

# Knowledge Worker

## What's Going on Here?

(May 2015)

### A Puzzle Solved

A paper I wrote titled “A Puzzle Solved” describes a situation in which a sales manager asked me to look into a situation that was puzzling her. The request was more or less informal and had nothing to do with the project on which I was working. To shorten up a long story, the situation involved a top-performing sales rep who would inexplicably call in sick in the middle of a hot streak of sales. It turns out the sales rep was managing his income based on differences in the way commissions and sick time were paid. You can read more about that in the paper I mentioned.

The point to be made here is that “A Puzzle Solved” is an instance of the kind of situation I call “What’s going on here?” which, as that question and the example above imply, involves a typically informal request to make sense out of a puzzling situation. The aim is to clarify, to develop an understanding of the situation, not necessarily to take action. Whether or not the situation is problematic remains to be seen, as does any requirement for further action.

I have had several of these “Could you look into this?” requests over the course of my consulting career. The “sick time” puzzle was just one of them. Allow me to describe a few more.

### “Oh, By the Way...”

I had been engaged to develop a set of algorithm-based job aids and associated training for a sizable population of people at a large bank whose work involved resolving claims for lost or stolen traveler’s checks. The fellow who brought me in said, “Oh, by the way, if you come across any opportunities for improvement, be sure to let me know.”

The employees in question all worked in cubicles and did their work at a computer terminal. It seemed rather obvious that any time away from the terminal was time away from work and at one point we set out to find out how much time they spent away from their workstations. Unobtrusive observations yielding time samples were made and the results were startling: the claims examiners were spending roughly 40 percent of their time away from their workstations. That 40 percent was about evenly divided between (1) time spent trotting back and forth to their supervisor’s desk to obtain approval for a proposed resolution of a claim and (2) time spent standing in line at a big, new copy machine (which had replaced numerous small ones previously scattered about the workplace). To again cut to the chase, the authorization levels for the examiners were increased and the small copy machines were reinstalled throughout the work area. Time away from station dropped dramatically and productivity went up.

### “Could You Look Into This, Please?”

I was doing some work for AT&T Long Lines, the long distance arm of pre-divestiture AT&T, when my client and one of his colleagues approached me with a sensitive request. It seems a female computer programmer was under scrutiny because she was taking much longer than her male counterparts to reach the point of compiling the mainframe programs she wrote. My client asked me if I could look into the matter – discreetly, of course – and get back to him and his colleague. I did and what I found turned

# Knowledge Worker

## What's Going on Here?

(May 2015)

out to be quite surprising. First off, her total time to develop a program was on a par with her male colleagues. However, she spent a much larger percentage of that total time in writing and re-writing her code. Her male colleagues spent much less time writing and re-writing and turned to compiling and debugging as quickly as possible. They were using compiling as quick and easy way of de-bugging the programs they had written. Her programs, by contrast, were de-bugged via through extensive review and rewriting and they typically compiled on the very first attempt. The comparison between the female programmer and her male colleagues is illustrated in the simplified diagram below.



Back then, compile time on the computer was quite expensive. Consequently, the female programmer was far more cost-effective than her male colleagues because she used much less in the way of compile time. Needless to say, all concerned stopped looking askance at her and started trying to get her male colleagues to be more like her.

### Improving Productivity through Training

A large, well-known consulting firm had performed a strategic study for a client and one of the recommendations made was to hire me to “improve productivity through training.” I had no idea what they had in mind but I was willing to go in and take a look.

The function in question handled the reject stream for a large, seasonal forms processing operation. Forms that failed certain edits were suspended for manual resolution. My task was to improve the productivity of the function.

In the course of getting ready for a kick-off meeting I asked if I could observe the operation for a while. Permission was granted and I watched what the resolution personnel were doing. Every so often they would reach for a three-ring binder and refer to it as they worked a suspended form. As one person did so, I introduced myself and asked what it was he used the binder for. He told me that he used it to see why the suspended form had kicked out. In essence, he was manually re-running the computer edit. Talk about rework!

Later, in the kickoff meeting I asked the head of systems if he could print a code that would identify the edit that the form failed. He said, “Sure.” That was quickly accomplished and the manual re-running of the edits was eliminated. The resultant productivity improvement more than paid for the cost of the project.

# Knowledge Worker

## What's Going on Here?

(May 2015)

### How Far Did Those Rounds Go?

Perhaps the earliest and most significant of these “What’s going on here?” situations occurred during my Navy days, long before I knew much of anything about training and human performance, and it was me who was asking the question.

My ship was providing gunfire support for troops ashore in Viet Nam and, in the course of one mission the spotter came up with an unusual request. He asked us to “throw” a round as far down the gun target line as we could. Without boring you with how that was done we obliged him and he was overjoyed with the result, immediately requesting several more rounds. Afterward, I asked my Fire Control Officer to get the coordinates for our position at the time and for where the rounds were landing so we could check the distance. To my surprise, the rounds were landing well beyond the supposed maximum range of my weapons system. “What’s going on here?” I wondered. After a sleepless night I found a fundamental flaw in the design of the computer at the heart of the weapons system. That led to a temporary workaround and later a more lasting fix in the form of a fleet-wide modification to the computer that controlled the gun mounts.

### Some Things in Common

What do these little stories have in common? What lessons are to be learned from them? What points are to be made? Well, from my perspective, there appear to be five things that all the stories have in common:

1. Curiosity
2. Situation-Specific Knowledge
3. Relevant Know-How
4. Access
5. Authority to Investigate

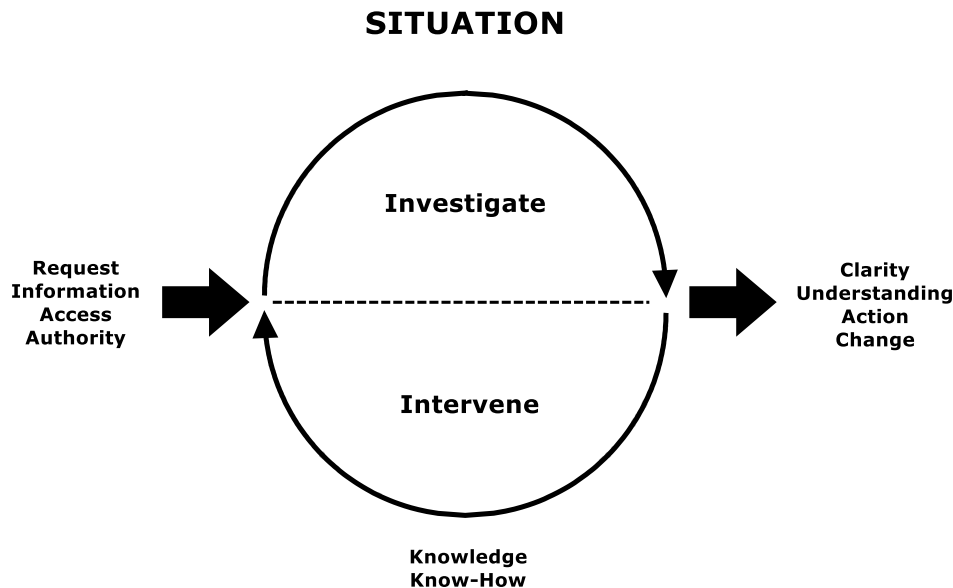
Curiosity played a role in all of the stories; mine or someone else’s. There was a desire to know what was going on. In all five situations I can point to situation-specific knowledge. This is best illustrated by the gunnery system story where, as the technician in charge of the gunfire control system, I definitely had specific knowledge of that system. Also marking these five stories is relevant know-how. In the case of the sales rep calling in sick, it was my know-how related to analyzing and understanding human behavior; specifically, the fact that human behavior serves to control certain variables and, in the sales rep’s case, what was being controlled was his paycheck. Perhaps unnoticed are the next two factors: access and authority. In all cases, I had legitimate access to people and information related to the situation. Perhaps most important, I also had the authority to investigate the situation, to look into it, to figure out what was going on. Without it, I would have been sticking my nose where it didn’t belong, which is rarely a wise thing to do. These five things, then, were and are prerequisites or necessary conditions for a successful investigation.

# Knowledge Worker

## What's Going on Here?

(May 2015)

The preceding discussion is captured in the diagram below.



© Fred Nickols 2015

### Figuring Out “What’s going on here?” Is What We Do

Much of what we performance improvement professionals do is *ad hoc*, off-the-books or on the side so to speak. This is especially true when we start out with a training assignment. These off-the-books efforts are value-added to use a trite term but add value they do, often of a considerable nature. Getting a fix on the situation is also the first step in any formal engagement, training or otherwise. In the last analysis, that’s what we knowledge workers do, we investigate, then we intervene; we figure out what’s going on and, on most occasions, we then do something about it. To get started, we have to answer the question, “What’s going on here?”

In case you’re interested, here’s a link to the puzzle solved paper on my web site:

<http://www.nickols.us/PuzzleSolved.pdf>

### 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](#).