Knowledge Worker
At the Heart of It All
(April 2021)

What's at the Heart of Performance Improvement?

Ask any performance improvement professional what he or she does and you're likely to hear something along these lines: "I improve performance." They might add "of people," or "of processes" or "of organizations." Ask them how they do that, and they might mention things like conducting needs assessments, analyzing performance problems, designing a feedback system, and developing and delivering training to name a few. Here's another question: What's at the heart of what performance improvement professionals do – what's at the heart of performance improvement?

In a word, I think the answer is "relationships."

Where We Do What We Do

Most of what performance improvement professionals – and other people – do is done in and as part of an organization. Organizations are open systems; they take in inputs (resources) and produce outputs (products, services and other kinds of results). They also carry out transactions with their environment (e.g., purchases from suppliers and payments from customers). Not everything goes into producing outputs; organizations also use some inputs to maintain and sustain themselves.

Organizations employ and make use of people, tools, equipment, materials, facilities and money. To be in and part of an organization is to be part of a structured, organized network of relationships – relationships between and among people, between and among units, between people and processes, between units and processes, between the organization and various aspects of its environment (e.g., with customers, suppliers, the community and various government agencies). On and on goes the list of relationships that define an organization.

It's All about Relationships

To improve performance – whether of individuals, teams, units, processes or the entire organization – is to change and improve one or more relationships. Improving a process, for example, might entail changing and improving the relationship between the process and the people who carry it out, or improving the relationship between the process and the tools and equipment used to accomplish it, or the materials it transforms into outputs. Improving the performance of a team might entail improving interpersonal relationships among and between team members. Improving the performance of an organization might entail improving the relationships between it and its customers and suppliers or between various units within the organization or between the units and certain processes. Improving the performance of an individual might involve improving the relationship between his current and required knowledge base, or the relationship between her and her boss, or between him and his co-workers, or between her and her working environment.

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On and on go the possibilities but, in all cases, they involve improving relationships of one kind or another. Relationships are indeed at the heart of what we do. (That goes for our colleagues in the OD field and other fields as well.)

Digging A Little Deeper

Let's dig a little deeper, shall we?

What kind of relationship must exist between an individual and his or her environment for that person's performance to meet expectations? Here's a short (and admittedly incomplete) list:

- The necessary tools, equipment and materials must be readily available and in working order.
- Any required cooperation or collaboration must be forthcoming.
- Feedback about progress and accomplishment must be timely and accurate.
- Any obstacles or barriers must be manageable and dealt with.
- The individual must see the balance of consequences as favorable.

What kind of relationship must exist between that individual and the job or task itself? Here's another short (and admittedly incomplete) list:

- Expectations must be clearly understood and seen as realistic by the individual in question.
- The individual must see the job or task as having meaning and value.
- The job or task or project must be a fit with the individual's capabilities and capacity.

Similar questions could be asked (and answered) about the relationship between the organization and its suppliers or between the organization and its customers. The same is true of the relationships between units and processes, between and among team members, and between the levels of authority that mark the organization's hierarchy.

Relationship Defined

So, just what is a relationship? Two basic dictionary definitions are relevant here.

1. The way in which two or more concepts, objects or people are connected.
2. The ways in which two or more people or groups regard and behave toward each other.

Blending the two, we can see that a relationship, in the context in which we've been talking, refers to how people and things are connected, and how they view and interact with one another. Sound familiar?

I stand by my earlier statement: Relationships are at the heart of it all.

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Next Time

So, the next time you're called upon to investigate or improve the performance of people, processes, or the organization, ask yourself this question: "What are the relationships I need to look at and understand?" And, if you're called upon to explain what you do or how you do it, say simply that you are in the business of understanding and improving the relationships that affect the performance of people, processes, and the organization. If anyone says that's a trivial matter, consider the list below, which contains just some of the relationships that an employee might have to manage and that might shape and affect his or her performance:

- Boss
- Peers
- Direct Reports
- Customers
- Suppliers
- Policies
- Procedures
- HR
- Systems
- Information
- Rules
- Job/Tasks/Projects

And, if you're an employee, ask yourself this question: "What are the relationships I have to manage?"

The Moral of this Story

We all are in the business of managing the relationships that connect us to the world around us and of which we are a part and with which we interact.

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a 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 *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at Distance Consulting LLC. His web site is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred writes this column on a monthly basis. All previous Knowledge Worker columns are accessible by clicking here.