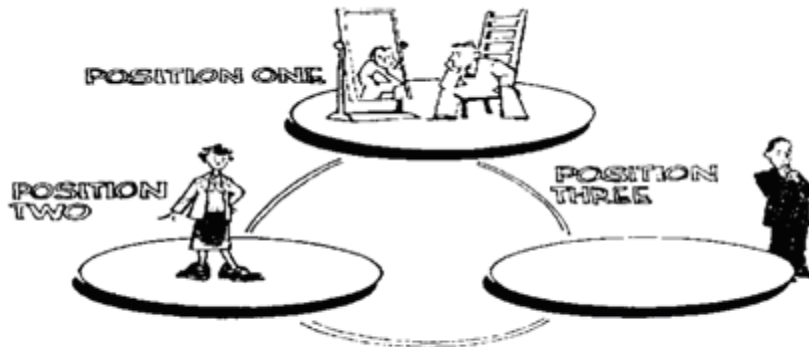


Perceptual Positions

By Sarah Frossell

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'A map is not the territory . . .'

Have you ever found yourself staring in amazement at another individual's 'crazy' or 'irrational' response to a situation and wondered what was happening in their head? Have you ever, as the jury in the 'Dingo Baby Case' did, judged an individual's response to a trauma as inappropriate because it differed significantly from your own response? Have you ever wondered why what you're saying doesn't seem to be getting through to the people you most need to influence, why, in Wyatt Woodsmall's words, everyone else in the universe - except thee and me, of course - seems to be a complete idiot for an incredible number of their waking hours? Well that's what we're going to be considering in this article; how we perceive the World, how our view can limit our reality and how we can transcend those limits by changing our position from a perceptual point of view, so to speak

Some months ago Guy Barron of Changeworks and I were working with some of his clients - a top team who had, as the result of a global reorganisation found themselves working for an ogre of a managing director.

We had introduced them to the basic principles of NLP, which they loved and felt they could really apply effectively to the main part of everything they did at work and home. But, 'the Ogre' kept coming up as an issue. It was clear that, both as individuals and together they had quickly become defeated by this man and his management style and that it was affecting everything they did and everything that they contemplated doing.

Here we were with seven highly competent professionals: a team which had successfully turned the company around, individuals who had operated at the highest levels of their



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industry and their business and yet who had found no way of convincing their boss to stop micro-managing them, to trust that they knew what they were doing and could be relied to act upon and solve the inevitable issues that had come up and continued to come up around the reorganisation and the increasingly accelerating changes in their marketplace. And it was defeating them. They could feel their motivation draining on a daily basis. They knew that unless they found a way of stopping what he was doing to them and to the other people in their organisation the business would falter alarmingly. Indeed, it was already doing so.

As the workshop progressed it became increasingly clear that what we needed to do here was to find a way of helping them change their perceptions so that they could change their behaviour and become more flexible, able to operate differently in their new circumstances and influence the ogre in positive ways.

We decided to work with perceptual positions to help them re-motivate themselves, begin to feel their personal and group power and find constructive ways of working with him to move the business forward . . .

First Position . . .

We all perceive the World, other people, places and things from what we call 'first position'; that is the position of ourselves as individuals looking out at, hearing and operating in and with our environment and the other people in that environment. It is a relatively limited view. We can, from this position, only be aware of what our sensory equipment can take in. This is hugely affected by the internal 'filters' we have developed at different levels of our neurology, most of which function automatically, with little or no conscious input.

To illustrate the point further, we have only to consider the everyday dilemma faced by the police when they ask witnesses to an incident to make statements. If there are five witnesses to an accident, they expect to get five markedly different accounts of what was seen, heard and felt at the time.

Rubbish, you might say. Something happened and there must be some factual information that can be ascertained to sort out the facts. Sadly the truth is that there may be no such thing as truth. There is only perception and perception is limited. Our perception becomes our reality. Different people witnessing an accident will see, hear and feel different things depending upon:

§ where they were at the time § what was going on in their heads - were they focused internally or externally § the state of their sensory equipment - eyesight, hearing and so on § their memories of similar situations, both things that have happened to them and which have happened to other significant people in their lives § their levels of panic, fear or reasonableness in these situations

Doing what you've always done will get you what you've always got . . .



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So, how does this happen?

Human beings are innately ego-centric. As babes in arms and as infants we do all we can, usually very successfully, to make ourselves the centres of our own, and our parents' universes. And it is from this stance, this position of self and self-centredness that we learn about the World, that we develop our perceptions about ourselves and about others.

There is little in the conventional journey to adulthood that teaches us anything else. Egocentricity is wired in as a survival mechanism - it is, at its best, a primitive response essential to the whole process of staying alive.

If we've been successful in bending our parents to our will then the filters we have developed will focus us on the 'I-ness' of our viewpoint. As teenagers our outlook will expand beyond ourselves and our families to ourselves and our peer-group, a strong connection to a collective outlook but one which we have usually chosen specifically to coincide with our own view of who we are and how we want to convey our identity to the outer World.

Even attempts to fashion our morality, to get us to empathise with others, phrases such as, 'Do as you would be done to', and 'Treat thy neighbour as thyself', do little more than reinforce these primary instincts.

Developing a pattern interrupt . . . or Second Position . . .

The upside of maintaining a purely first position stance is that when we use it well it will give us useful and life-enhancing information about ourselves, how and who we are. It can help us to work at the intuitive level that small children operate so beautifully and that so often eludes us as adults.

The downside is that it can be tremendously limiting. It can distance us from other people by trapping us in patterns of thinking and behaving that pressure us and limit our beliefs about what we can choose to do in our lives.

The clearest thinking about the need to interrupt this pattern came from Fritz Perls with his notion of 'Chairwork'. His solution for clients who were 'stuck' in first position powerlessness was to do the following: invite them to

- imagine that their protagonist was sitting in another chair in the room
- speak to the other chair about the issue that needed to be dealt with
- move to and sit in the other chair, becoming the other person as they did so, to hear what was being said as if they were that person . . . and having heard, to reply from this second position as the other person, in the other person's voice and manner
- move back to their original chair and hear the reply
- continue to shift between the positions, noticing, hearing and feeling the effect of the new information until the point where the client could consider making different, more flexible approaches, to the other, and start to resolve the situation.



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When we collaborate in exercises like this, we talk about 'taking on', or 'going into second position' to gather more information about what we are doing.

'To emulate a great leader we have only to walk a mile in his/her moccasins . . .'

In NLP we do, of course, encourage people to do this second positioning as a regular part of the training. It is a tremendously enabling thing to do. It allows us to perceive a larger part of the whole and increases our awareness of the possibilities for new solutions and new behaviours regardless of the perceived difficulties of the situations in which we find ourselves.

When you build rapport with people, you are, in effect, second positioning them as you go into their world and take on their world view as well as your own.

A core part of the modelling process is to change your physiology and enter into the physiology of the person you have chosen to model in order to feel, hear and see things just as they do.

Scientific Objectivity . . . or Third Position . . .

NLP has built on this flexibility and increase in information by adding the notion of objectivity into the equation. It is possible we argue - and some people do it naturally because of their scientific or technical training - to take up a third position. This is the position of the detached observer; the person who can perceive the whole transaction, who can see hear and feel what is going on for each of the individuals within an interaction and in addition observe and comment on the dynamic between the two.

From this position we can make suggestions about future possibilities, about the first person becoming even more flexible in her or his approach to the second person, about points for real leverage and so on. The straightforward information gleaned from moving between the first two positions has become knowledge and now the third position becomes the starting point for turning that knowledge into real wisdom.

Utilising these three perceptual positions creatively can help us make more sense of our worlds more quickly and thus allow us to become more personally powerful. It is pretty much one of the basic starting points for developing excellent practice in NLP. It is a vital skill, one that will pay you back multi-fold when you have mastered it. You will be surprised at just how straightforward it is when you use it.



And . . . How many more positions and applications . . . ?

Robert Dilts, among others, has experimented to increase the range of possible, positive uses of perceptual positions.

It was he who originally introduced the notion of Meta-Mirror to NLP. This is a powerful technique, widely taught at conferences and at the beginning of Practitioner Tracks to bring about major changes in behaviour and beliefs.

The process uses a fourth position or even, if need be, a fifth; a totally resourceful location which allows us to look at all three positions and then, from this place to alter the flow of the communication by moving back into the scenario in a different, fully resourceful way.

He and his partner Tod Epstein devised what they called the 'Jungle Gym', a three dimensional grid which maps first, second and third positions onto a timeline including past present and future. A different timeline process, 'Reimprinting' also makes use of different perceptual positions to heal the past. These are both powerful tools for personal and organisational transformation and repay working through.

So . . . if what you're doing hasn't worked . . . do something different now . . .

Back to our top team and the ogre. They were a little surprised when we suggested that one of them should take on the ogre's role. They were even more surprised when we insisted that the individual playing the role 'mimic' or be physically as like the ogre as it was possible to be, including the way he stood, walked, sat, spoke and breathed. There was a great deal of hilarity around getting this right.

They role-played three different scenarios, with three different individuals dealing with him in their own idiosyncratic ways. The rest became third position detached observers. Needless to say the group mindset around the ogre shifted during the session; the group developed new, more flexible strategies for maintaining their own power in the on-going relationship. They have subsequently used this to good effect – as indeed you can!

