

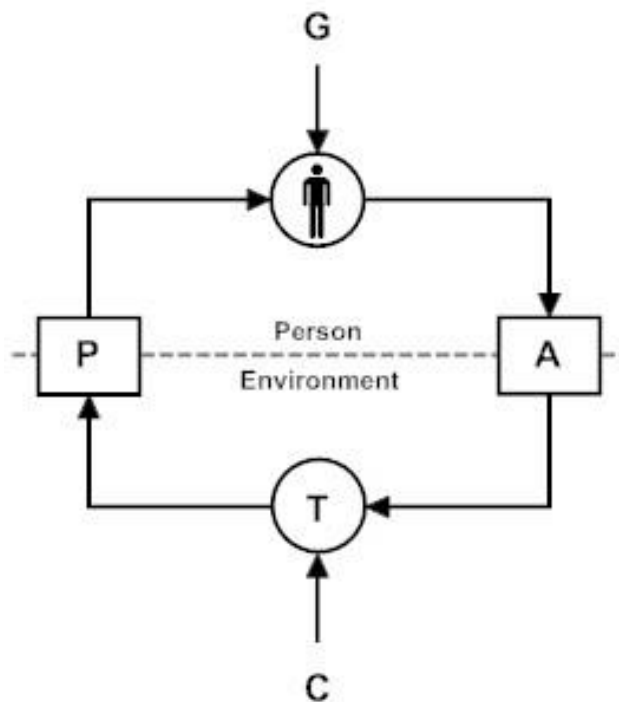
Knowledge Worker

The Self-Managed Employee as a Living Control System

(October 2013)

If you read last month's column you know that "SME" refers to "Self-Managed Employee." In the title of this month's column, "LCS" stands for "Living Control System," a term coined by William T. Powers. This column takes a look at SMEs as living control systems and it uses a model of human behavior based on Powers' Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) to do so. That model is depicted in the diagram below. First,

PCT View of Behavior



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As human beings, whether at work, at home or at play, we all try to control certain aspects of our environment, whether it is the reject rate in a given process, the temperature in our living room or our score at the bowling alley. Those aspects of our environment that we try to control are represented by T in the diagram. T stands for Target, some variable that has been selected or targeted for control.

T is controlled (or not as the case may be) by way of actions taken by the person (represented by A in the diagram).

Actions are occasioned as a consequence of the person comparing his or her perceptions of the current state of the target with the goal state for the target. The goal state is represented by G and perceptions are represented by P. The goal state specifies some desired value for T. If an unacceptable gap between the two exists, action is taken. If no gap exists action isn't necessary.

It is also the case that the target can be affected by other conditions, other actors and factors in the environment that impact T. These can disturb or alter the value of T independently of actions on the part of the person. These other conditions might or might not be known to the person but, if control is successful, any actions taken will compensate for or offset them. Ordinarily, control is successful; we compensate for any disturbances to T. But, on occasion, those other conditions can overwhelm our best efforts and our control isn't successful. As we all know, our control is far from perfect.

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Now, let's move this model into the world of work, worker and working and see how it can be used to help and support SMEs. We'll do that by examining each element of the model in the context of human performance in the workplace. Doing so in great detail could easily fill a book so here we'll touch on just some of the more important points.

Goal. The primary aim here is clarity. The employee must be clear about the variable that is to be controlled and equally clear about its desired value at some point in the future.

Employee. Several important considerations tie to the employee; for example, the extent to which the goal is seen as worthwhile, as worthy of the effort needed to achieve it; the employee's commitment to achieving it; and the competence and the confidence of the employee in relation to achieving the goal. Obviously, the ability of the employee to identify and engage in the required actions is a key factor here, which suggests making certain the employee in question is the right one for the task at hand.

Actions. Here the focus is on figuring out the course of action that will produce the desired outcome. Here too is a requirement to tend to things that might interfere with those actions, like any restraints or constraints that exist; barriers, obstacles and other impediments to action; the extent to which cooperation from others is forthcoming; and the efficiency and the effectiveness of actions themselves.

Conditions. Those other actors and factors that affect the target variable need to be identified and monitored and perhaps offset or neutralized. This entails looking at the target variable in context and that will be addressed next.

Target. As indicated earlier, this is some variable in the workplace (e.g., sales, error rates, quality levels, etc.). These variables exist in some kind of structure; they are part of a network of larger variables and this larger network needs to be examined for at least two reasons. First, such an examination helps in identifying the paths or avenues through which the targeted variable can be affected and, second, it also helps identify any likely unintended consequences. Most important, the ultimate results we seek to achieve – those ultimate variables we are trying to control – are often far removed from us in time and space. We need to know the paths by which our direct and immediate actions will ripple through that network of variables and make themselves felt in desired ways on the targeted variable. We must be able to connect proximate results with ultimate results. Being able to place the target variable in its proper context is key. There are clues to this structure in the measures and the means of measurement used to track progress and assess achievement.

Perceptions. The employee's perceptions of the current state, when compared with the goal state for the target variable, constitutes feedback. It is information that can be used to identify any gaps requiring action as well as gauge progress and success. This kind of information must be timely, accurate and ongoing. Most important, the employee must be able to obtain this information in a direct, free and unfettered way. Moreover, this kind of information or feedback pertains not just to the

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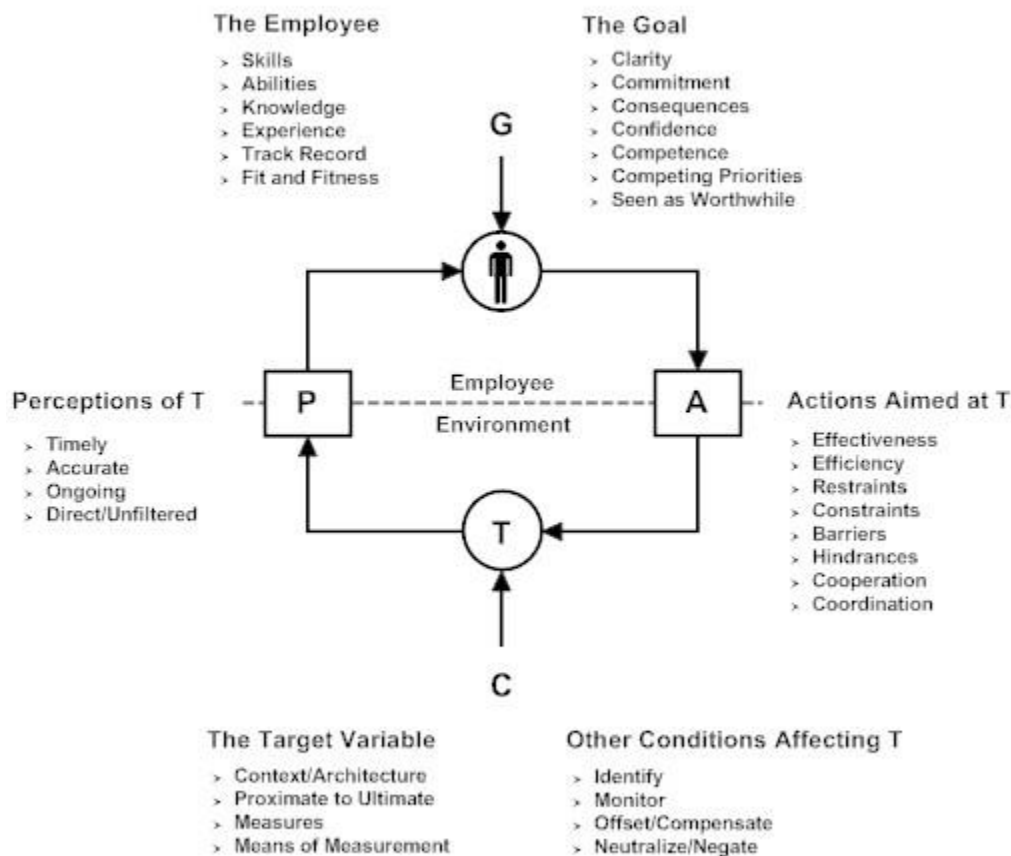
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ultimate results but also to those intermediate results and variables that connect the employee's direct and immediate actions with those ultimate results. Feedback is necessary all along the way.

Summary

A summary of the preceding highlights is contained in the diagram below. Use it to stimulate your own thinking about how a self-managed employee, acting as a living control system, achieves results in the kinds of situations with which you are familiar – and how you do so yourself.

The Self-Managed Employee



Further Reading

If you are interested in learning more about the self-managed employee as a living control system, here are some additional readings that should serve to help you along. And, of course, you're always free to contact me with questions or to ask my advice.

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Perceptual Control Theory and Living Control Systems

The most authoritative source is the late William T. Powers' book, *Behavior: The Control of Perception*. The first edition was published in 1973, the second in 2005. The second edition contains additional material. In addition, there is a collection of Powers' papers titled *Living Control Systems*, published in 2005. Both can be found on Amazon.com.

Self-Managed Employees

In this case, several of my papers should prove of value. All can be found in the control theory section of my web site at <http://www.nickols.us/controltheory.html>. I encourage you to check out three of the papers available there:

- [Manage Your Own Performance: No One Else Can](#)
- [Helping People Hit their Performance Targets](#)
- [The Target \(GAP-ACT\) Model: A Mainly Visual Presentation](#)

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, 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 manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's 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 and access to them is available [here](#).