

Knowledge Worker

Recognition & Accountability: Two Sides of the Same Coin

(December 2014)

Instructional designers and developers are prime examples of people who do what is called “knowledge work.” So are performance improvement professionals. In examining their performance, we are well served by considering the nature of recognition – and its fit with accountability. Here’s a little story from my Navy days to illustrate what I mean. It goes back to when ISPI was NSPI and PI stood for programmed instruction.

One of my most enjoyable assignments was as head of the Navy’s Programmed Instruction Writers course, a unit of the Navy Instructor School at the Service School Command (SSC). SSC was in turn part of the Naval Training Center (NTC) in San Diego, California. During my tour there I redesigned the PI Writers course. Instead of the participants being taught how to *develop* PI materials they were taught how to *evaluate* them. The premise was that if they could correctly evaluate such materials they could produce them too. The assumption proved valid; the trainees were in fact able to evaluate and thus produce high-quality PI materials.

My next tour of duty was at the Navy’s Human Resources Management Project (HRMP). It was located right down the street from the Instructor School. My Commanding Officer at the HRMP, a Captain by the name of Gerry Bradford, was reassigned as the C.O. of the Service School Command. A while after he took command of SSC I got a call asking me to report to his office. When I showed up we exchanged some pleasantries and then got down to business.

He told me he remembered that I had headed up the PI Writers course and he wanted to ask my advice about a related matter. He said it had come to his attention that the PI Materials being produced at the various schools which were part of SSC were of less than sterling quality. He came straight to the point: He wanted to know what could be done about it.

As it happened, I was aware of the problem, too. And I thought I knew the reason behind it. At any rate, here’s the advice I gave my former Skipper.

“Skipper,” I said, “I know about that problem and I think I know what’s behind it. When I was running the PI Writers course, we made sure the developers put their names on the materials they developed. We also made sure they put their names front and center on the cover page. What I understand to be the case now is that they are forbidden from putting their names on the materials. As a result, no one knows who developed the materials and the people who develop them probably don’t care nearly as much as they would if their names were on them.”

“So what would you have me do?” asked my former Skipper.

“Have them put their names on the materials, right on the cover page,” I replied. “Restore their pride of authorship.”

“Thanks, Nick,” said Captain Bradford. With that we shook hands and I returned to the HRMP.

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A few months later I heard that the developers' names were in fact once again being put on the materials in a prominent place although not on the front cover. I also heard that the quality of the materials being developed had improved considerably. I also learned that Captain Bradford considered the problem solved.

What I think this little incident illustrates is the way in which recognition and accountability work together to produce better performance than would be the case in the absence of either. They are not necessarily separate and are profitably viewed as two sides of the same coin.

So, think about it: What roles do recognition and accountability play in your performance as someone who does knowledge work?

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, 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 manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's 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 and access to them is available [here](#).