

Knowledge Worker

Successful Performance

(September 2016)

This month's column presents a basic view of the factors involved in successful human performance. This view draws on my reflections about some of the many problems of human behavior and performance I have tackled during my long and winding career; for example:

- People receiving unnecessary training because training was routinely used as a solution
- A well-intentioned management decision that disrupted productivity instead of improving it
- People not being provided the information needed to properly complete their task
- A sales reward system that boosted sales so high production couldn't meet the demand

As I mulled over my experiences with these and other instances I concluded that in that last analysis successful performance boils down to three factors: commitment, competence and circumstances (see Figure 1).



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Figure 1 – The Successful Performance Triangle

If people are committed to achieving a given result, if they are competent to do so and if there are no circumstances preventing them from doing so they will achieve it. If any of these three criteria are not satisfied, the result in question won't be achieved – successful performance will not occur.

- **Commitment.** The commitment to achieve a given result involves two things: (1) the performers want to achieve the result in question and (2) the performers are determined to do so. This kind

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of determined effort typically ties to the performers seeing personal and organizational value in the desired outcome that far outweigh the personal and organizational costs of achieving it.

- **Competence.** Being competent to achieve a given result hinges on the performers knowing what to do, how to do it, when to do it and on being sufficiently proficient at doing it that they will succeed given the circumstances at hand. Trying circumstances typically call for greater proficiency. Thus it is that an expert can easily succeed in a set of circumstances that would foil the best efforts of a novice.
- **Circumstances.** Achieving a given result also hinges on there not being any circumstances or conditions that prevent the performers from achieving the result. Even the best of us can be overwhelmed by circumstances. There are many circumstances that can hinder or prevent someone from achieving a result they want to achieve and are capable of achieving. For example, they might be able to obtain any necessary information, especially information about the effects of their actions, as well as any needed resources such as tools and equipment. They might also be hindered by the lack of essential support such as cooperation and collaboration on the part of others. Their work might be part of a poorly-designed and poorly-functioning process; in other words, there are “system” problems. Finally, there might be opposition or resistance that cannot be overcome.

Sounds a lot like good old knowledge, skill and attitude doesn't it? Throw in attention to those oft-cited “environmental factors” and you have the basic elements of human performance technology (HPT). Pretty basic stuff, isn't it?

The late Geary Rummler, one of ISPI's better-known members famously said, “If you put a good performer in a bad system the system wins every time.” In similar fashion, W. Edwards Deming, drawing a distinction between special causes and common causes, wrote in *Out of the Crisis*, “I should estimate that in my experience most troubles and most possibilities for improvement add up to proportions something like this: 94 % belong to the system (responsibility of management), 6 % special (p.315).” Deming, too, believed “the system” accounted for the vast bulk of performance problems.

As just one illustration, consider this: At a large health insurer, some claims were “disappearing” (i.e., they seemed to get “lost” in the system). Senior managers and the systems folks were convinced that the claim examiners didn't know what they were doing. Upon investigation, it turns out that if a claim failed an edit, it would be suspended for resolution by a claims examiner. In certain cases, a claim would fail a particular edit and the resolution for that suspension caused the claim to subsequently be suspended for a different edit failure. The resolution to this second reject led to the claim once again being kicked out for the original reason, etc., etc., etc. The claim disappeared because it was being cycled back and forth by the computer-based claims processing system. We called that a “rat-race” loop and the knowledge, skill and attitudes of the claims examiners had nothing to do with the problem (although it could be argued that the systems people had something to do with it).

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In terms of the successful performance model presented above, this example highlights the importance of looking first at the circumstances (i.e., “the system”), then at the performer’s commitment and lastly at the performer’s competence.

Here’s a simple little checklist to summarize what’s been said.

Commitment

- Wants to achieve the result in question and is determined to do so.
- Sees value in achieving the result and is willing to incur the costs of achieving it.

Competence

- Knows what to do.
- Knows how to do it.
- Is sufficiently proficient.

Circumstances

- Has the necessary information.
- Has the necessary cooperation and support.
- Has the necessary tools and equipment.
- There are no “system” problems.
- There are no overwhelming obstacles, barriers, impediments or opposing forces.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer, consultant and former executive who spent 20 years in the United States 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 managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers’ 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*.