

# Knowledge Worker

## Aligning Actual with Expected Performance

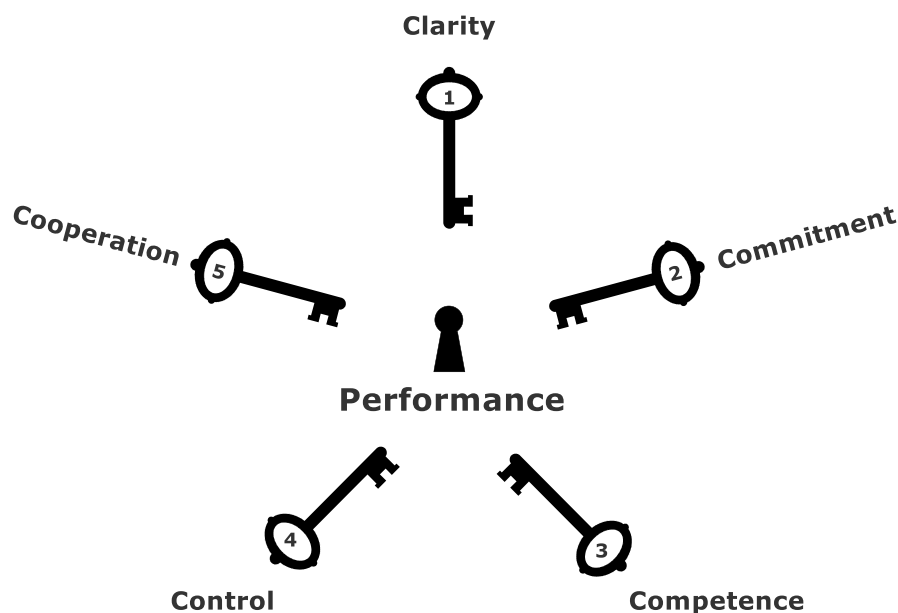
(February 2021)

### Performance & Performance Alignment

Performance occurs when a person's behavior or actions produce the expected results or outcomes *and* the value of those outcomes outweighs the costs of the actions needed to achieve them. That is how Gilbert (1978) defined "worthy performance."

One of your ongoing aims – whether as a manager, a consultant or in relation to your own performance – is to align actual results with expected results. As we all know, actual results often deviate from expected results – in good ways as well as bad. Occasionally, we surprise ourselves with the quality of the performance we turn in (good or bad). The same is true for the costs of achieving them (under or over). But, in general, we aim to come in on target.

The diagram in Figure 1 shows five "keys" or factors that help align actual and expected performance. Each "key" ties to a view of people as "living control systems" (Powers, 1989) and is discussed below.



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*Figure 1 – Five Keys to Aligning Actual and Expected Performance*

### Clarity

One characteristic of people who exercise control is that they compare their perceptions of the current state with what they want to see – their goal state. A goal state specifies the desired or

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intended value for some workplace variable. To achieve a goal is to bring the targeted variable to its specified value. Goal clarity entails being clear about (a) the variable in question and (b) its intended value. Sales might be the variable and some dollar amount or number of new accounts might be the specified value. Or perhaps the variable is the error rate or waste level in a process and its value is set at fewer than three parts per million. Whether as a manager or as performer you must be clear about the results or outcome(s) to be achieved. It is the joint responsibility of the manager and the performer to ensure that such clarity exists regarding (a) the variable to be controlled and (b) the value it is to satisfy.

### Commitment

Another characteristic of people who exercise control is that they are committed to achieving the goals they have set for themselves. This is not necessarily true of people as employees with respect to goals that have been set for them. Consequently, managers and employees must both take steps to ensure that sufficient commitment exists. Two factors come into play here: (1) Contribution and (2) Consequences. Managers and employees are well served by expending effort in understanding the contribution that the goal in question makes to some larger goal or initiative. Commitment to achieving an outcome is also helped by ensuring that the anticipated consequences of achieving it are, on balance, positive instead of negative. It pays you as a manager to be especially alert to any punishing or negative consequences associated with an assignment and take steps to remove, mitigate or negate them. As a performer it is in your best interests to bring such issues to your manager's attention.

### Competence

Yet another characteristic of people who successfully exercise control is that they are able to vary their behavior as required by the circumstances at hand. This enables them to achieve fairly constant results under varying conditions. It stands to reason that the person's repertoire must be up to the task at hand. Managers should ensure that the person they assign to achieve a certain outcome possesses the necessary skills and is also sufficiently proficient at them to achieve the outcome. Two people might have the same skill set needed to achieve a certain result but one of them might be much more proficient than the other. Consequently, the kind of capability and the level of competence must both be considered in assigning an outcome to a particular person. As the performer, you need to make sure you are up to the task.

### Control

A person exercises control as a result of comparing actual with desired conditions and then acting to close any gap between the two. We have already discussed the importance of goal clarity and the fact that actions or behaviors need to vary. That brings us to information about the current state of affairs with respect to the goal state. That kind of information is known as "feedback." The performer, whether it's you or someone else, must have free, timely and ongoing access to information about the current state of affairs, including the effects of any actions taken. The nature of control suggests an accompanying need for controls, things like measures of progress and achievement, due dates, checkpoints and deliverables and so on, including costs.

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### Cooperation

There are some genuine individual contributors in the world of work but most of us work in concert with others. Think of the workplace as a giant network of living control systems, of people working together and independently to achieve outcomes that add up to larger achievements. Cooperation is usually a necessary ingredient in performance. The world of work is also filled with obstacles and barriers, impediments to performing as expected. Here, collaboration between you as the manager and the performer is a key element. You can and should collaborate with and support performers in helping them remove or overcome obstacles and barriers. As a manager you also play a key role in obtaining any necessary cooperation from others. This is one of the more productive uses of your authority. One of the hallmarks of effective cooperation is open, honest communication, a reliable flow of information about what is going on, changes in plans, surprises, altered assumptions, roadblocks encountered and so forth. As a manager or performer, you have an obligation to provide, support and encourage good communication – upward, downward and laterally.

### It's a Numbers Game

In the end there are no guarantees. Although we are living control systems, our control is far from perfect. It's a numbers game. But we can stack the deck in our favor; we can do our best to make the probability of achieving a particular result as high as possible; we can tip the scales in our favor. And we can do the same for other people. The five “keys” just discussed are helpful in that regard. In parting, consider this: Whether you are a manager supporting the performance of someone else or you are focused on managing your own performance, you can use these five keys to facilitate alignment between actual and expected performance.

### References

1. Gilbert, T.F. (1978). *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill
2. Powers, W.T. (1989). *Living Control Systems*. Gravel Switch, KY: Control Systems Group

### 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](#).