

The Reflections Exercise

Familiarizing Yourself with the Target Model

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This paper lays out an exercise readers can use to familiarize themselves with The Target Model of Human Behavior and Performance. It contains two illustrations and guidelines for an exercise in applying The Target Model.

The Reflections Exercise: Familiarizing Yourself with the Target Model

Welcome to the Reflections Exercise, an easy way to acquaint and familiarize yourself with the Target Model of Human Behavior and Performance. Let's get started.

Example 1: A Trip to the Grocery Store

My wife and I keep a running grocery list. From time to time, we write down items to be picked up the next time one of us goes to the store. When it's full or if we need a particular item badly enough, off we go to the store. This is all illustrated in relation to the Target Model as shown below in Figure 1.

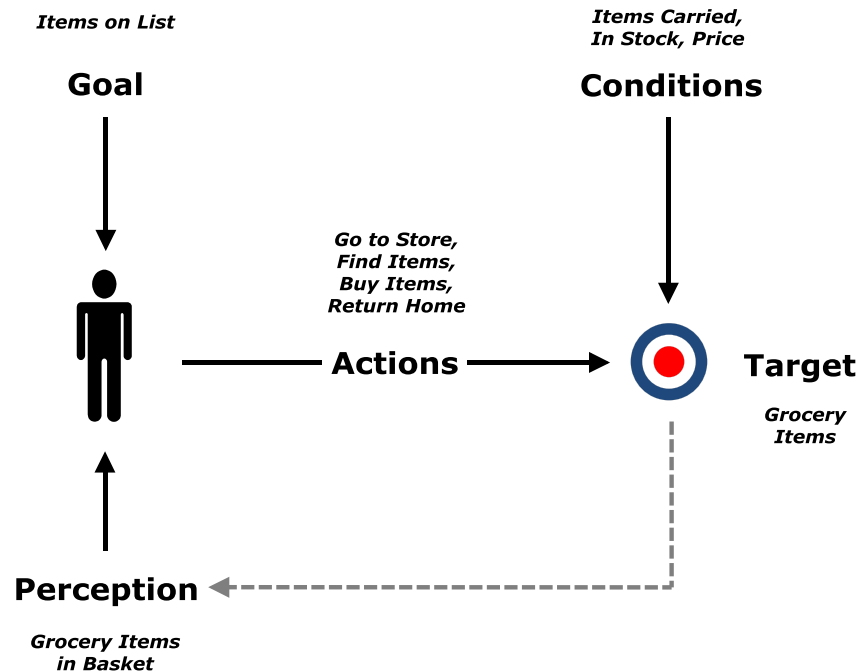


Figure 1 – A Trip to the Grocery Store

The actions are mundane enough: go to the store, find the items on the list, place them in the cart or basket, check out and pay for the items, and then return home. How do I know what to look for and buy? That's easy enough: I've got a list; it tells me which items to get. How do I know I've got them? That's easy, too; I can look in my cart or basket and see if what's on my list is there. If they're all there, I can check out, pay for them, and be on my way. If not, I keep looking.

Sometimes, I don't get everything that's on the list. Sometimes it's because I want a particular item and the store I'm in doesn't carry that brand or size. Sometimes it's because the store does carry it but they're out of stock. And, on occasion, the price of something has jumped so much that I decide not to buy it. (A jar of queen-sized olives once went from \$2.89 to \$4.89 between visits and I crossed olives off the list without buying any.)

The Reflections Exercise: Familiarizing Yourself with the Target Model

With that example in mind, along with its illustration in Figure 1, let's briefly review the elements of the Target Model and let's start with Targets.

Targets are variables, things that can change. The items I purchase during a trip to the grocery store can vary; I don't get the same things every time. "Grocery items" is a variable. My grocery list tells me which items I intend purchasing. That list serves as a goal to be achieved. In general terms, my actions consist of going to the store, finding the items, placing them in the cart or basket, checking out and paying for the items and then returning home. More specific behaviors might include walking up and down the aisles, pushing a cart or carrying a basket, looking up and down the shelves, picking up items, putting them back and a myriad of other possibilities. How do I know I've achieved my goal? My perceptions inform me. I can look in my basket or cart, compare what's there with what's on my list and go from there. And, of course, the items I actually purchase might be affected by other factors (e.g., price and availability).

That simple little trip to the grocery store illustrates a "living control system" in action. And that's what the Target Model represents: a living control system; in other words, a human being.

Example 2: Doing the Laundry

Here's another mundane little example for you: doing the laundry. (Yes, I do the laundry in my house.) What does doing the laundry look like in terms of the Target Model? Well, take a look at Figure 2.

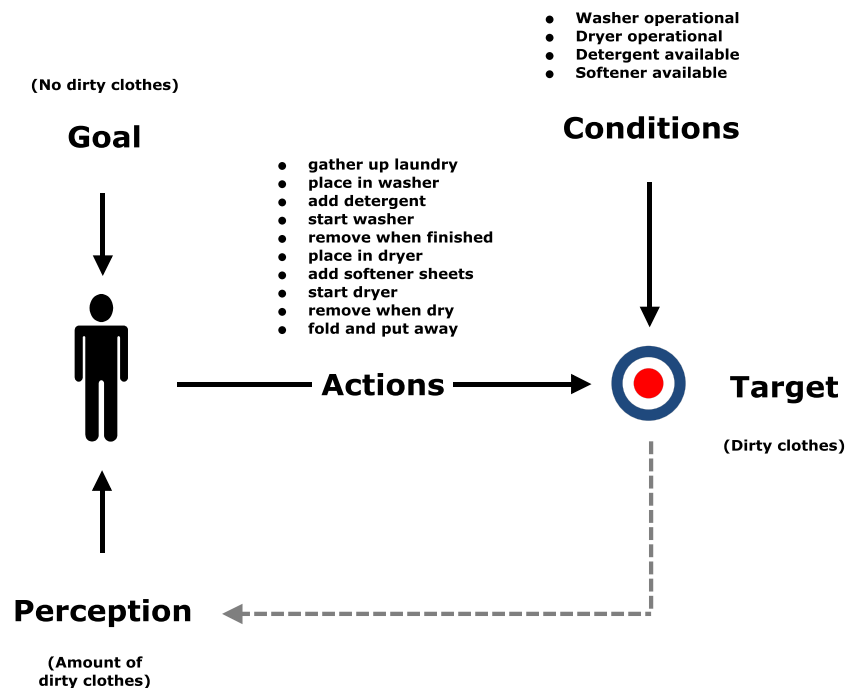


Figure 2 – Doing the Laundry

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The Targets in this case can be summed up as dirty clothes (amount or mix, take your pick). The actions are familiar to most if not all of us: gather up the laundry, go to the laundry room, put the clothes in the washer, add detergent, start the washer, remove the clothes when the wash cycle is finished, place them in the dryer, toss in one or two fabric softener sheets, start the dryer, remove the clothes when they're dry, fold them and put them away, repeating the previous steps as many times as necessary to finish doing the laundry. How do I know I'm done? That's easy; all the dirty clothes have been washed and are now available as clean clothes. What was my goal? There are lots of ways to state it but I like to keep in mind that a goal specifies some state a target variable should satisfy. In this case, the target variables were (1) the amount of dirty clothes, (2) the mix of dirty clothes (e.g., mainly jeans and shirts or socks and underwear or towels and sheets, etc.) and (3) the availability of clean clothes or linens. My goals, then, were to reduce to zero the amount of dirty clothes/linens and to increase to maximum the availability of clean clothes/linens. Were there any other conditions that might have affected my doing of the laundry? Well, if the washer or the dryer broke down, that would interfere with achieving my goal. My wife and I also spend a lot of time in our RV and I have to go to the Laundromat to do the laundry. Sometimes, the washers and dryers are all in use and so their availability can affect my performance. The same is true of the availability of detergent and fabric softener. (That reminds me, I need to put detergent and softener on the grocery list.)

Let's stop there for a moment.

The Reflections Exercise

The Target Model is useful in examining behavior and performance because it focuses us on some very fundamental and key aspects of the behavior and performance of those living control systems we call people. It leads to questions like the following:

- What am I controlling for? What am I trying to make happen?
- How will I know or how can I tell I have it?
- What do I have to do to get it?
- What factors or circumstances might interfere with my ability to get it?
- What exactly are the targets at which I'm aiming?
- What are my goals? In other words, what states do I want those targets to be in?

So here's the exercise I promised you at the outset.

Think about some everyday, ordinary activities (e.g., checking e-mail, balancing the checkbook, paying bills online, filling up at a gas station, driving to work or others that might come to mind).

Examine them in light of the Target Model. See if you can identify the target variables, the goals you set for them, how your perceptions inform you of progress and success, the actions you take and those pesky conditions that can interfere with hitting your targets.

Do this for two or three fairly mundane situations.

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Then take a crack at doing it for a situation at work. What targets are you trying to hit there? What are your goals, that is, what states or values are you trying to bring about in those target variables? What other conditions might be interfering with or keeping you from hitting your targets? How are you able to tell if you've hit the target or not or if you've even come close? What actions are called for on your part?

If you like, send me your exercise products via e-mail, along with any questions you might have, and I'll happily answer them to the extent I can.

On the following page you will find an unlabeled Target Model on which you can jot down notes and the results of your thinking. Feel free to copy or print as many copies as you like.

A Little Theory

The Target Model of Human Behavior and Performance is based on Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) as developed and articulated by William T. Powers in several publications over many years. The term "living control systems" also owes to Powers.

For more about Powers and PCT visit the Control Systems web site at <http://www.perceptualcontroltheory.org/>.

For more about the Target Model, visit my web site at <http://www.nickols.us/articles.htm> and go to the section on Control Theory.

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Label the Target Model below with examples drawn from reflecting on your own experience. Make as many copies as you need.

