Kurt Lewin (1951) famously wrote “that there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 169).

Nowhere is this any truer than with respect to Perceptual Control Theory (PCT), the brainchild of the late William T. Powers.

In this column I will touch on just one way in which PCT changes the way we view and deal with performance.

I think it is safe to say that most of us realize that the term performance refers to outcomes and the actions that lead to or produce them. In shorthand, P = A + O. Let’s focus on outcomes and then come back to actions.

An outcome or accomplishment or result refers to the effects of our actions. In PCT, our actions serve to control certain aspects of our environment. Those aspects we attempt to control are known as “controlled variables.” The key point being made here is that the focal points of our efforts to control are variables. To elucidate the obvious the value of a variable can vary. When we set out to achieve some outcome or result in the workplace we are focused on some variable that we want to have a certain value. In PCT this desired or intended value is known as the “reference value.” The variable of interest might be the error rate in a production process, the retention rate among employees, inventory levels or earnings-per-share. Whatever it might be it is a variable, its value can vary and we set out to change that value from its current value to its desired value.

Those variables we wish to control in the workplace are typically embedded in some larger structure, a network of other variables having connections to and relationships with one another. Often enough, we can’t directly access or influence the variable we wish to control or influence. Consider profit or return on investment for example. The values of these variables are calculated and we have to find other variables that we can affect and that in turn will affect the variables of interest. We can, for example, raise prices and thus affect revenues and, hopefully, profits. However, a price hike might also drive down sales and revenues, too. Our control is far from perfect and our actions often generate unintended consequences.

In any case, in order to perform we have to intervene, we have to take action in and on that larger structure in which our targeted variable is embedded. In short, we have to change things. As the profit and ROI example above suggest, change is often indirect, that is, we don’t change it (the variable of interest), we change something else and it changes as a result. We are, then, interventionists, we are change agents. To perform, which is to bring some workplace variable to a desired value, is to intervene, to change things with some outcome or purpose in mind.

Our actions are informed by our perceptions and we modify our actions so as to have the effects we seek. We are feedback-governed or, to use Powers’ (2008) term, we are “living control systems.” That is as true in our private lives as it is in the workplace.

So, one way in which PCT affects how we view performance (and how we perform) is by way of viewing results or outcomes as variables we target for control. When we set goals and objectives we are in fact specifying the intended value we want for certain variables. Here are some questions that can help in that regard:

1. What is the variable I am trying to affect?
2. What is its desired or intended value?
3. What is its current value?
4. What is the larger structure in which the target variable is embedded?
5. What are the other variables to which it is connected and has relationships?
6. Which of these variables can I affect or arrange to have affected?
7. What avenues are open to me for influencing those variables?
8. What means are necessary in order to affect them?
9. Can I do this directly or do I have to do it indirectly?
10. Where in that structure can I intervene?
11. Where in that structure can I evaluate the effects of my actions?
12. What is the path connecting my direct, immediate actions with the end result I seek?

So just how does PCT affect the way we view and deal with performance?

Well, first of all it makes clear that the outcomes we seek take the form of changes in the value of workplace variables we have targeted for control.

In turn, that leads us to realize that (1) those targeted variables are embedded in larger networks of variables, (2) to change the value of our targeted variable we often have to change something else (i.e., change is often indirect), (3) our actions are actually interventions in this larger structure, (4) we ourselves are interventionists, we are change agents and (5) all this leads to a very different set of questions we need to ask and answer (see the list above).

## References

1. Lewin, K. (1951). *Field Theory in Social Science*. Harper & Brothers: New York
2. Powers, W.T. (2008). *Living Control Systems III: The Fact of Control.* Benchmark Publications: Bloomfield, NJ