

Knowledge Worker

Five Kinds of Gaps and What to Do about Them

(December 2012)

A generally accepted notion in the world of work is that a problem exists when there is a gap between *what is* and *what should be* that requires action but the action to take is not immediately apparent. In other words, there is uncertainty regarding action; hence, the view of problem solving as a matter of figuring out what to do.

A less widely-known view is that those gaps between *what is* and *what should be* can come about in five different ways and how they come about has a lot to say about how to figure out ways and means of closing them.

In this post I'll take a look at those five gaps and the three ways of figuring out what to do about each of them. First, the five gaps.

Gaps between *what is* and *what should be* come about in five different ways (see Figure 1).

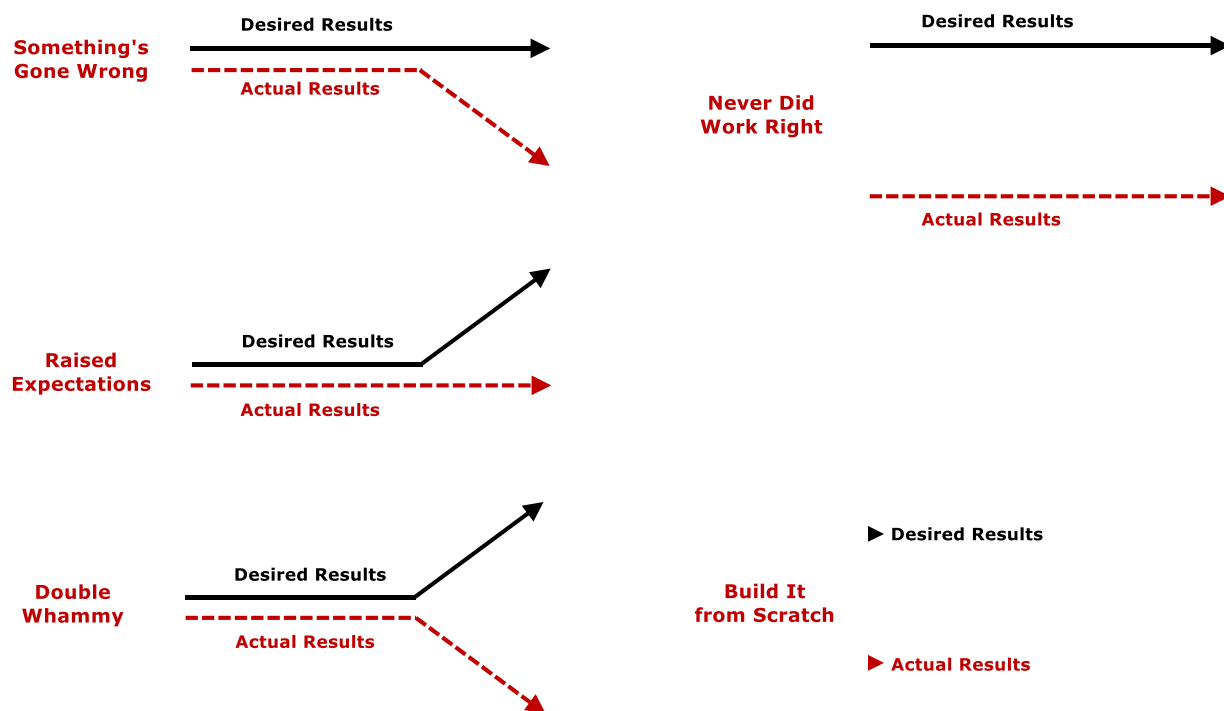


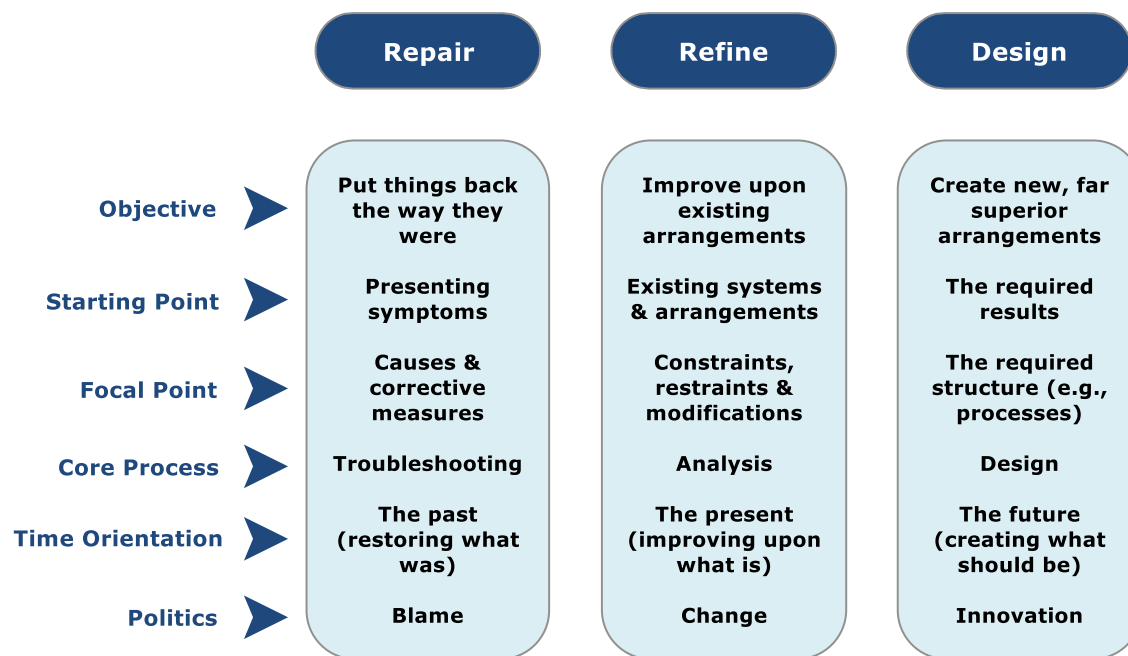
Figure 1 – Five Sources of Gaps

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1. **Something's Gone Wrong.** In this case, things are going along just fine and then there is a sudden deterioration in results. The obvious thing to do is find the cause and fix it. This calls for a troubleshooting approach, one known to generations and legions of technicians as "fault isolation."
2. **Raised Expectations.** Here, there is no deterioration in results; instead, the bar is raised. New and higher expectations create the gap. There is no cause to find and fix. Some kind of change to existing systems and arrangements is required.
3. **Double Whammy.** A sudden deterioration in results is coupled with raised expectations. It might be the case that finding and fixing the cause will take care of part of the problem but to completely close the gap will require other measures as well.
4. **Never Did Work Right.** In this case the gap has always existed. The desired results were never achieved. Some practitioners will set off in search of "root causes" for this failure to perform. Other will conclude that an entirely new system is required to close the gap.
5. **Build It from Scratch.** The gap is brand-new, the result of setting expectations for the very first time. There is no system to achieve them and there is no system to troubleshoot. This is a basic engineering problem; the required system must be built for the first time.



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Figure 2 – Three Problem Solving Approaches

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The five gaps just outlined, coupled with their origins, suggest three basic problem-solving approaches, which I will sum up as *Repair*, *Refine* and *Design*. Each is briefly summed up in Figure 2 above.

As Figure 2 makes clear, an accomplished problem solver has to be a master of three basic and very different approaches to solving problems encountered in the workplace. It also makes clear that a search for the “cause” of a problem isn’t always a relevant undertaking and in at least three out of the five cases, is completely irrelevant. Lastly, it can be the case that the search for cause is indeed relevant but, one found, it can’t be fixed, so other measures are called for. The bottom line here is that you need to take the concept of “cause” with a grain of salt and, in addition to solid troubleshooting skills, you also need the skills and abilities need to refine and improve existing systems and arrangements as well as design or engineer them from scratch.

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](#).