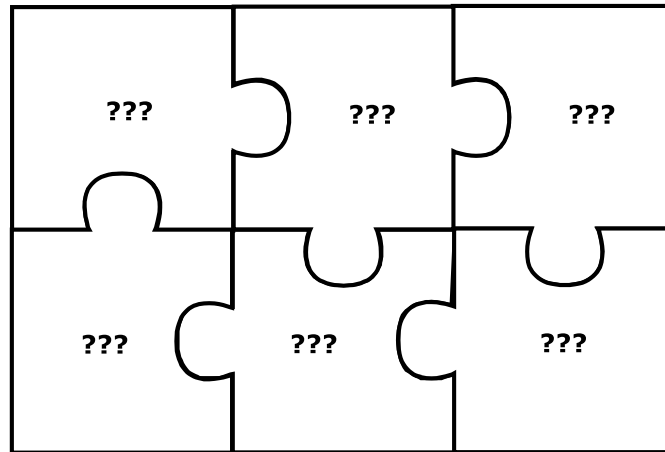


Knowledge Work

The Jigsaw Puzzle of Performance Improvement

(June 2019)



More years ago than I care to remember, I was contacted by a fellow claiming to be the Director of Training for the CIA. He wanted to discuss what I knew about managing and improving the performance of knowledge workers. I did my best to share with him what I thought I knew at the time. To my dismay, he dismissed what I said as “B School basics.”

During the course of our conversation, he said something that has stayed with me all the years since. I said something about knowledge work having much in common with putting together a jigsaw puzzle without knowing what the picture on the box looks like. He chuckled and said, “We have to figure out what the picture on the box looks like given only one piece of the puzzle.” Well, we performance improvement specialists don’t have to work with just one piece of the puzzle, but our work is very much a form of intelligence work and our task is very much one of unearthing and examining all the pieces we can find and figuring out what the picture on the performance puzzle box looks like.

I have long said to my clients that I have very few answers but lots of questions. Those questions serve to identify pieces of the performance puzzle – those that are present and those that are missing. So, what are those pieces and what are some of the questions that get at them?

- **Clarity.** Are people clear about the result to be achieved? Are they clear about what is expected of them? Are they clear about the actions necessary to achieve the result in question? Are they clear about the consequences of success? Of failure?
- **Commitment.** Are people committed to achieving the result in question? Do they see its value and importance? Do they see achieving it as having benefit for them?
- **Competence.** Do people have the necessary skills and abilities? Are they sufficiently proficient?
- **Consequences.** Are the consequences of achieving the result seen as positive or negative? Which of those consequences are inevitable by-products of the work itself and which are contrived or added on afterward?
- **Competition.** Are there competing tasks and assignments of equal or greater importance and priority?

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- **Control.** Does the person charged with achieving the result have the necessary control over the required resources, including his or her own time and that of other people? Does the performer have the authority necessary to pursue the result?
- **Cooperation.** Is cooperation forthcoming when other people are involved? Does the result have the same priority and importance for the other people who are involved?
- **Context.** Is the context in which the task is to be performed supportive of the task itself? For example, a task that requires intense concentration isn't likely to be performed well in a noisy situation.
- **Support.** Is management actively supporting the effort or merely giving it lip service?
- **Feedback.** Is the performer able to obtain ongoing, timely, relevant information about progress and achievement?
- **Achievement Path.** Is the path linking the actions of the performer and others to the result being sought known to the performer and those others?

As you can no doubt guess, I could continue adding pieces to the pile and questions to the list, but I think the point is made. To reiterate: Our work as performance improvement professionals is a form of investigative intelligence work; we have to gather pieces of the puzzles on which we find ourselves working; we have to figure out what the picture on the box looks like; we have to identify any missing pieces and we also have to identify any pieces that don't fit. We are puzzle solvers. We ask lots of questions because we don't have ready-made answers, we search for them. Fortunately, what we do have are models and frameworks that guide and direct our searches.

P.S. Let's hope the CIA does, too.

About the Author

Fred Nickols 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 *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 is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns is available [here](#).