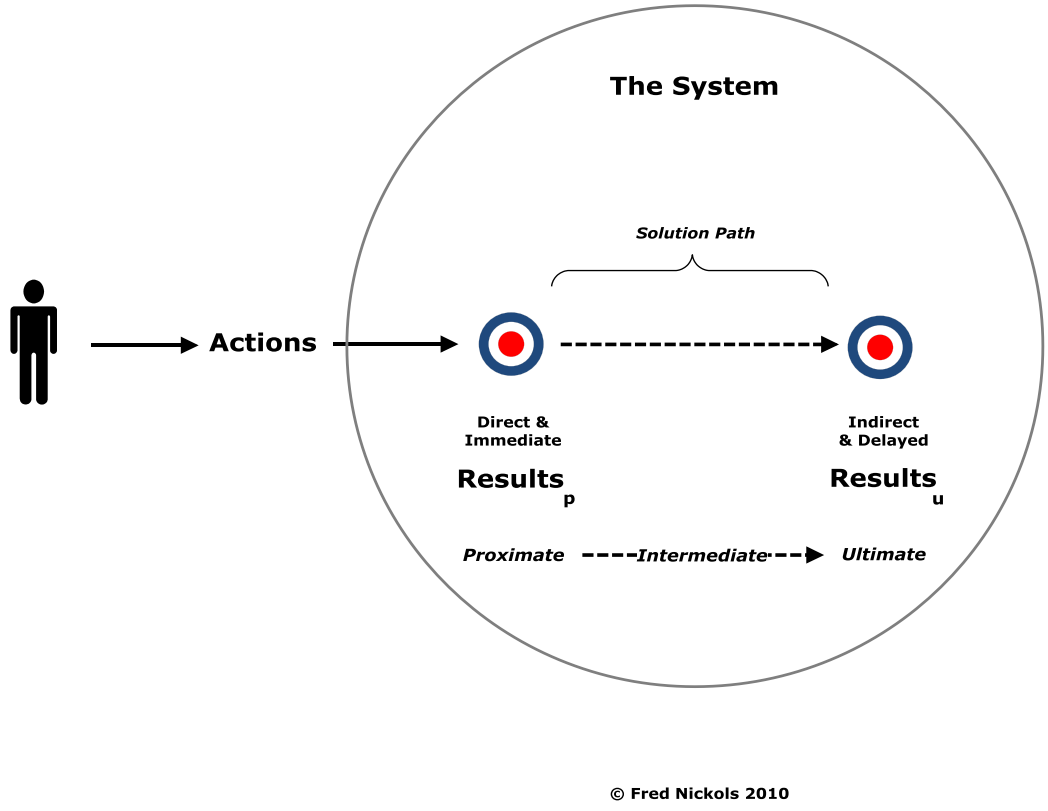

Figure 2 – Proximate and Ultimate Results

Ultimately, what *The Target Model* provides is a set of questions that help you focus on your own performance.

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Questions to Ask Yourself

- What are the variables you are trying to affect?
- What are the states to which you are trying to bring and maintain them?
- How do you keep abreast of their current or actual states?
- What are the paths through which your actions can affect them?
- What other actors and factors affect those same variables?
- What are the paths through which they affect them?
- Do you need to mitigate or offset their effects?
- If so, what avenues are open to you for doing that?
- Do you need to link proximate and ultimate results?
- What are the paths that connect proximate with ultimate results?
- Where in those paths can your actions have effect?

Your Performance as Influencing the Performance of Other People

Finally, it might be the case that your performance entails influencing the performance of other people. To help you in that regard, the diagram in Figure 3 illustrates the many factors that affect performance. By this point I'm confident you can figure out how to use *The Target Model* in Figure 3 without any help from me. But I will ask you two more questions:

1. Do you focus on these kinds of factors when helping your people hit their performance targets?
2. Does your manager focus on them when trying to help you hit yours?

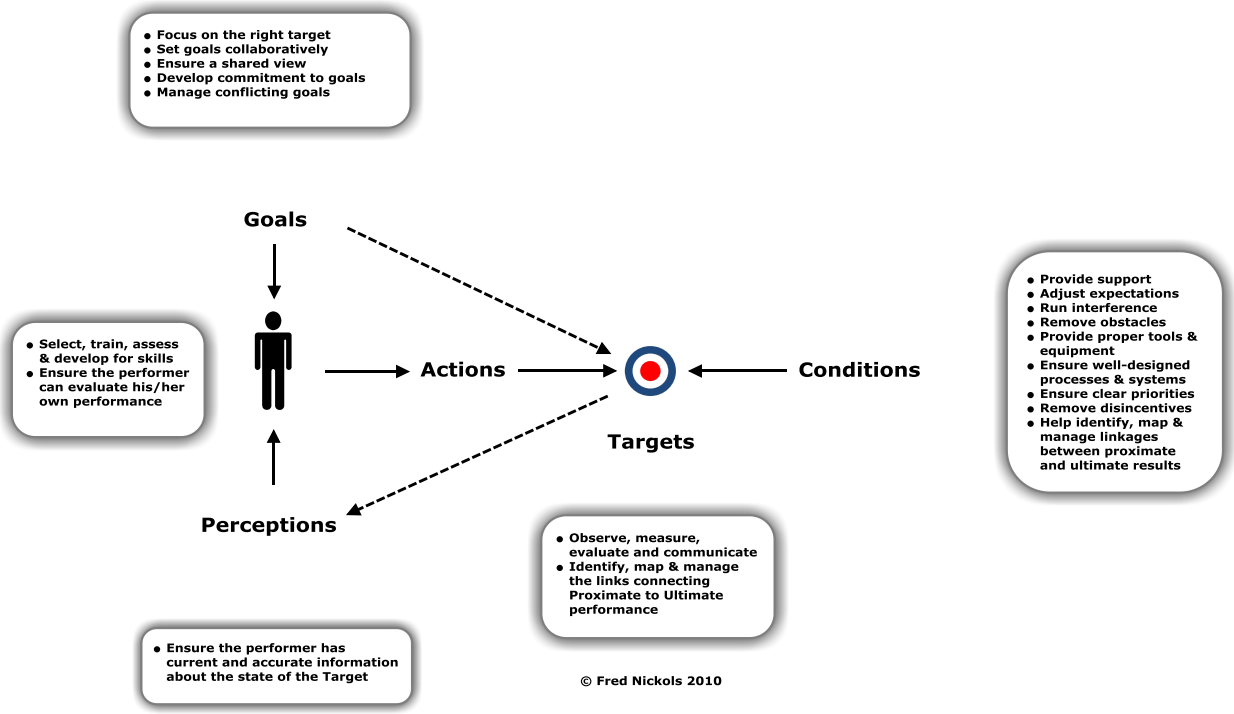

Figure 3 – Factors Affecting Performance

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About the Author

Fred Nickols is a writer, consultant and former executive with a deep and abiding interest in human behavior and performance in the workplace. His current focus is applying, refining and communicating *The Target Model of Human Behavior and Performance*. He maintains a web site at www.nickols.us and his many articles and papers are available there. He may be reached by email at fred@nickols.us.