

The Action-Motivation Matrix

Positions People Take Regarding Problems

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6/16/2012



This paper presents the Action-Motivation Matrix and uses it to identify and examine four basic positions people take with respect to the problems they encounter in the workplace. The matrix arrays reactive-proactive actions against approach-avoidance motivation resulting in four cells labeled Firefighter, Early Bird, Phantom and Artful Dodger. The matrix provides insight, guidance and ideas to individuals, to management and to performance improvement professionals in their efforts to better understand and manage problem solving behavior in the workplace.

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That I have a long-standing interest in problems and problem solving is evidenced by just some of the many articles I've published over the years (Nickols, 1994a, 1994b 1997, 2005). My continuing interest in problems and problem solving recently resulted in the creation of what I view as a very helpful conceptual framework for identifying, examining and understanding the positions people take regarding the problems they encounter in the workplace. That framework is the Action-Motivation Matrix and it is the subject of this article (see Figure 1).

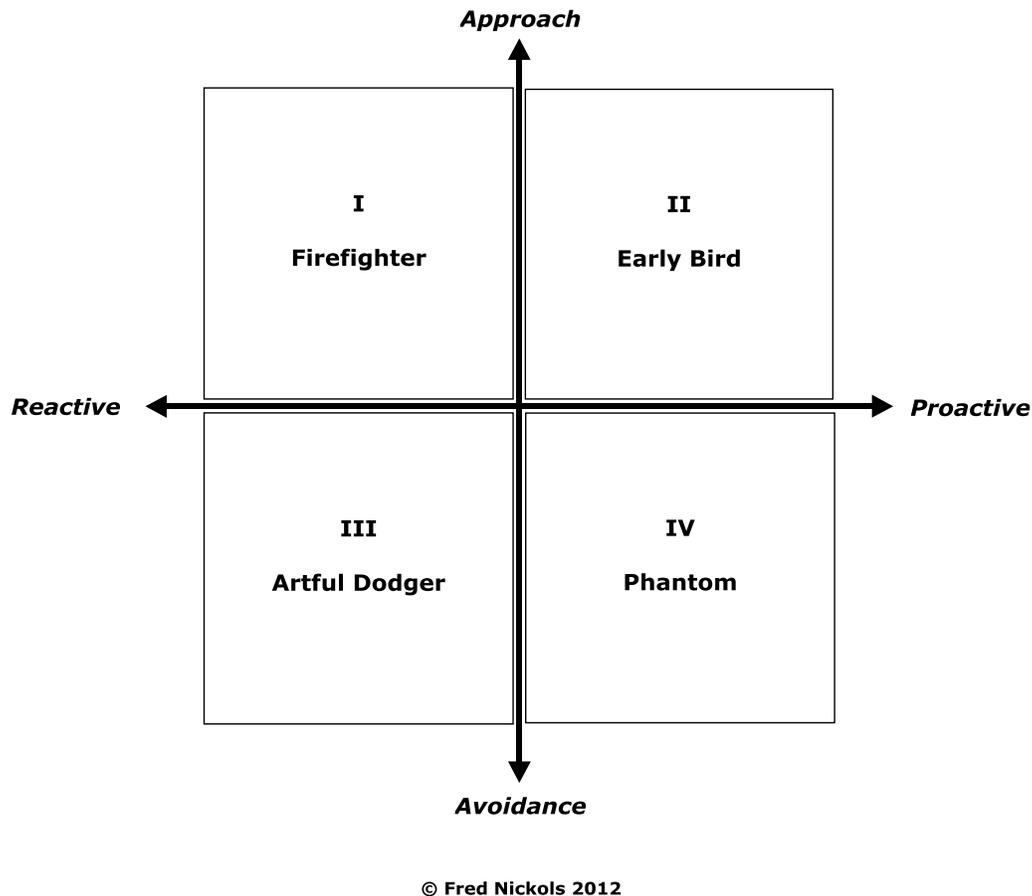


Figure 1 – The Action-Motivation Matrix

I have often argued that problem solving is *the* core skill, *the* core competency in modern organizations. To solve a problem is to close the gap between the way things are and the way they are wanted to be. Thus, solving problems isn't just about fixing things when they've gone wrong; that's only one application of problem solving and it is by far not the most important one. Writ large, solving problems can be about (1) getting what you want, (2) keeping what you've got and (3) avoiding or (4) getting rid of what you don't want. What makes a problem a problem isn't the difference between desired and actual con-

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ditions; instead, what makes such a gap a problem is not knowing what course of action will close the gap; hence the search for a solution, a course of action that will close it.

Gaps between what we have and what we want show up in many different circumstances, not just in those situations we typically refer to as problems. To increase productivity can present a problem. To change an organization's culture can present a problem. To reduce the turnover rate in an organization can present a problem. To increase employee engagement can present a problem. Reducing costs can present a problem. In short, just about any situation can present a problem. Consequently, the positions people take regarding problems have implications for a wide range of efforts in an organizational context.

Almost every successful undertaking, from an organizational overhaul to a small project hangs in large measure on being able to effect necessary changes. As should be clear by now, making changes in and to organizations entails a considerable amount of sophisticated problem solving. The positions people take with respect to problems are key factors in the success or failure of problem solving efforts and, in turn, of the larger change efforts. The positions people take are reflected in their actions and in their motivation. The Action-Motivation Matrix is a tool that can help performance improvement professionals successfully identify, prepare for and deal with people who are in any of the four positions, whether Early Bird, Firefighter, Phantom or Artful Dodger. Doing so greatly increases the odds of a successful effort, whatever its nature and aims.

The Action-Motivation Matrix in Figure 1 is based on two familiar psychological concepts. One is the concept of reactive vs proactive *action*, which is the difference between (1) responding to circumstances after the fact and (2) taking the initiative in order to shape them to your liking. These polar opposites figure prominently in research related to cognitive control (Braver et al., 2007). As those researchers contrast these two opposites, proactive is marked by future-oriented, early selection and preparatory attention whereas reactive is marked by past-oriented, late correction and interference resolution.

The other concept used to construct the Action-Motivation Matrix is that of approach vs avoidance *motivation*, which gets at the conflict we can experience in relation to a particular situation. On the one hand, we might feel we need to do something about it; on the other, we might see it as something we shouldn't go near. Naturally, a perfect balance between approach and avoidance results in inaction. The concept of approach-avoidance has been of periodic interest to psychologists for many years. For an interesting treatment of approach-avoidance in the context of self-regulation and control, see a paper by noted author Charles S. Carver (2006) available on the web.

Both the concepts just mentioned can be displayed on a continuum and these can be displayed at right angles to one another and results in the four-cell Action-Motivation Matrix depicted in Figure 1 above.

The Action-Motivation Matrix is used in Figure 1 to examine the positions people take regarding the problems they encounter in the workplace. The upper right quadrant, labeled "Early Bird," represents a Proactive-Approach position. The lower left quadrant, labeled "Artful Dodger" represents a Reactive-Avoidance position. The other two positions clearly implied by the matrix are "Firefighter" (Reactive-Approach) and "Phantom" (Proactive-Avoidance). It is tempting to say that there is a fifth position at

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the intersection of the axes, a place marked by little or nothing in the way of action or motivation. It could be labeled “The Observer” or some might choose to call it “The Ostrich” but that makes the matrix into something else and so we’ll forego that exploration. The four basic positions in the matrix above are discussed next.

I – The Firefighter: Reactive-Approach. People adopting the Firefighter position leap into action the moment a problem appears and nail it quickly as possible. They are able to do this because they are skilled, knowledgeable and experienced troubleshooters. Once the fire is out, so to speak, the Firefighter returns to the firehouse until the next blaze erupts. If this position is to be faulted, it is that it focuses on fighting fires instead of preventing them. However, the reality is that fires, once ablaze, must be put out.

II – The Early Bird: Proactive-Approach. More concerned with fire prevention than firefighting, people who take the Early Bird position tend to nip problems in the bud, well before the situation gets out of hand. Ever on the alert for situations that might mushroom into a problem, people in the Early Bird position possess the kind of experience and insight that enable them to see problems coming and take appropriate preventive or neutralizing action. The fault here is that the Early Bird might become an Eager Beaver and move too precipitously.

III – The Phantom: Proactive-Avoidance. People who take the Phantom position are also blessed with insight and experience but that is tempered by an extremely strong concern with self-preservation. And so, when a formidable problem is perceived to be on its way, one that is likely to be their undoing, the Phantom disappears. Once the problem has been dealt with, say by someone in a Firefighter or Early Bird position, or if it should go away of its own accord, the Phantom reappears. The fault here is that the Phantom leaves burgeoning problems untended and, worse, unidentified for others to address.

IV – The Artful Dodger: Reactive-Avoidance. Lots of other labels might apply to this position depending on nuances in circumstances; Escapee, Runaway and Deserter come to mind. But what a person in this position does is best captured by Charles Dickens’ character, Artful Dodger. The Artful Dodger literally takes evasive action, scrambling to avoid having to address a problem and denying any responsibility for it. This can include pushing it off on to someone else. Typically, this owes to a view of the problem as one that is impossible to resolve and getting involved is seen as a losing proposition.

It is important to note that what is described above are *not* roles or styles or personality types. These are *positions* or stands we choose to take with respect to a particular problem, at a particular time, under particular circumstances. Chances are we all choose to take all these positions at one time or another. As Walt Kelly’s Pogo famously said, “We have met the enemy and they is us.” So, keep in mind that there is nothing to be gained by trying to convert the Artful Dodger into a Firefighter or transform a Phantom into an Early Bird. To paraphrase former President Bill Clinton’s famous campaign remark about the economy, “It’s the circumstances, Stupid!”

The Action-Motivation Matrix framework just presented can be useful in several ways.

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- First, reflect on your own experiences in light of the framework. When have you been a Firefighter? Why? Do the same for the other categories. Then, think about the circumstances under which you chose to adopt each of the four positions. Why did you choose to be a Firefighter? What made you opt for The Early Bird? What caused you to be a Phantom? Why did you become an Artful Dodger?
- Second, use the framework as a discussion starter, with your team or as an ice-breaker in a session focusing on problems and problem solving. Get the group members to provide some examples of each category. But be sure to focus the discussion on the circumstances that might account for the choice, not on styles or personalities. If, as is often claimed, performance is as much or more a matter of environmental factors instead of individual factors, what are those environmental factors that lead us to opt for a particular position?
- Third, a likely goal of management with respect to the Action-Motivation Matrix would be to have as many people as possible choosing to be in the Early Bird or Firefighter quadrants. To achieve that goal requires managing the conditions that lead people to choose a particular position. That is very different from trying to manage the choices people make or to change the people themselves. To reiterate, another use of the matrix to identify and then manage those conditions that influence choices about which position to take.

A few words of caution: The Action-Motivation Matrix is a framework for prompting thinking and reflection, not a solution to a specific problem. Feel free to adopt and adapt the framework for your own purposes. Perhaps you prefer “Runaway” or “Escapee” to “Artful Dodger.” Maybe you think multiple labels fit within a particular quadrant depending on the mix of Approach-Avoidance motivation and Reactive-Proactive action. For example, someone who chooses a modestly proactive-avoidance position might be termed “Timid Soul” instead of “Phantom.” Or, as was alluded to earlier, someone who has neither approach nor avoidance motivation and who chooses to ignore a particular problem or pretend it doesn’t exist might be labeled “Ostrich.” Similarly, someone who chooses a modestly proactive-approach position, a “wait-and-see” position, might be termed “Observer” or “Monitor.”

Keep in mind the larger, more general purpose tool in this framework; namely, the underlying Action-Motivation Matrix. It can be usefully applied to more than just the positions taken with respect to the problems we encounter. To illustrate, consider the following adjectives and where they might fit in the matrix: Buck-Passer, Con Man, Teflon Terry, Go-Getter, First Responder, Troubleshooter, Hard Charger, Procrastinator, Repairman and Politician. If you have a few favorite labels of your own you are welcome to fit them into the matrix. Again, stay focused on the circumstances shaping the choice of position, not the character of the person making that choice.

Permit me a few words about the Action-Motivation Matrix as a general-purpose tool for knowledge workers. Of all the things involved in knowledge work, two stand head and shoulders above the rest: (1) the mind and (2) thinking. Tools connect the worker with the work in the course of that activity we call working. Tools for knowledge workers should stimulate the mind and facilitate more productive thinking. Thinking leads to insights and ideas and these lead to action. There is nothing more basic to work and working than the interplay of worker action and motivation. The Action-Motivation Matrix should prove useful to you in pondering many different kinds of situations in the workplace.

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In closing, let me say a few words about *my* actions and motivation. I love to toy around with ideas and concepts. Most of the time, I do my “thinkering” in a visual or graphic way. I did not set out to create the Action-Motivation Matrix; I was toying around with the reactive-proactive and approach-avoidance concepts when it occurred to me to place them at right angles to one another and out popped the matrix. Many people reviewed and commented about it when I first exposed it to review. It was clear to me that everyone saw considerable value in it. And so I resolved to “put it out there” where it would be available for other thinkers to put to use. It is my hope that the Action-Motivation Matrix will stimulate your mind and thinking and lead to some new insights and ideas, and perhaps to some new, different and more effective actions regarding the problems you encounter in the workplace.

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