

# Knowledge Worker

## Fix the System, Not the People

(May 2021)

In this month's column, I'll briefly review a case involving performance improvement, a case I've told before but, this time, I'll tell it from a different perspective in order to make a different point. First the case.

A division manager at a company where I was employed asked me to take a look at one of the registration processing operations in his division. The reject rate in the operation was way too high for his liking and he wanted me to see what I could do about it.

A little research revealed that the reject rate was about 70 percent, evenly divided between forms that had incorrect institutional codes and a wide variety of errors that all fit neatly under the heading of "carelessness."

Further investigation revealed that the registrants did not have a code list suited to the task of entering the correct code on the registration form and nowhere were they informed as to the consequences to them of their failure to correctly and completely fill out the form – despite the fact that the failure to do so had significant negative consequences for them.

The solution was to devise a new, more suitable institutional code list and to rewrite and clarify the instructions for filling out the form, emphasizing the importance to the registrants of properly filling it out. Shortly afterward, the reject rate plummeted to less than 10 percent.

The point I want to make here ties to the oft-repeated assertion that most performance problems owe to the system, not the individual. As the late Geary Rummler famously said, "Put a good person in a bad system and the system will win every time."

In the case just cited, I never spoke with a registrant, never asked one of them a single question, never visited the places where they worked and never tried to analyze the tasks of filling out the form or to identify any so-called "master performer." Instead, I applied my knowledge of human behavior and performance to understanding the situation, the "system" as it were.

I knew, for instance, that the registrants had the name of the institution where they worked or were to be employed and they needed the numerical code for it. This suggested they needed a code list organized in alphabetical order by institution name. The code list they were given was organized in numerical order, by institutional code. It was the same list the processing operation staff used when looking up the name of an institution based on its code number.

I knew also that very few people intentionally incur negative consequences and I suspected that if the registrants were made aware of the consequences to them of careless or incomplete filling out of the registration form, they would do a better job. Subsequent events confirmed my suspicion.

The point I'm trying to make here isn't simply one of focusing on the system instead of the performer, it is one of applying what we know about human behavior and performance to what I see as an absolutely

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critical task; namely, *identifying the conditions that must exist for desired performance to occur*. You can then take stock of the current situation – “the system” – to see where the shortfalls lie. Fixing the shortcomings in the conditions necessary for performance to occur is much more productive than remedying imagined deficiencies in people.

So, the next time you’re asked to look into a problem of human performance, try thinking through and identifying the conditions that must exist in order for the desired performance to occur. If you next look at the conditions that actually exist, you’ll likely find some gaps you can close more easily, more effectively and less expensively than trying to fix those pesky human beings. As the title of this column says, “Fix the system, not the people.”

For now, here’s a starter list of the conditions that are necessary to ensure expected or desired performance occurs.

- Can the performer correctly describe the expected performance?
- Is the performer aware of the consequences of not performing as expected?
- Are the consequences of performing as expected likely to ensure an effort to doing so?
- Are any necessary tools, equipment or job aids available, appropriate and usable by the performer?
- Is any necessary cooperation on the part of others forthcoming?
- Are there any competing tasks or priorities that might interfere with performing as expected?
- Can the performer tell if he or she has done the job properly?

For a more in-depth treatment of the conditions of performance, see an article of mine bearing that title at the following link: <http://www.nickols.us/conditions.pdf>

### 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](http://www.distanceconsulting.com). His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers’ Tool Room](http://www.knowledgeworkers.com) 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](#).