

Chapter 2

A Simple Understanding of Perceptual Control Theory

Every sound program needs an equally sound theoretical basis. For this program, perceptual control theory (PCT) is the basis. PCT was developed by William T. Powers and researched by members of the Control Systems Group (see Appendix 2). This chapter provides an overview of PCT, using a story to illustrate the basic ideas.

Hunter wasn't Mrs. Johnson's favorite fourth grade student. He had been in trouble for most of the week, getting out of his seat and wandering around the classroom, talking when she was trying to teach the class, and constantly borrowing pencils and paper.

Today, Hunter was supposed to be working on his spelling. He didn't want to do his spelling—he wanted some attention. Sally Ann, who was busy doing her work, sat across the aisle from Hunter. He thought she was cute, and he liked her happy smile. He wanted her to notice him.

“Sally Ann, psst! Hi!” She looked over, smiled and giggled, then looked down at her paper. For a short time, Hunter had gotten what he wanted. He perceived Sally Ann's smile and giggle as signs of affection and caring. He wanted the pleasure to continue. Again, he tried to get Sally Ann's attention. “Psst, Sally Ann, hi!”

This second attempt at getting Sally Ann's attention did not go unnoticed by Mrs. Johnson. She looked at Hunter and said, “Hunter, please stop talking.” Hunter looked up and said nothing. Then he pretended to return to his spelling exercise, while writing a note to Sally Ann.

What did Hunter *want*? He wanted to perceive Sally Ann

caring about him and paying attention to him. And what did Hunter *perceive*? He perceived Sally Ann as working at her desk, ignoring him, not caring about him. Hunter compared what he wanted with his perception and found that there was a big *difference* between his goal and his perception. That difference caused him a lot of pain.

Now, how do you suppose Hunter tried to get rid of the pain which was caused by the difference between wanting Sally Ann to notice him and what he saw, which was Sally Ann busily doing her school work? Obviously, he tried to get her attention by making noise and calling her name.

What do you think was *most* on Mrs. Johnson's mind? What was she thinking about at the time Hunter called to Sally Ann? Think about your own life and how you handle things. Suppose one of your own children is yelling at another child; what are the dominant concerns in your mind? They probably are that you want to experience quiet in the house.

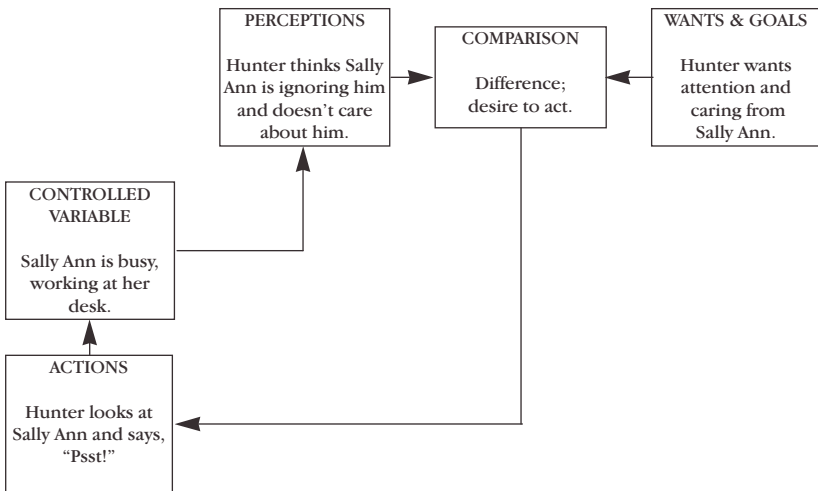
Imagine being Hunter's teacher, trying to maintain quiet in her class, so the children could focus on their work, and so she could be free to help those who seemed to need it, while Hunter was trying to get a little girl's attention. What is the first thing that would come to your mind? Obviously, you would want Hunter to do his work and not disturb other children.

The point is that *what comes to our minds is what we want*. The reason it comes to our minds is that we perceive something which does not compare favorably to what we want. In the case of a parent, it could be yelling and screaming replacing the calm in the house. To a teacher, it could be talking in the classroom. If I were walking down the street with my wife, Hester, and a car were to drive by at what I consider to be a reasonable speed, I'd probably not give the car's passing a second thought. But if it were to drive by at 80 miles per hour, that would conflict with my own internal goal of what a safe speed should be.

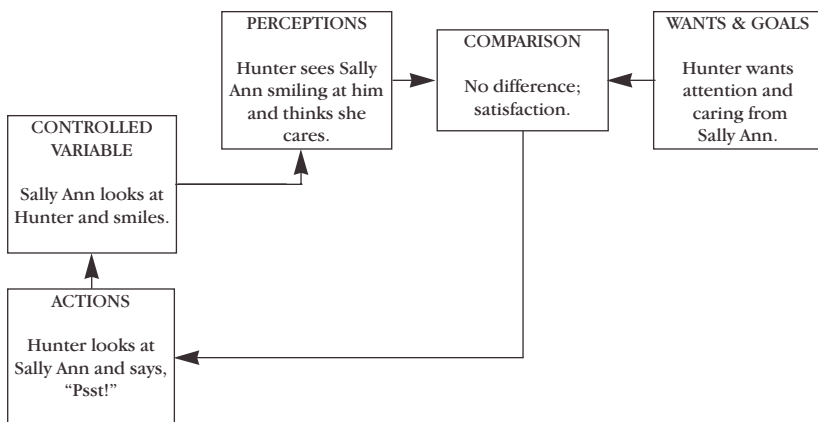
The only time we have concerns is when we have a perception which is contrary to our goals. It is comparing what

we perceive around us to what we want that drives us to *change our actions*, but *only* when there are differences between the two. If everything compares favorably, then we don't have any concerns, and we don't change what we are doing. Thus, in Hunter's case, what drives his actions is the difference between his goal and what he sees Sally Ann doing.

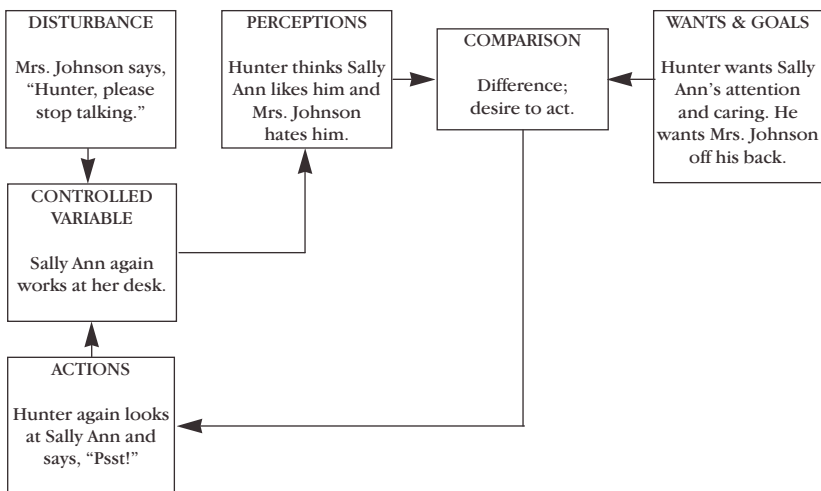
Human beings act when they are trying to *control* their perception of the world to make it conform to internally set goals. But many things in the world that affect our perceptions keep changing or varying. Thus, people try to control their perceptions by acting on those things that affect their perceptions. In Hunter's case, he acted by making the noise "Psst." The diagrams below show Hunter's control system in operation.



And it *worked*. As the next diagram shows, Sally Ann looked at Hunter, smiled, and giggled. *Hunter was satisfied* because he perceived Sally Ann as caring, whether she did or not.

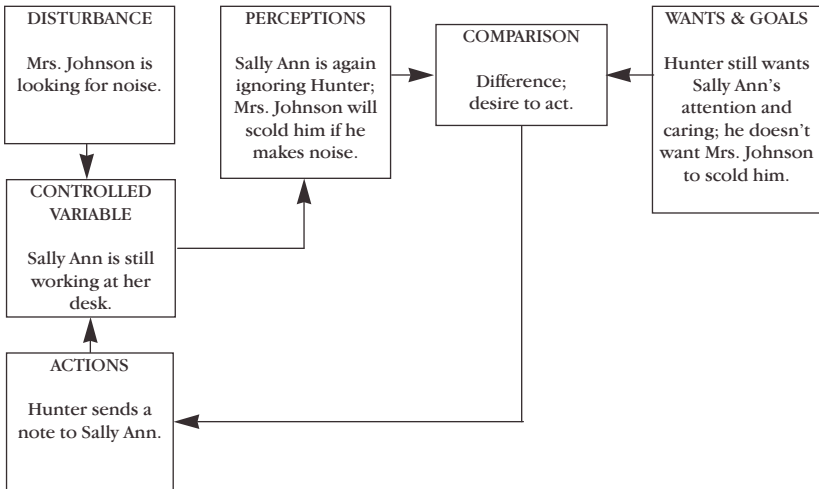


But it worked only *temporarily*. Sally Ann soon stopped paying attention to Hunter, and again there was a difference between his goal and his perception. So Hunter again acted on the outside world to make his perceptions conform to his goal. This time, however, something else happened. Mrs. Johnson, the teacher, disapproved of Hunter’s actions. She said to Hunter, “Hunter, please stop talking.” Hunter said nothing and pretended to go back to work. In Hunter’s world, Mrs. Johnson was a *disturbance* affecting

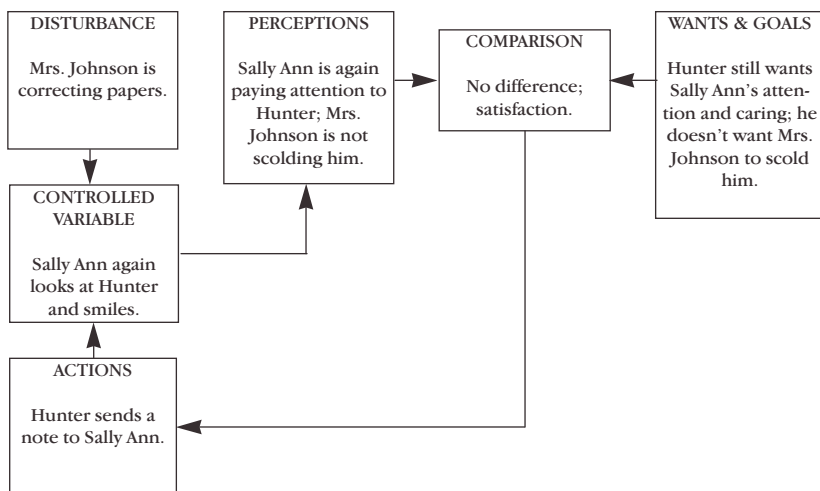


his attempt to control his perception of the way he wanted Sally Ann to be.

Hunter was afraid to continue saying “Psst!” to try to get Sally Ann’s attention. He now had to look busy to get around Mrs. Johnson’s concern for noise. But there was still a difference between his desire for Sally Ann’s attention and his perception of Sally Ann. So he tried an *alternative* action in an attempt to *get around* the effect of the disturbance (Mrs. Johnson) and to achieve his primary goal of getting Sally Ann’s attention. Hunter sent Sally Ann a note.



Guess what—it worked! Sally Ann looked at Hunter, smiled again, and Hunter was again satisfied. This movement produced no noise, and Mrs. Johnson, who wanted quiet in her room, was satisfied that the noise had stopped. And it had. Hunter had evaded the disturbance and had gotten what he wanted. The point here is that our perceptions don’t always match the real world. Sally Ann might not have cared for Hunter, and though it was quiet, not all of the students were necessarily studying.



The above illustrates the basic ideas of perceptual control theory. We always act to control our perceptions. We're always comparing the way we want things to be with the way we perceive them to be. If what we perceive is the same as what we want, then we are satisfied. If what we perceive is not the same as what we want, then we try to eliminate the difference by changing what we want or by acting on the world to change what we perceive. *The details of how we perform the actions are of little importance to us. Getting our perceptions to conform to what we want is our major concern.* Our environment is filled with other people and natural forces, which often keep our perceptions of the world from conforming to what we want. We act in *whatever ways are necessary* to eliminate or cancel the effects of those disturbances on our perceptions which we are trying to control.

If you are interested in learning more about the ideas of perceptual control theory and how they relate to RTP, I recommend that you read Chapter 31.