Knowledge Worker

Performance Control Theory

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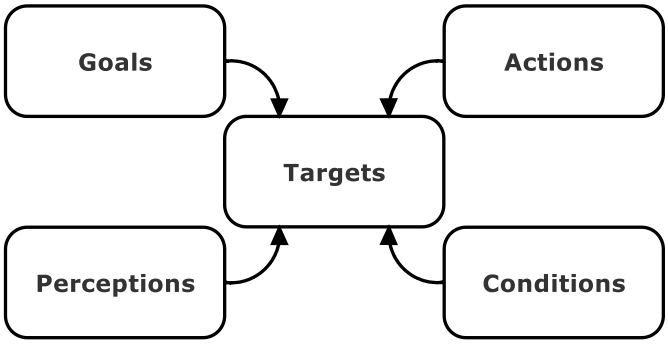
There is an excellent theory pertaining to human behavior known as Perceptual Control Theory (PCT), articulated by the late William T. Powers in several papers and books. Two of his more important books are listed at the end of this column. Basically, Powers' theory holds that we behave in ways that serve to control what we perceive. PCT, then, is a theory of control.

Because it is a theory of control, PCT offers an excellent explanation of how performance is controlled (or not). Indeed, to be precise, PCT would hold that to perform is to control. Consequently, I like to think of PCT as standing not just for Perceptual Control Theory but also for Performance Control Theory. In this month's column, I intend exploring how individual performance is controlled – by the performer.

Performance Control Model



As the Performance Control Model above indicates there are five major elements involved in the control of performance: Targets, Goals, Actions, Conditions and Perceptions. A brief review of each follows.

- ***Targets*** are the focal points for action, the center of attention; they are the variables we want to bring to a certain value and, on occasion, maintain at that value. The variable might be something like the reject rate in a process, the sales volume for a region, the retention rate for employees, or the turnover rate in inventory. Whatever they are, they are variables and our aim is to control their value. As the arrows indicate, the other four boxes tie to the Targets box in one way or another.
- ***Goals*** specify the desired value of our targets. The reject rate goal might be something like "less than one percent" and the sales goal might be something like "$200 thousand per quarter." Goals serve to specify the result we're after with respect to our targets. It stands to reason that to achieve any goal the performer must be clear about it and committed to achieving it. Absent clarity and commitment actions will be misguided, poorly executed or simply not undertaken.

- ***Actions*** are those things we do to bring our targeted variables to their desired states. With respect to the reject rate goal we might redesign the process, isolate and repair some malfunctioning portion of it, or perhaps realize that we need to change the inputs, not the process itself. Of extreme importance here is the fact that change is often indirect; we take action over here in order to realize a result over there. To be successful, we must know how "over here" is connected to "over there" so that, ultimately, our direct, immediate actions lead to and have the desired effects on our target variables. Obviously, we must also be capable of engaging in the necessary actions.
- ***Conditions*** are those circumstances or situations in which our targets are embedded and in which our actions are taken. These can be helpful or hindering and, in some cases, of no consequence whatsoever. In any case, they include other actors and factors that might also affect the variables we wish to affect. Consequently, our actions must offset or preclude any untoward effects stemming from the conditions in which we are operating.
- ***Perceptions*** inform us of the current state of our target variables and of changes to them owing to our actions or the effects of other actors and factors. We compare our perceptions of the current state of our targeted variables with our goals for those variables and if an unacceptable discrepancy exists, we act to close it. If no such discrepancy exists, we have succeeded in bringing the target variable to its desired state and no further action is necessary except to maintain the target variable in its desired state.

Control, as the late Peter Drucker observed, is always against some standard. We control our performance in light of the target variables whose value we intend controlling and our goals or desired values for those targets. We do so by acting in ways that alter the value of our target variables and we are informed about the efficacy of our actions by our perceptions of those values and changes in them. In short, Perceptual Control Theory explains how individuals control their performance.

The Control of Performance: A Recap

- The performer perceives the current state of the outcome he or she is trying to achieve (i.e., a specific value of a targeted variable).
- The performer compares the current state of the intended outcome with the intended or goal state.
- If an unacceptable gap exists between the current and intended states, the performer acts to close any gap.
- Assuming they are effective, the performer's actions, whether directly or indirectly, affect the value of the target variable.
- Bringing the value of the target variable to some specified state and keeping it there is the goal, the intended outcome, the performance in question.

- There are, however, other actors and factors in that same setting and these, too, can affect or, to use a PCT term, "disturb" the value of the target variable. The performer's actions must offset the effects of these other actors and factors.

Selected References

1. Powers, W.T., (2005). *Behavior: The Control of Perception*. Benchmark Publications: Montclair, NJ.
2. _____ (1998). *Making Sense of Behavior: The Meaning of Control.* Benchmark Publications: New Canaan, CT

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.