Actions, Variables, Outcomes
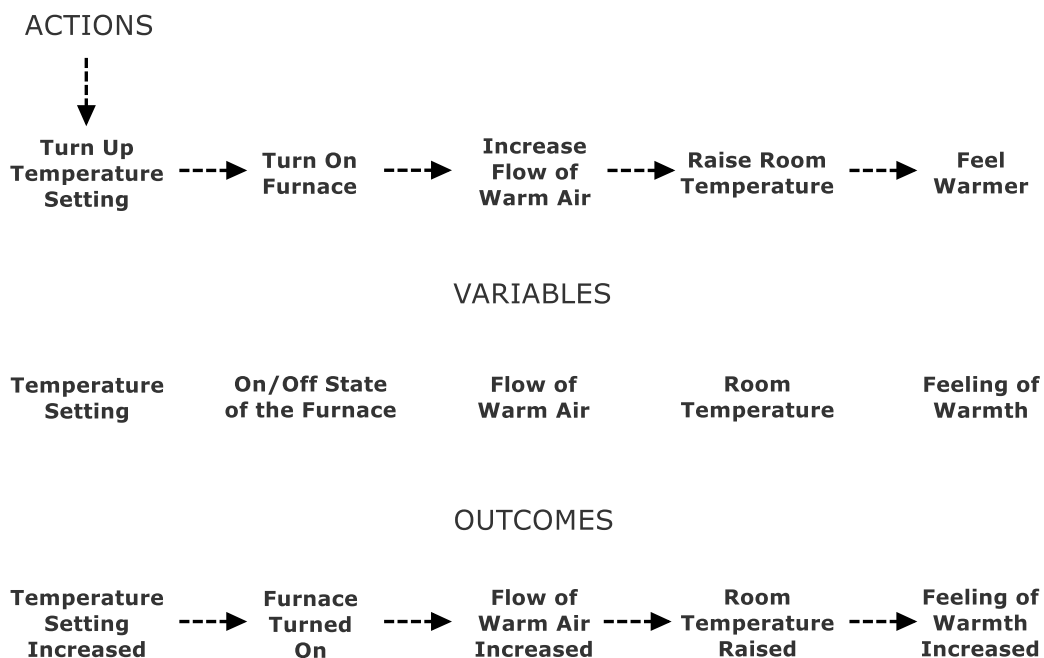## Three Essential Elements of Achievement

Instead of theory or concepts, let's begin with a commonplace example most of us should be able to relate to. It's winter. It's a cold day. You are feeling a little chilly and you want to feel warmer. You walk over to the thermostat on the wall and turn up the temperature setting by a few degrees. The furnace kicks in, the flow of warm air into the room increases, the temperature in the room goes up and, after a while, you feel warmer. You achieved the result you were after.

Three Essential Elements of Achievement

The example above illustrates three essential elements involved in achieving any result. Those three elements form a framework for thinking about results and how to achieve them.

1. *Actions* (what you do).
2. *Variables* (the things affected by your actions).
3. *Outcomes* (the effects or results your actions produce, directly or indirectly, and intended or otherwise).

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ACTIONS

| Turn Up Temperature Setting | ---> | Turn On Furnace | ---> | Increase Flow of Warm Air | ---> | Raise Room Temperature | ---> | Feel Warmer |

VARIABLES

| Temperature Setting | On/Off State of the Furnace | Flow of Warm Air | Room Temperature | Feeling of Warmth |

OUTCOMES

| Temperature Setting Increased | ---> | Furnace Turned On | ---> | Flow of Warm Air Increased | ---> | Room Temperature Raised | ---> | Feeling of Warmth Increased |

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The same five variables are present in all three parts of the diagram above: (1) the temperature setting, (2) the on/off state of the furnace, (3) the flow of warm air, (4) the room temperature, and (5) your feeling of warmth. The first level of the diagram (ACTIONS) depicts a series of occurrences that stem from increasing the thermostat setting. The second level (VARIABLES) indicates the variables involved

and their sequential relationships to one another. The third level (OUTCOMES) indicates the nature of the change in the value of each of the variables.

Each element offers a vantage point from which to examine achievement. The *Actions* element is useful in describing the chain of events that leads to or is necessary to achieve a particular outcome. The *Variables* element is useful in identifying the variables and causal relationships that must be affected to achieve a given outcome. The *Outcomes* element is useful in identifying the nature of the changes in the values of the variables necessary to achieve a particular outcome.

Some Basic Concepts

The example above makes clear some basic concepts. First, *Actions* are what we do to something, (e.g., increase the temperature setting on the thermostat). Second, what we act upon are *Variables*, things that have a value that can be changed (e.g., the temperature setting). Third, *Outcomes* reflect a change in the value of one or more variables (e.g., the temperature setting is increased, the furnace goes from off to on, the flow of warm air increases, the room temperature goes up, and the feeling of warmth increases).

The Concept of Path

Lurking in the diagram and description above is a key concept related to the successful achievement of any goal or objective; namely, what is sometimes called the "Achievement Path" and sometimes called the "Solution Path." In either case, we are talking about a *path* that leads from those variables you can affect through direct action (the temperature setting), through other variables (the state of the furnace, the flow of warm air, and room temperature), eventually affecting the variable that is your ultimate target (your feeling of warmth).

The diagram also illustrates the utility and relevance of working backward from the result you're after to those things you can affect through direct, immediate action. You want to feel warmer. To do that, you have to raise the room temperature. To do that, you have to increase the flow of warm air into the room. To do that, the furnace must be on. To achieve that, you have to increase the temperature setting on the thermostat.

Whether you are trying to feel warmer, or increase the net sales in your region, or reduce the waste levels in a production operation, or perhaps increase the market value of your company, three essential elements come into play in all cases: *Actions*, *Variables*, *Outcomes*.

The good news is this: There are ways of figuring out the appropriate Achievement Path or Solution Path for a particular result or outcome. Essentially, this entails identifying and examining the structure of the network of variables in which your target variable is embedded. This facilitates identifying (1) variables you can directly affect and (2) a path that leads from those variables through the network to the one you are trying to affect.

The not so good news is this: Doing so can be challenging. In some cases, it's easy; in some cases, it's not. It all depends on the complexity of the situation and the extent to which people can identify and examine its structure, especially the network of variables in which the one you are trying to affect is embedded.

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Three Suggestions

What are you supposed to do with what has been said? Here are three suggestions:

1. All results or outcomes can be expressed as a value of some variable. Start thinking about the variable that is at the heart of the result you seek. What is that variable? What value do you want it to have?
2. Variables are found in networks of other variables. Start thinking about the outcome you're after in terms of the network of variables in which your variable of interest is embedded. What does that larger network of variables look like? What are the other variables that make it up? How are they all connected to one another?
3. Change is indirect. You change something *over here* in order to change something *over there* (e.g., changing the thermostat setting in order to feel warmer). Start thinking about the path that leads from those variables you can affect through direct, immediate action, through other variables in the network, to the variable whose value you are ultimately trying to affect. What do I change *over here* to realize the result I want *over there*? How is *over here* connected to *over there*?

If I can be of assistance, give me a call.

Further Reading

Several of the Knowledge Worker Columns I have written for ISPI's *PerformanceXpress* deal with the notion of an Achievement Path or Solution Path and the network of variables in which such paths are found. Here are links to those columns. The columns are all brief, easy reads and they include some workplace examples.

*   [Solution Paths: Getting from Here to There](). November 2015
*   [Solution Paths: An Example](). December 2015
*   [Solution Paths: Another Example](). February 2016
*   [The Achievement Path](). May 2018
*   [The Achievement Path: A Workplace Example](). July 2018

About the Author

Fred Nickols is the *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at **Distance Consulting LLC**, where he provides "Assistance at A Distance." He is a retired, decorated Chief Petty Officer, as well as a former consultant and senior executive. Contact Fred via [e-mail]() and visit the [Distance Consulting]() web site. The site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Toolroom](), and has more than 200 free articles, book chapters, book reviews and columns.

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