

# Knowledge Worker

## The Control of Human Performance

(March 2020)

If we who claim to be knowledgeable about human performance are to understand, manage and improve human performance, we must first understand and appreciate the system that controls it. That system is a “living control system” and it consists of five components, each of which is discussed next.

### *The Goal is the first component.*

Control is always against a standard. With respect to human performance, the standard against which control is exercised is the goal, the outcome to be achieved, and the achievement of which signifies successful performance. A goal specifies the desired value of some variable of interest. The variable in question becomes the target of actions intended to bring its current value to some specified value.

### *The Target Variable is the second component.*

We alter the value of a target variable by way of our actions. It might be the case that we can affect the value of the target variable through direct, immediate action or perhaps we might have to use a more indirect approach. In either case our actions are the chief means of affecting the target variable and altering its value.

### *Actions are the third component.*

We do not operate in a vacuum nor do our target variables exist in isolation. Both are to be found in some kind of setting or context, some situation or set of circumstances. In these conditions are to be found other actors and factors that can affect the same variable we wish to affect and that can also help or hinder our actions. Thus, we are able to achieve the same result or outcome under very different circumstances. If some independent condition disturbs or affects the value of the variable we are trying to achieve, we adjust, adapt and modify our actions to keep on target and achieve our goal.

### *Conditions constitute the fourth element.*

We know of all this – our actions, the conditions in which and under which they take place, our goals and the variables and values to which those goals tie, by way of our perceptions. Our perceptions inform us as to all else. We compare our perceptions of what is the case with what we want to be the case and, if any unacceptable gaps exist, we act to close them.

### *Perceptions make up the fifth and final element.*

To recap, we set goals, we target certain variables and specify desired values for those variables, we compare what we perceive to be the case with what we want or intend to be the case and we act to close any perceived gaps. We do all this in one context or another, which might help or hinder our efforts but, unless these conditions overwhelm us, we succeed – we achieve our goals – we perform as expected and intended.

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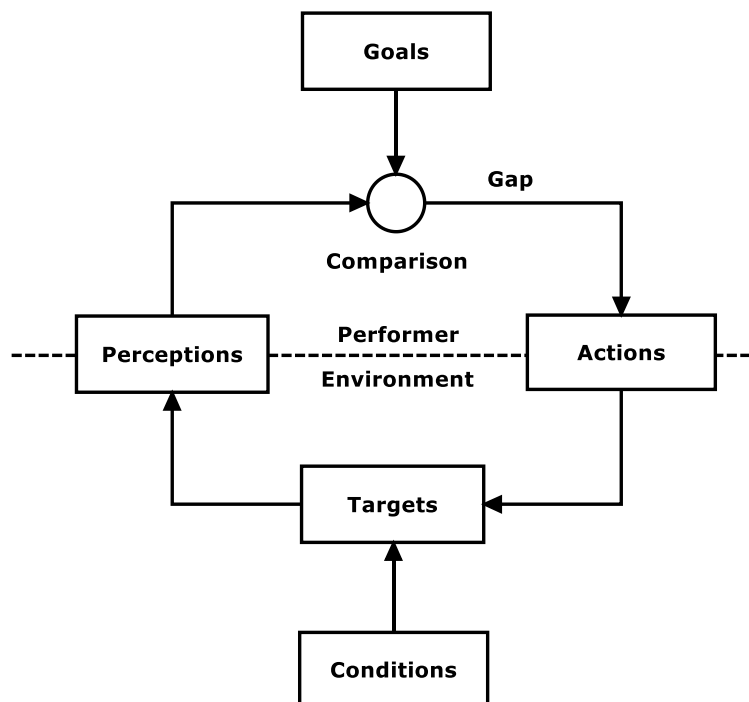
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Who does all this? We do. We manage, govern, control and improve our own performance. No one else does. Not our boss or our peers. And if we don't, no one else can or will.

The control of our performance, then, is up to us, whether it is performance for hire or for personal reasons. It is our responsibility and, as "living control systems," we are up to the task. What remains to be seen is if management will adopt this new view of us and accord us the new role they so desperately need us to fill – namely, that of agents acting on their behalf and in their best interests, instead of viewing us as mere instruments of managerial will.

The five components making up the system that controls human performance are depicted in the diagram below.

### The Performance Control Model



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The five components just discussed are based on a theory of human behavior that depicts human beings as "living control systems." The theory is known as Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) and was developed and articulated by the late William T. Powers.

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The diagram above is a closed loop, “living control system” view of human performance. I sometimes refer to it as the GAP-ACT Model, referring to the basic notion that, as “living control systems,” when we see a gap, we act to close it. It also helps that GAP-ACT refers to the first letter of each of the components of control that comprise the model.

### Additional Resources

Readers who wish to further pursue the ideas raised in this brief paper can find much more material in the control theory section of my web site. The direct link is <https://www.nickols.us/controltheory.html>.

### 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](#).