

# Knowledge Worker

## Putting the GAP-ACT Model to Work

(July 2014)

In last month's column I reviewed the GAP-ACT Model of Human Behavior and Performance (see Figure 1). If the model could speak it might say something like this:

We human beings select or target certain variables in our environment (T). We set goals (G) defining the state we wish those variables to be in and we compare our perceptions (P) of the actual or current state of those variables with the goal state we have set for them. If there is a discrepancy ( $d$ ) between these two states we intervene ( $i$ ), we engage in actions (A) aimed at reducing or eliminating that gap. For the most part we are successful. We are "living control systems" and we do a pretty good job of controlling things. However, there are other conditions (C), other actors and factors that affect the same variables we want to control. For the most part, these other actors and factors pose minor disturbances to our control and we can compensate for them. But on occasion they can overwhelm our best efforts. Our control is far from perfect.

In last month's column I also promised to address how the GAP-ACT Model can be put to use. In this month's column I will keep my promise by providing some general guidelines and by pointing you to some more in-depth sources.

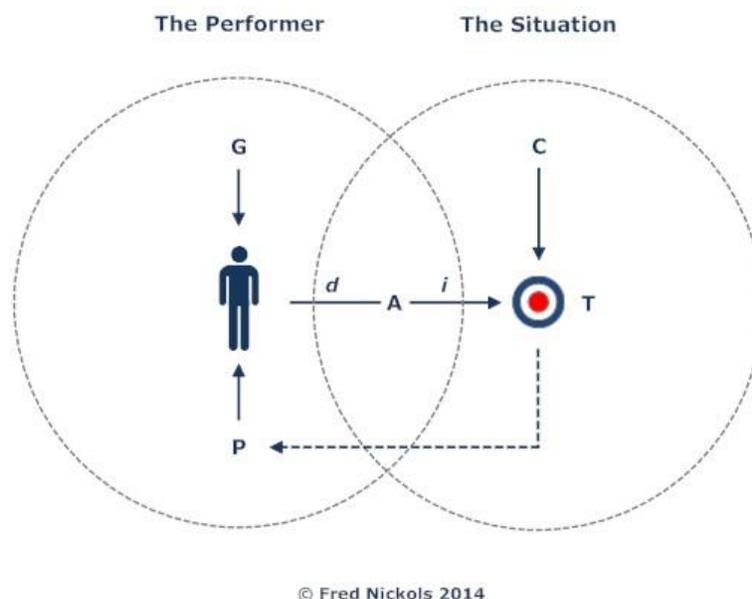


Figure 1 – The GAP-ACT Model of Human Behavior & Performance

### General Uses

- As a Diagnostic Framework
- As an Aid to Understanding Human Behavior & Performance
- As a Tool in Providing Performance Support

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- As a Tool for Solving Performance Problems
- As a Tool for Preventing Performance Problems

These general uses are elaborated upon below and in the additional resources pointed to.

### In-Depth Treatment

The GAP-ACT Model is also known as The Target Model (owing to the use of a bulls-eye to represent the target or controlled variable). Previously published papers and some unpublished papers provide much more detail about putting the GAP-ACT/Target Model to work. Following are some brief explanations of the more useful of these papers along with links that will take you to them. Collectively, these papers illustrate the general uses listed above.

- **The Target (GAP-ACT) Model: A Mainly Visual Presentation.** If I could have you refer to only one additional source this would be it. This paper is mainly visual in nature but it also contains lots of illustrative examples and a couple of cases in point. Of particular interest are the notions of proximate, intermediate and ultimate targets. It also presents a version of the GAP-ACT Model that is annotated with diagnostic questions. Click [here](#).
- **A Puzzle Solved.** This is about an incident I encountered when I was working with a field sales force. The sales manager asked me to look into a puzzling situation pertaining to a high-performing sales rep who would call in sick in the middle of a hot run of sales. I looked into the matter and the puzzle was solved, although not in the way the manager had hoped for. However, the Target (GAP-ACT) Model helped her understand. This case, although true, is told in fictionalized story form and I'm told it makes good reading. Click [here](#).
- **A Model for Helping People Hit Their Performance Targets.** This paper was published in *Performance Improvement* (Nickols, 2010) and is available to ISPI members in the resources section of the ISPI web site. It presents the Target (GAP-ACT) Model and then presents a detailed analysis of an operations problem using the model as a diagnostic guide. Click [here](#).
- **Managerial Performance: Achieving Stable Results in Varying Conditions.** If anyone has to vary their behavior in response to shifting, changing circumstances it is managers. This paper examines managerial performance in light of the Target (GAP-ACT) Model. It was published in *Proven* in 2012. A copy of the article is available on my web site. Click [here](#).
- **Manage Your Own Performance: No One Else Can.** This paper was also published in *Performance Improvement* (Nickols, 2011). It uses the Target (GAP-ACT) Model to take a look at a task all of us face; namely, managing our own performance. It is available to ISPI members in the resources section of the ISPI web site. Click [here](#).

### Concluding Remarks

Some of you reading this column might ask, "Why? Why bother with this GAP-ACT or Target Model or whatever you care to call it? Why is it so all-fired important?" For me, the answer goes back to 1983

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when I published my first article dealing with the shift to knowledge work (Nickols, 1983). That article, too, is available to ISPI members on the ISPI web site. Click [here](#).

The shift to knowledge work was in fact a multi-faceted shift in the nature of work and working. For one thing, the basis of work shifted from materials to information. For another, working activities shifted from primarily prefigured or pre-scripted routines carried out under standardized conditions to configured responses to the circumstances at hand. This means the performer must figure out what to do instead of simply doing what someone else has already figured out. Just as important, this means the performer is most profitably viewed as an agent, acting on the employer's behalf instead of as an actor following a script. We need a view of human behavior and performance that incorporates self-control, self-management, autonomy and the pursuit of specified results under varying circumstances. In short, we need a model of people that recognizes they are adaptive and adaptable "living control systems" (Powers, 1989, 1992, 2008). The Target (GAP-ACT) Model is just such a view.

Finally, in case you don't have time or don't care to check out any of the resources I've pointed you to, shown below, in Figure 2, is an annotated version of the GAP-ACT/Target Model. It illustrates the kinds of issues that useful in diagnosing, designing, supporting and managing human performance in the workplace. It should prove useful.

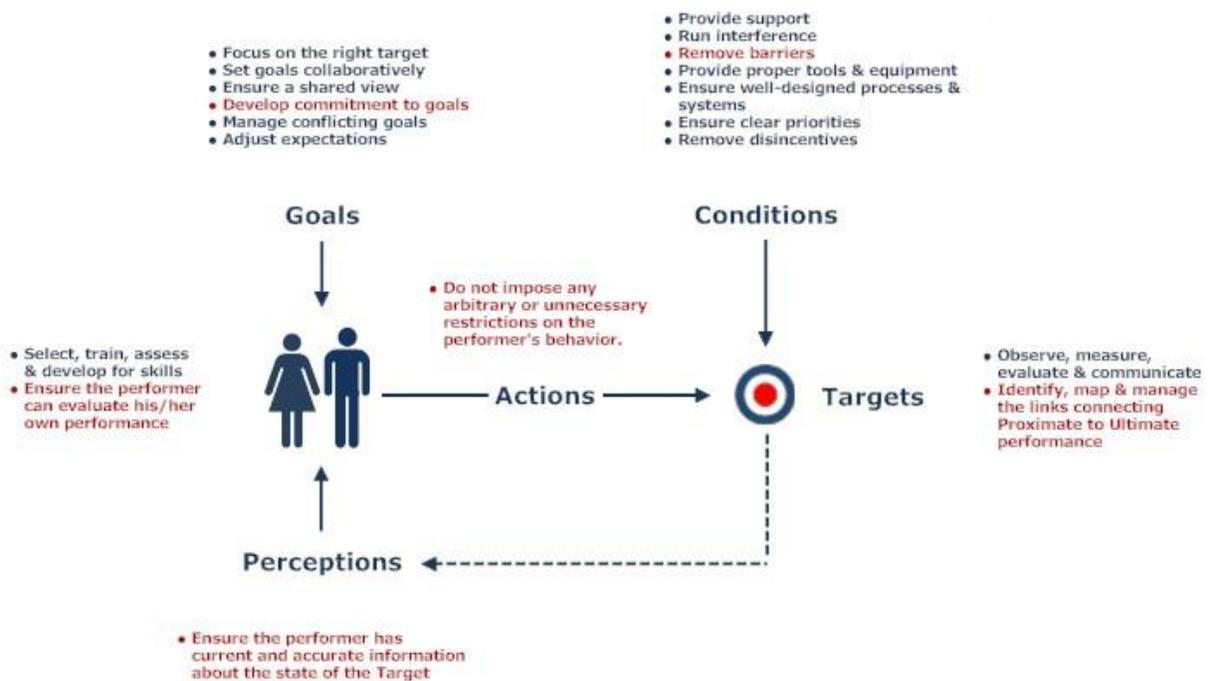


Figure 2 – The GAP-ACT/Target Model – Annotated

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### References

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### 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](#).