Proximate to Ultimate

From Actions to Outcomes

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The ultimate results we seek are often far removed in space and time from the proximate or direct and immediate effects of the actions we take in order to realize those ultimate results. However, those ultimate results we seek – "over there later on" – must somehow be linked to the proximate or "here and now" results of our actions. This paper uses the Target Model to explore, explain and illustrate the connections between proximate and ultimate results and how to link the two.

One of the first lessons I learned as a newly-trained, internal Organization Development (OD) consultant is that change is indirect. In other words, you don't change *it*, you change something else and *it* changes as a result. It is often the case that change is also delayed. Or, as I've since learned to put it, you change something "over here" – and now – in order to change something "over there" later on.

The reject-rate problem serving as the focal point for this paper illustrates the points above. I've written about this problem before but this time I'm going to focus on a previously unexplored aspect of it. More specifically, I am going to examine the concepts of proximate, ultimate and intermediate targets or results. Why? Because whether as consultants, performers or managers, the nature of our work requires us to come to grips not only with the direct and immediate effects of our actions but also their indirect and delayed effects as well as what lies between and links the two. As suggested above, we intervene in the "here and now" in order to realize results "over there later on." Let's begin with the problem.

Shortly after joining a testing company some years back I was asked by a division director – a former client of mine – to look into a problem in one of his division's operations. One of the processes in the operation in question handled registration forms for a certain certification examination. Assuming the form in question could be processed successfully, the registrants would be assigned a seat at an upcoming administration of the certification examination. The division director informed me that the reject rate in this operation was way too high and he wanted me to see what could be done to reduce it. A preliminary investigation revealed the following, illustrated in Figure 1.
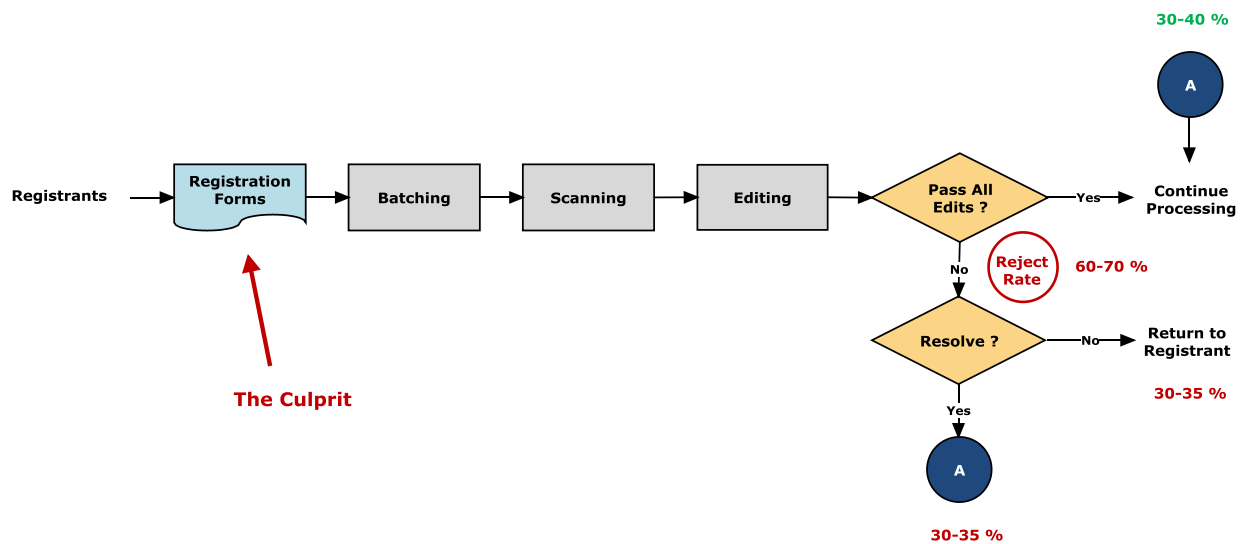

Figure 1 – Registration Form Processing Operation

The reject rate was running between 60 and 70 percent. Only 30 to 40 percent of the registration forms were being successfully processed on the first pass. About half of the rejected forms could be corrected and reinserted into processing but the other half had to be returned to the registrants. This was a costly

situation, both in terms of the financial and resource utilization costs associated with duplication of effort as well as in client and registrant satisfaction.

This extraordinarily high reject rate owed to registration forms that were riddled with errors. From the testing company's perspective, the registrants were not doing a good job of filling out the registration form. The forms were not what the testing company called "clean and complete." About half of the rejects owed to missing or invalid institutional codes and the other half appeared to owe to what can only be called "sloppiness."

In terms of the Target Model, which has been at the center of my practice for a long time now, the ideal situation would have been as shown in Figure 2 below.
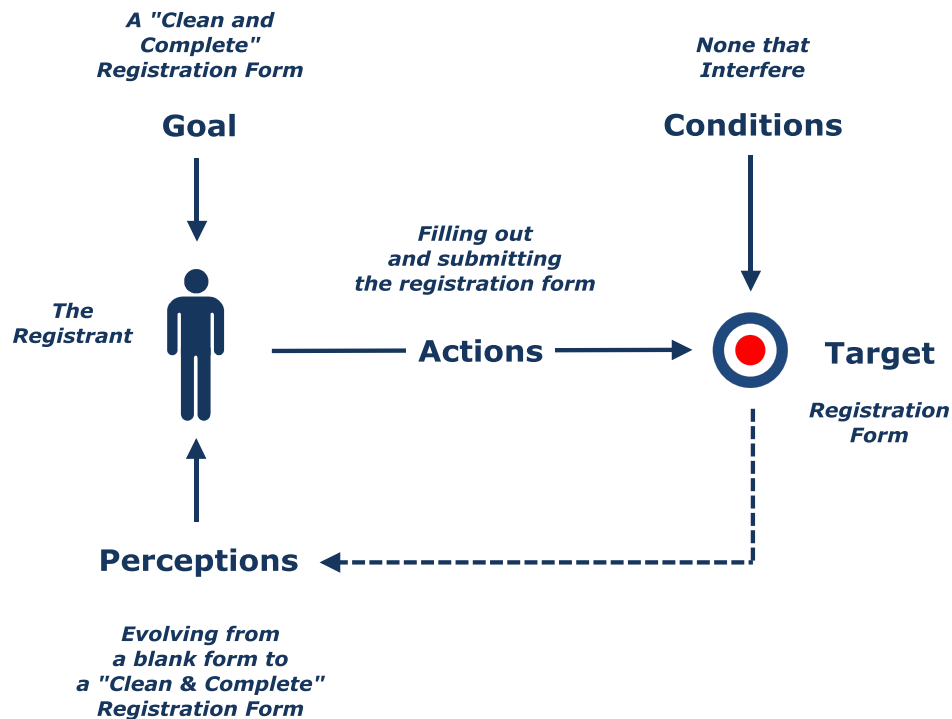

Figure 2 – Registration Form Submission – The Ideal Situation

The target was the registration form. The registrants' actions consisted of filling out and submitting the registration form. Their goal would have been to submit a "clean and complete" registration form and their perceptions would have informed them of the evolving state of the registration form and thus their progress toward and achievement of their goal. They would have been able to judge for themselves if the registration form was properly completed before submitting it. Finally, there would not have been any conditions that interfered with or prevented them from achieving their goal.

Clearly, the ideal situation did not prevail. After some further investigation, I concluded that the reality was more like that shown in Figure 3 below.
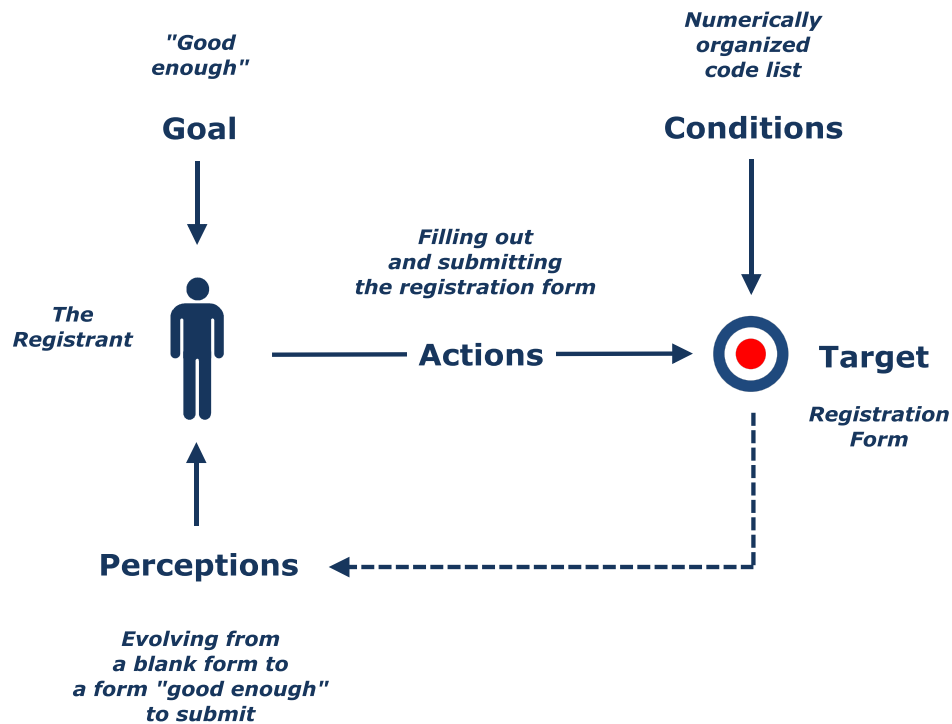

Figure 3 – The Reality

The registrants probably had no idea as to the testing company's requirements regarding a "clean and complete" registration form and, even if they had, they might not have cared. My guess was that the registrants viewed filling out and submitting the registration form as an obligatory administrative requirement and were content to complete it as best they could and that was "good enough."

I also discovered an impediment to properly completing the registration form. The registrants were expected to provide numeric codes identifying institutions where they had been trained and where they hoped to be employed. This part of filling out the registration form entailed providing the registrants with a code list. Presumably, it would have been organized alphabetically, by institutional name, so that the registrants could find the name and the corresponding code number. Instead, the registrants had been provided with the same numerically-organized code list used by the staff in the processing operation. It was organized numerically, by code number, so the processing staff could use a code number to look up the corresponding institution. The numerically-organized code list worked fine for the processing staff but it presented the registrants with an almost insurmountable problem.

My review of the instructions provided to the registrants resulted in some further conclusions. Nowhere were the registrants advised as to what constituted a "clean and complete" registration form

nor were they advised as to the consequences to them of failing to submit such a form. In short, the linkages between the testing company's requirements and the goals of the registrants were not made clear. Part of my solution to this problem was to rewrite the instructions, focusing on the importance of properly completing the registration form. Another part was to provide the registrants with an alphabetically-organized code list. The impact of these changes on the reject rate was dramatic (see Figure 4).
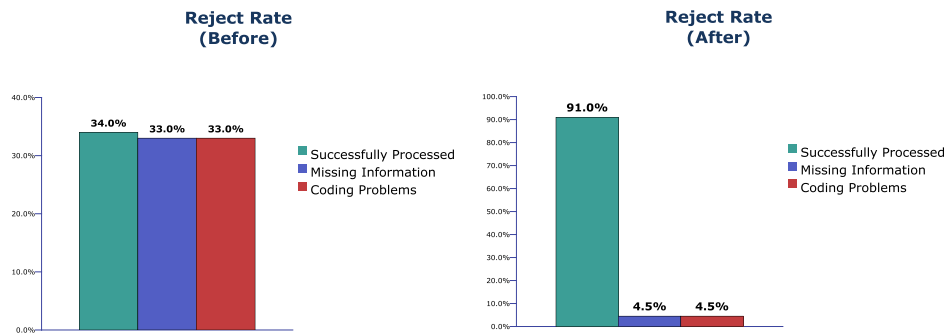

Figure 4 – The Reject Rate Before and After

What is of primary interest in this paper is not the solution to the reject rate problem but, rather, the concepts that led to its discovery and account for its success; namely, those aspects of the Target Model having to do with proximate, ultimate and intermediate targets or results (see Figure 5).
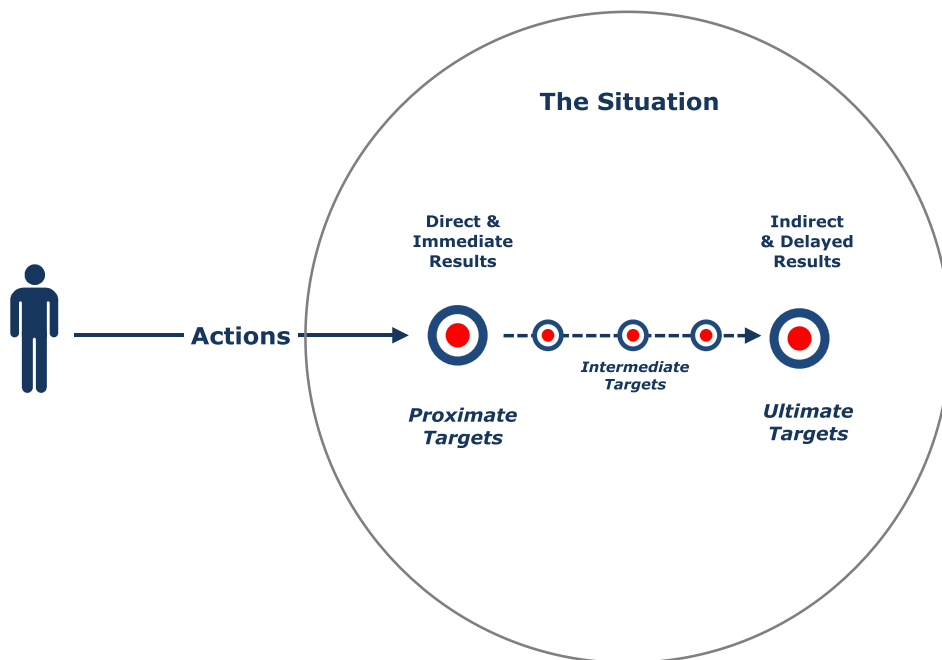

Figure 5 – Proximate, Ultimate and Intermediate Targets

Our actions have direct and immediate effects. They also have indirect and delayed effects. On occasion, the result or target of interest is such that the target of interest is proximate, close at hand in time and space (e.g., filling out a form). But it is also the case that we are often interested in effects that are far removed in space and time – indirect and delayed (e.g., reducing the operating costs of a work process). These kinds of targets or results are ultimate targets or results. What is essential in such cases is knowledge of how the proximate and ultimate targets or results are linked. What are the variables that connect the two? These linkages and connections constitute *intermediate* targets or results. A solid grasp of the intermediate targets that link proximate and ultimate targets is essential to effective action. Proximate results must lead eventually to ultimate results. My own situation in resolving the reject rate problem offers a good example (see Figure 6 below).
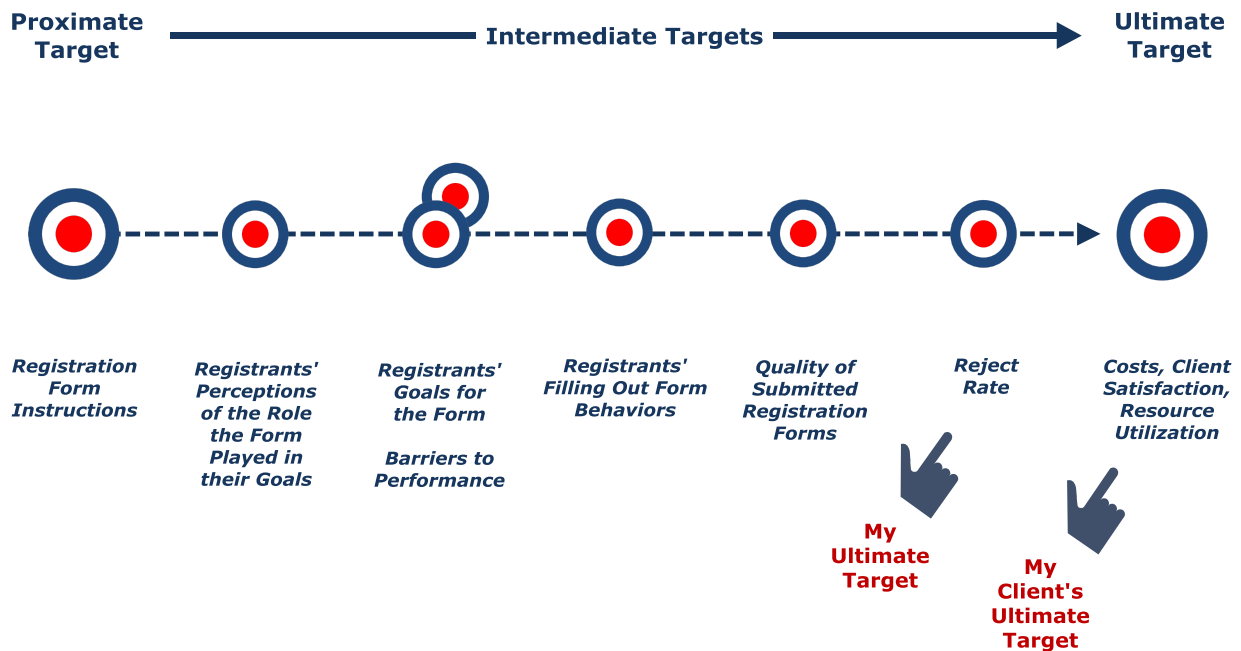

Figure 6 – My Proximate and Ultimate Targets

As Figure 6 illustrates, my client's ultimate target had to do with the costs, client satisfaction and resource utilization associated with the reject rate. My ultimate target was that reject rate. The reject rate tied directly to the quality of the registration forms being submitted. That, in turn, tied to the registrants' actions in filling out the form. Their behaviors in filling out the form tied to their goals for completing the form and, possibly, to any barriers in doing so correctly. The registrants' goals for filling out the form tied to their perception of the role that form played in their own goals. And, finally, my only avenue for influencing their perception of the role the registration form played in their goals was via the instructions for filling out the form that were part of the test bulletin. That brings us to the registrants' proximate and ultimate targets.

The registrants probably didn't care much one way or the other about the registration form. To them, it was a necessary administrative hurdle. However, in reality, it was much more important to them than they realized. This is illustrated in Figure 7 below.

Proximate Target ——————————— **Intermediate Targets** ————————→ **Ultimate Target**

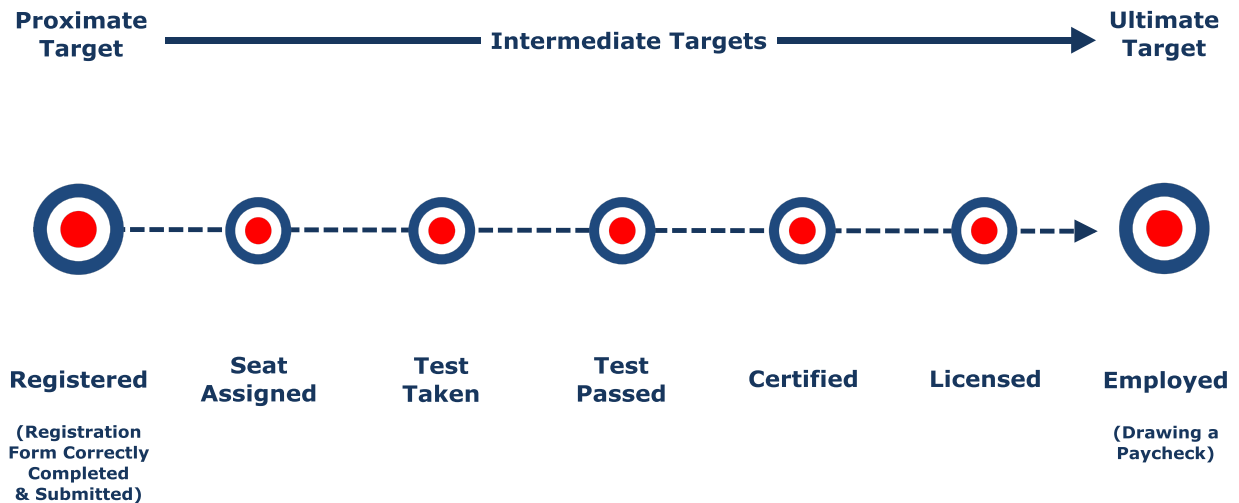| Registered	Seat Assigned	Test Taken	Test Passed	Certified	Licensed	Employed
(Registration Form Correctly Completed & Submitted)						(Drawing a Paycheck)

Figure 7 – The Registrants' Proximate to Ultimate Targets

The ultimate goal of the registrants was employment – a job and a paycheck. To achieve this goal, they first had to be licensed. In order to obtain a license, they had to be certified. Certification involved passing a certification test. To pass it they first had to take it. To take that test, they had to obtain a seat assignment at a test administration. Getting a seat assignment entailed filling out and submitting a registration form – and doing so correctly. It was in the registrants' best interests to fill out and submit what the testing company called a "clean and complete" registration form. The chain of results, linking the registrants' ultimate goal of obtaining employment with the testing company's requirement for a "clean and complete" registration form, was a key element in the revised instructions for filling out the form. In terms of the significant reduction in the reject rate, clarifying this chain of results accounts for the reduction in "sloppiness" and the alphabetically-organized code list accounts for the reduction in coding errors.

Conclusion

There are few jobs in the workplace today where the results or targets of interest consist of proximate results. More often than not, the results or targets of interest are indirect and delayed, far removed in space and time from the direct and immediate effects of our actions. Moreover, most jobs in today's workplace require the performer to figure out what to do instead of simply doing what someone else has figured out. In addition, the results of interest for many if not most jobs are indirect and delayed instead of direct and immediate. Thus, whether as consultants, managers or employers, we are well served by thinking about performance in terms of proximate, intermediate and ultimate results or

targets. Successful performance hinges on being able to act in the "here and now" so as to realize results "over there later on." It also hinges on being able to identify and manage the linkages connecting the two.

Proximate, intermediate and ultimate targets are all embedded in a larger network of variables. That network constitutes a performance architecture and, on occasion, that architecture must be mapped and analyzed so as to link proximate and ultimate targets.

It is my hope that this paper will start at least some managers, consultants and performance technologists thinking about and addressing the notions of proximate, intermediate and ultimate performance targets.

I did not go into the Target Model in detail in this paper. The focal points were the concepts of proximate, intermediate and ultimate targets. For those who haven't read any of my earlier pieces about the Target Model, a recap of its main components is provided in Figure 8 below and some pointers to further reading are provided below.
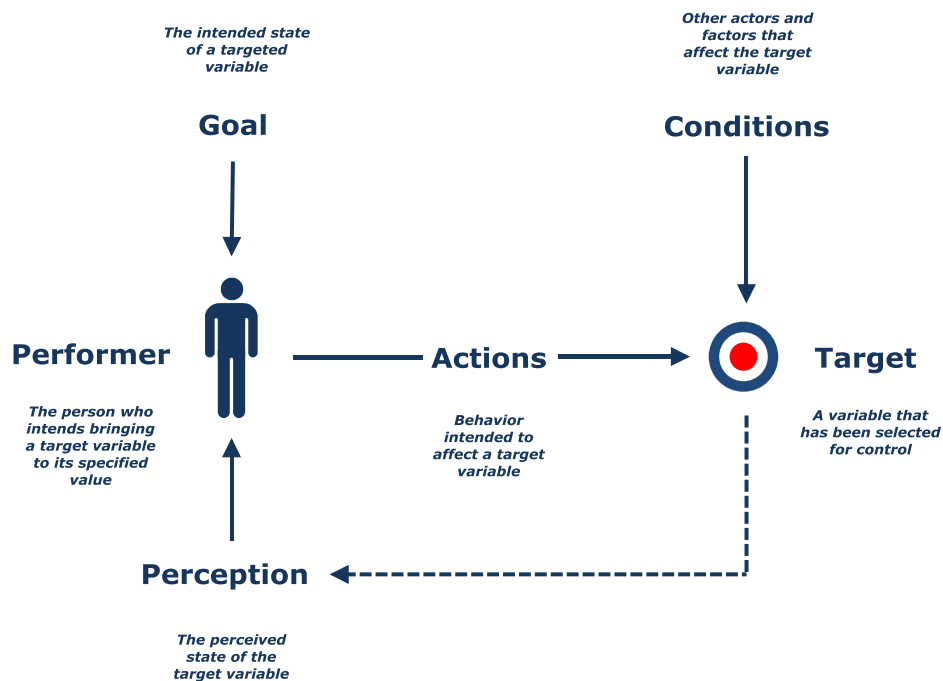

Figure 8 – Target Model (Annotated)

Further Reading

The Target Model has been featured in several published and unpublished papers. These are listed below, including links to my web site where the papers can be found.

- Helping People Hit their Performance Targets
- The GAP-ACT (Target) Model of Human Performance
- Manage Your Own Performance: No One Else Can
- Managerial Performance: Achieving Stable Results under Unstable Conditions
- A Puzzle Solved
- The Reflections Exercise
- Target Model of Human Behavior and Performance

A Few Words about Theory

Some people don't care much for theory. They are apt to dismiss it out of hand and snort, "Give me something practical."

Kurt Lewin is frequently credited with saying, "Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory." All technicians, most engineers and many managers also know that nothing is quite so practical as a good diagram or schematic of the system which you are trying to operate, maintain, improve or, in some cases, repair. In this paper, the thinking that led to such a robust solution to the reject rate problem was derived from a single diagram and that diagram was derived from a single theory. Nowhere else in management practice is so much traceable to or explained by a single theory.

The theoretical basis of the Target Model is "Perceptual Control Theory (PCT)." PCT was developed and has been articulated by William T. Powers in several books and numerous papers over a period of many years. The most salient for the purposes of this paper are listed below. If you would like to know more, my recommendation is to start with the most recent book and work your way back to the earlier ones.

1. W. T. Powers, "Behavior: The Control of Perception" (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1973).
2. W. T. Powers, "Behavior: The Control of Perception (2nd Edition)" (New Canaan: Benchmark Publications, 2005).
3. W.T. Powers, "Living Control Systems: Selected Papers of William T. Powers" (Gravel Switch: Control Systems Group, 1989).
4. W.T. Powers, "Making Sense of Behavior: The Meaning of Control" (New Canaan: Benchmark Publications, 1998).

There are some papers on my web site that are directly related to Perceptual Control Theory. Links to two of these are listed below.

- A Perceptual Control Theory Primer
- The Tank that Filled Itself by William T Powers