

CHAPTER 1

Dear Reader,

*Welcome
to taking control
of your life*



Dear Reader,

I was walking through a local bookstore the other day looking at the self-help section, and I was thinking that so many things we read about helping ourselves and others are based on Eighteenth Century thinking. We have this box-like mentality — we put people into one box or another and slap labels on the boxes. Most often this is followed by a plethora of strategies or programs that give us a list of specifically what to do and what to say based on what box we are in and what the label is. Examples of this are Phillip C. McGraw's *Life Strategies*, Zig Ziglar's *Success for Dummies*, and John Gray's *Men are From Mars; Women are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships*. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which professionals use to place people into one of sixteen boxes, is intended to help people find work that fits them, help people develop more appreciation for individual differences, and suggest how people can use the differences constructively rather than divisively.

At times, this “box and label” type of thinking can provide some important data, but it also ignores a lot of very valuable information. Understanding how to get out of this “box thinking” will help you reach your greatest potential. In short, you need to think about the world and living systems in a whole new way.

The box thinking that many operate under describes living organisms as having clock-like workings, and it contends that if we could just disassemble a person into his





component parts — personality type, learning style, ethnicity, gender — and better understand each one, we could reassemble the individual and he would work better. This “if-then” thinking is what advertisers count on when they try to sell you a new product: if you drink milk, then you will look like your favorite TV star. Or if you wear this pair of jeans, then all the girls will chase you. It is what most people think of as just the way life is. Unfortunately, this type of linear logic doesn’t take into account how parts work together, how we change over time, or that we are in an ongoing relationship with our ever-changing environment. The bottom line is that we are far greater than the sum of our parts, and are constantly interacting with an increasingly complex world.

Today’s physicists have a phrase they use to describe energy: “bundles of potentiality.” I think this is a great description of individuals. When I think of people this way, I see each and every person I meet as a bundle of potentiality. Each person is just waiting to tap into some wonderful undiscovered possibilities. I don’t see anyone as a label on a box, and I don’t think rules and instructions will get any of us very far in taking control of our lives. I think we need to put away the whole “box and label” way of thinking. As my friend Pam Fox said, “It just fills our minds with clutter, and it needs to be packed up and thrown away.”

In the book *Season of Life*, author Jeffrey Marx captures a second problem with this type of thinking. At a high school football team’s first meeting of the year, a coach explains why players on his team will not be separated and labeled. He says:

The rest of the world will want to separate you by race, by socioeconomic status, by education levels, by religion, by neighborhoods, by what kind of a car





you drive, by the clothes you wear, by athletic ability. You name it — always gonna be people who want to separate by that stuff. Well, if you let that happen now, then you'll let it happen later. Don't let it happen. If you're one of us, then you won't walk around putting people in boxes. Not now. Not ever. *Because every single one of them has something to offer. Every single one of them is special.* (Emphasis added.)

Later, the coach talks about how this same idea plays out on and off the field. He talks with the team about never letting anyone eat lunch alone, team member or not. The idea here isn't that you're in or our you're out (you're on the team or you're not); it's about realizing that everyone has unique talents and recognizing each person as an individual worthy of belonging to "the team."

When Columbus successfully sailed west to go east, people had to start thinking of the world in a whole new way. The scientists of today are exploring exciting new territory about behavior, and now it is time for us to venture into this new world of thinking. A major change in perspective (Thomas Kuhn called these "paradigm shifts") about how people operate doesn't change the facts of our observations; it changes our perceptions and explanations. This is what I hope to do in this book. I hope to help you fundamentally change your view of behavior to one based on Perceptual Control Theory, a theory of living systems developed by William Powers and first published in the early 1970s.

I want you to clear out the clutter of your understanding of behavior and untangle the mystery of why we behave the way we do. When technology became more advanced and scientists began to observe things they couldn't explain, they had to pack up their old ideas and throw them away. They had to open their minds and explore new theories to





explain what they were seeing. Fritjof Capra in *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding to Living Systems* put it this way:

The exploration of the atomic and subatomic world brought [scientists] in contact with a strange and unexpected reality. In their struggle to grasp this new reality, scientists became painfully aware that their basic concepts, their language, and their whole way of thinking were inadequate to describe atomic phenomena.

Chaos theory, wave theory, nested hierarchies of webs, circular causation, and a whole lot more have become the working vocabulary of today's scientists.

Many people still try to explain the world and what they observe using the same old paradigm. One of the basic explanations of how people operate, based on Newtonian laws of motion, was accepted in the 1700s is still with us today: for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. The behavioral version was then translated to a postulate that life can be explained using linear cause and effect reasoning. If I dress just right and say just the right thing, I'll be popular. If I hear a phone ringing, I will answer it. If I yell at my children or punish them in other creative ways, I can get them to do what I want. If I reward people for "good" behavior, they will continue to use that behavior. Conversely if I punish them for "bad" behavior, they will stop.

Here is one of the big problems with this type of thinking: if box thinking were true, we could be assured that every time we repeat an action, we will get the exact same results. Have you ever tested this belief? Have you ever done the same thing and gotten a different result? I have. When I was a child I would stick out my tongue at my brother when





I thought he was being especially obnoxious, and he'd answer by sticking his tongue out at me. Then one day I did it, and he grabbed my tongue. When it comes to behavior,

Doing A ≠ Always Getting B

The linear Newtonian way of thinking about the world may hold true when we are talking about creating faster airplanes, constructing buildings, developing computer programs, or doing many other things, but it does not hold true in the same way when we are talking about living organisms. When we apply this linear logic—labeling everything right or wrong, good or bad, positive or negative—to people functioning in a complex environment it simply doesn't work. Like Columbus in his day, we need to see the living world in a new and different way. We need a whole new language to explain behavior, and we need a fundamental change in our thinking. As a friend said to me, "You write to me about systems, the flow in dynamic balance, and webs that grow in interconnections. But boxes, at best I fill them with clutter and dispose of them." I'd like to invite you to dispose of some long held beliefs about human behavior.

This new way of thinking explains why we can't be sure exactly what will happen when we try something. It also leads to one of my favorite truths about living systems: we can produce the same results by taking different actions. This is great news for living things, because we are never ever in exactly the same situation twice. When we shoot free throws in a basketball game, we don't do exactly the same thing every time. But if we are good at this skill, we can get the results we want more often, whether we are in double overtime or in practice. That's what I'm hoping for you. I'm hoping that by reading this book, by better understanding





PCT, you'll find that even when you're dog-tired, your actions will be more effective at bringing about the desired results. Are you ready to pack up the clutter?

Doing A, C, or D may get you B

In this book, we are going to explore a scientific theory of human behavior. Bill Powers states that PCT is the only theory that can be simulated successfully and matched to specific human behavior. Other basic theories are simply assumed to be true without proof or demonstration. I'm going to try to keep the discussion simple and useful. At the end of each chapter, there is an "In a nutshell" section to summarize a few key principles and ideas. This is a tough task because what seems simple gets very complicated when it comes to thinking about people and their behavior. Understanding the theory and putting its principles into action also takes time and practice. All of us have experienced the "wait time" needed to make a skill or a theory our own. The idea of walking seems simple now, but before you could do it, you spent a lot of time falling down, getting up, falling down, and getting up again. We're reminded of this every time we watch a baby learning to walk. If we watch two babies, we'll see that they will not learn to walk in the same way. Learning PCT demonstrates the same principle; everyone will go about it just a little bit differently. That's an exciting part of life, learning how to get the same result by different means!

Here's a little sample of PCT thinking: when you were learning to walk, in PCT terms you were learning how to control a set of perceptions. Saying it this way may sound strange to you, but PCT developer Bill Powers is a systems engineer (not the train kind), and the language of PCT can get technical. For some of you, this may be the most difficult





part of learning a new way of thinking. Learning PCT is a lot like learning a new language. Both require a whole lot of practice and patience.

Learning a new language also requires understanding or relearning the meaning of words. Much of our K-12 educational system is about learning the meaning of different words. When you were young, you learned a specific meaning for the word “light.” For most of you, the meaning was connected to a lamp or a bulb hanging in the ceiling. Now you have a lot of different meanings for the word. Take a minute and think of how many ways you could use “light” and how many different meanings the word has. Here are some examples: “Come on baby *light* my fire.” or “That guy is really a *lightweight*.” Today you have a deeper understanding of this word. The good news is that once you really understand PCT terminology, you’ve surmounted one of the biggest hurdles.

When you began to study different content areas in school, did it seem as if each one had its own language? As you learned more and got “smarter,” did you realize some languages and ideas could cross over? Think about the word “parallel.” It is important in math, in physical education, in language arts, in art, in industrial technology, and so on. In each of these different subjects, we learned about the concept of “parallel,” and along the way, it made sense. For me, parallel first made sense in math. I understood what parallel lines were, and it wasn’t until I got out of college and had a master’s degree that I finally began to realize what my language arts teacher meant by parallel structure. Even now, just because I understand it, doesn’t mean I can always apply it correctly. In fact, that’s why I have a wonderful editor. In this book, I’ve tried to provide a lot of examples of PCT principles in different fields of interest. Somewhere along the way I’m hoping the words and





the theory will make sense to you in the context of your life experiences.

Something else you need to remember is how words change meaning over time. A popular Tim McGraw country song illustrates this:

Back when a hoe was a hoe
Coke was a coke
And crack's what you were doing
When you were cracking jokes
Back when a screw was a screw
The wind was all that blew
And when you said I'm down with that
Well it meant you had the flu.

Understanding words and language leads to better understanding of ourselves and others. The other day, my son asked me if he could borrow my whip. At first I thought, "What do you mean? I don't own a leather strap with a handle." Then I realized that, because he had just gotten his driver's license, he wanted to borrow my car.

As you investigate PCT, some of the terms used will sound familiar to you, but to understand the theory you must be sure you understand how I am using the terms, and what I mean by them. The language of PCT is very precise. The words will sound familiar, and this will give you a general idea of what they mean, but remember that the PCT meaning may be a little different than your present understanding of the word. And, even though you understand the words and their meanings, it isn't always easy to "do PCT" — to act in congruence with PCT rather than opposing its fundamental principles.

I hope this book is going to help you clear the clutter out of your thinking, change the way you see people, and





change your explanation of behavior. Are you ready to explore this new understanding of behavior? Are you up for the adventure of taking control of your life? Are you ready to think about living systems, the flow in dynamic balance, and webs that grow in interconnections? Are you willing to take baby step, just as you did when you learned to walk, knowing that if you keep at it, you'll soon be running a four-minute mile?

In deciding on the format for this book, I thought it might help if you could read selected letters that I wrote to some of the people in my life as I tried to help them better understand Perceptual Control Theory. I thought this format might be a lot more fun to read, and I know it's been fun to write. After all, this book is about people. So I've written a series of letters, some based on actual letters, and others based on conversations I've had. I have, however, changed most of the names of those I'm writing to.

Throughout the book, I am going to encourage you to test out the theory for yourself by taking baby steps to apply the theory. I want you to try a few new ways of thinking and a few new basic principles from which to operate. I'm not going to give you a list of rules and strategies; I'm not going to tell you what to do (*When you are talking to someone look them in the eye.*) or what to say (*Always use "I" statements.*) in specific situations. I'm going to sprinkle some ideas based on core behavioral principles throughout the book. (For example, *Pull, don't push.*) I hope these will serve like closet organizers, providing you with cubbies, containers, and bars for storing your new collection of actions.

Here's the first idea I'd like you to think about: *Ask, don't tell.* Try it out in the next couple of days, and see if it makes a difference. I'll give you an example: as I was writing this, my son Duncan walked in to show me a picture he had painted for his art class. I was about to tell him, "I'm so





proud of you, you did an excellent job!” Instead, I stopped myself and asked, “Are you proud of yourself?” He beamed and answered, “Yeah, I am.” Notice that I not only *asked* rather than *told*, but I also *pulled* the information from him rather than *pushed* it into him. Later we will take a look at more effective questions, but this is a good way to start.

I also suggest that you talk with others who are reading this book. Listening to and discussing with others what you and they are learning can enrich the experience for everyone. And remember to be patient with yourself.

Look within!





In a nutshell

- ☞ This book is about fundamentally changing the way we understand behavior.
- ☞ This new understanding of behavior is Perceptual Control Theory, originated by William T. Powers.
- ☞ Learning PCT is much like learning a new language; it requires patience, practice, and an examination of the use and meaning of words.
- ☞ Learning PCT can help you take more effective control of your life.
- ☞ Learning PCT leads to the understanding that you have very little control over other living systems. Understanding this principle will greatly relieve stress in your life.

