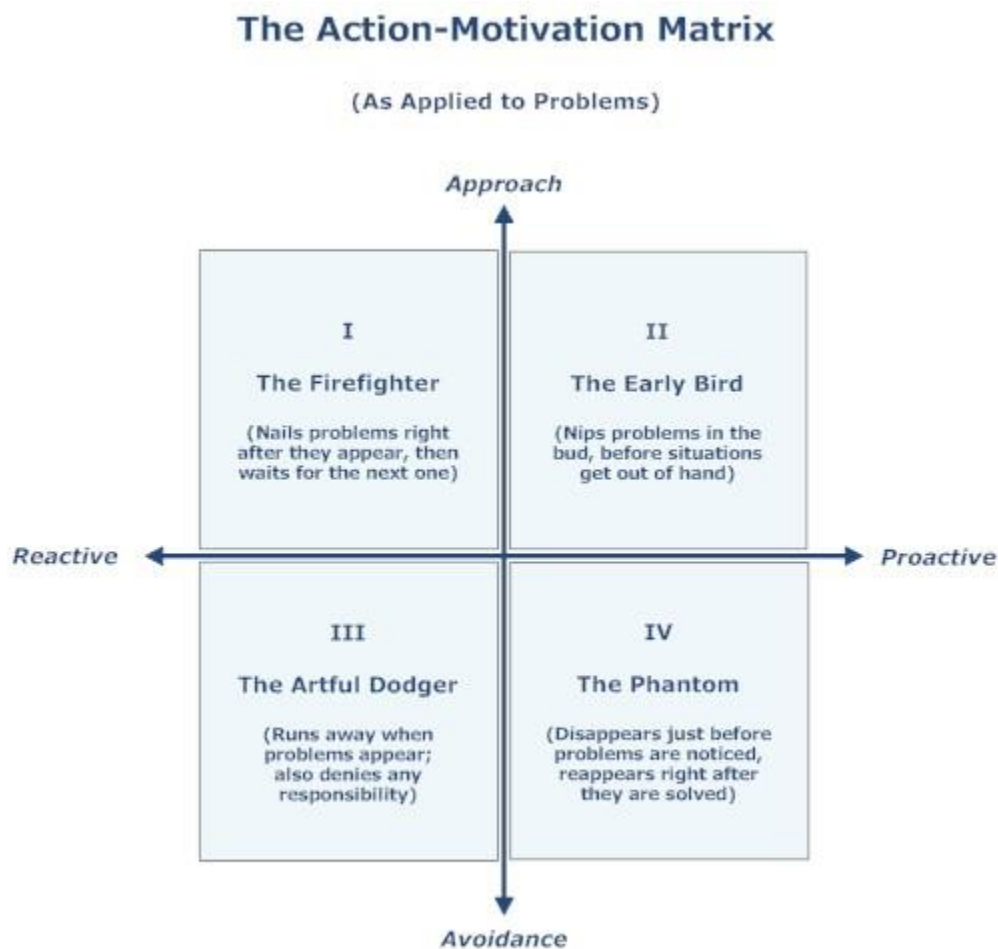# Knowledge Worker
What Kind of Problem Solver are You?
(November 2019)

Do you leap into action the moment a problem crops up? If so, you are a "Firefighter." Do you somehow manage to disappear when problems arise? If so, you are an "Artful Dodger." Do you manage to disappear right before a problem is noticed? If you can pull that off, you are a "Phantom." Or perhaps you nip problems in the bud before they become serious. That classifies you as an "Early Bird."

Chances are, you're none of the four just mentioned. On the other hand, chances are you've been more than one of them and maybe all four – just at different times and in relation to different problems.

The four kinds of problem solvers just mentioned aren't problem-solving styles or personality types; they are positions people take in relation to problems, and the positions taken vary with the problem and the circumstances. Take a look at the diagram below and then let's review each quadrant in a little more detail.

The Action-Motivation Matrix

(As Applied to Problems)

Approach

I **The Firefighter** (Nails problems right after they appear, then waits for the next one)	**II** **The Early Bird** (Nips problems in the bud, before situations get out of hand)
III **The Artful Dodger** (Runs away when problems appear; also denies any responsibility)	**IV** **The Phantom** (Disappears just before problems are noticed, reappears right after they are solved)

Reactive ← → Proactive

Avoidance

Of primary interest are the two axes of the diagram.

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The vertical axis suggests a continuum of responses to problems marked at one end by avoidance and marked at the other end by approach. In short, we can approach or avoid problems, we can face them or run away.

The horizontal axis indicates a continuum of responses marked at one end by a reactive response and marked at the other end by a proactive response; we can go off half-cocked or we can think things through.

I don't know about you, but I've been in all four of those quadrants at various times. There are times when problems are looming on the horizon and discretion is the better part of valor, so it's best to fade from view. Become the Phantom. Similarly, there are times in the early stages of a problem when you are best served by stepping back, taking a deep breath, and spending some time figuring out what's going on, why, and what to do about it before it becomes a truly serious matter. Be the Early Bird. Occasionally, there are huge, unstoppable problems rolling downhill and crushing everything in their path. Better to get out of the way. Time to be the Artful Dodger. And there are times, usually when a serious problem first appears, that it is best to step up to the plate, take matters in hand, deal with the situation and be a Firefighter.

So what kind of problem solver are you? What kind of problem solvers surround you at work? What kind of problem solvers are the people who report to you? What kind of problem solvers are your peers? What kind of problem solver is your boss? His boss? Her boss?

The primary thing to look for is people who habitually inhabit one quadrant. That's not good. It's better if they at least move back and forth between two and its best if they appropriately move around all four quadrants.

Postscript
There is a fifth position people can take in relation to a problem although I did not include it in the diagram. I call it "The Ostrich." This is someone who simply sticks his or head in the sand (figuratively speaking) and, not seeing anything, doesn't have to deal with anything.

Further Reading
On my web site, there is a lengthier treatment of the positions people take regarding problems. You can find it at https://www.nickols.us/The_Action_Motivation_Matrix.pdf

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.