The shift to knowledge work turned the worlds of work, working and management upside down and management has been scrambling to recover ever since. Some progress has been made but much remains to be done. In essence, the shift to knowledge work created a requirement for a new practice of management, including a new and different view of employees and their role.

Work is now information-based instead of materials-based; working now consists of primarily configured responses instead of prefigured routines; working activities are now mainly mental and verbal instead of manual; work processes are now frequently non-linear instead of linear; the results of interest are now often indirect and delayed instead of direct and immediate; and working conditions are now highly variable instead of highly standardized.

The consequences of the aforementioned changes in work and working are that direct supervision is now impossible; enforcing compliance is now pointless; the role of the worker must shift from instrument to agent; the core task of management must shift from supervising employees to supporting them; there is a need for a new practice of management; and there is an accompanying need for a new model of human behavior and performance in the workplace.

In a nutshell, the locus of control over working activities has shifted from management to the worker and that signals the need for a model of human behavior that sheds light on the nature of self-control and self-direction. Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) provides just such a model. Managers and employees are both well-served by developing a solid grasp of that model and its implications for work, workers, working, managers and management.

As just one illustration, consider the concept of “feedback.” Technically speaking, feedback is information about actual conditions that can be compared against intended conditions. When work was materials-based and working was a primarily physical activity, the effects of a worker’s actions were direct and immediate. The worker could quite literally see what was happening. Feedback was therefore also direct and immediate and required no intermediary.

But, in the modern world of work and working, the effects of actions are often indirect and delayed. And when the effects being sought consist of the impact of actions on other people, they are extremely difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty, especially when delays are involved.

There arises, then, a new requirement: the ability to link the direct and immediate effects of one’s actions to downstream results and effects. The paths connecting the two are often obscure and difficult to determine, yet identifying them is absolutely necessary if action is to be more than simply a shot in the dark. Identifying those paths also makes it possible to determine the en-route effects of actions, thus making possible feedback along the way instead of having to wait until the final impact can be determined, which is often too little too late.

Identifying the paths connecting proximate with ultimate results requires cooperation and collaboration between management and employees; neither is likely able to figure it out alone. In a very real sense, the chief impact of the shift to knowledge work has been to create a world of work in which success has to be shared by the organization and its employees.