

## **RE-POSITIONING NLP**

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**S**uppose we ask the question, “What is the position of NLP in the world today?” To ask this question also is to ask, “What is NLP? How do we within the field of NLP understand it? How do we position and brand it to those who are potential customers and clients of what NLP has to offer?”

Ah, this is *the* question, is it not? How do we present what we do with all of the tools, patterns, models, processes, and understandings in this thing that we call “Neuro-Linguistic Programming?” What is your elevator speech?

Traditionally there are many answers to these questions. Because NLP began in the context of therapy, NLP is often presented as a form of therapy, of psycho-therapy. Yet because the first model of NLP was the Meta-Model and arose from the linguistic distinctions that John Grinder brought to the patterning that Richard Bandler found in Fritz Perls and later in Virginia Satir, it is often presented as a Communication Model. But that’s not all. Sometimes it is presented as a form of hypnosis, a pop form of self-improvement, of the “technology of excellence,” of modeling, of cognitive-behavioral psychology, and so on.

*But what is it really?* And are there any other ways to position NLP so that it can be more widely received? After all, isn’t that what we want? That is certainly my motive. As a psychologist when I first saw first-hand the transformative power of NLP for changing patterns, habits, identities, cognitive distortions, fears, phobias, etc., I was absolutely thrilled with this new model and what it could do. And today, I am still shocked that NLP has not made more progress around the world in the field of psychology, psychotherapy, management, leadership, etc. And while there’s lots of reasons, for that and while many of us have written about those reasons, the bigger question is *what can we do about it?* How can we position and brand NLP for wider acceptance around the world?

## **The Re-Positioning of NLP**

As I mentioned in the first two articles, NLP arose as a child of the Human Potential Movement. I did not know this when I first entered into this field. The mythology of NLP at that time, and to a great extent to this day, was that two modelers discovered the communication magic of Perls and Satir and de-mystified by identifying the linguistic patterning behind or within what they were doing.

Yet that begs a key question, one regarding *where* Perls and Satir got their transformational skills, what they were attempting to do, and if they were part of something larger. It begs the question as to whether Perls and Satir were just lone rangers who just so happened to appear in history with their skills or whether they were part of a bigger movement with a grander vision. And now we know that it was the latter.

This is where it only takes a bit of data about the *Human Potential Movement* to awaken us to the realization that NLP arose as a child of that movement. You can find some of this data in the first article. If you didn't read that one, here is a summary of the connection of NLP with the Human Potential Movement in a series of the following bullet points:

- Key leaders in the *Human Potential Movement* were the very people modeled that created the content of NLP. *Fritz Perls*, the first resident scholar at Esalen, *Gregory Bateson*, the last resident scholar to live at Esalen, *Virginia Satir*, the first person in charge of Research and Training at Esalen.
- Esalen was the Mecca of the *Human Potential Movement*, the key Growth Center, a small community at Big Sur, not far from Santa Cruz in Southern California.
- The premises of the *Human Potential Movement* are the very ideas that are now encapsulated as “the NLP Presuppositions.” Namely, people are not innately broken and defective, that people have within their potentials the resources to self-actualize and to become authentic as persons, that we do “people-making” within our family systems, that how we use language fundamentally affects and influences how we frame and can reframe things, that meaning is a function of our framing, that sometimes shifting a small variable in a system can have system-wide generative change, we cannot not communicate, etc.
- The psychology of the *Human Potential Movement* was the psychology of how people positively grow and develop, the bright-side of human nature. Maslow was the first to model successful people pushing “the farther reaches of human nature.”
- The modeling of successful people, self-actualizers, began with Maslow's work in the 1940s which created the new positive psychology of generative change rather than remedial change.

## **Positioning NLP as Achieving Human Potential**

NLP inherited all of this from “the Third Force” in Psychology, the *Human Potential Movement*, but for the most part, Richard Bandler and John Grinder consistently failed to acknowledge this

when they created their first NLP model. Why? Who knows? Perhaps they were just too close to it all to have a historical understanding of where they stood in relation to the Human Potential Movement. Perhaps they were just caught up in the spirit of the times in the 1970s generated by the excitement of that movement and didn't have enough historical perspective to even realize that they were carrying on a movement that had begun two decades earlier.

Yet now, some forty-years after the *Human Potential Movement*, we have a much greater and broader perspective of things. Today we can now recognize that NLP was but one of a great many offsprings of that movement.

### **The First Modeler and Modeling**

Now the change that Maslow and Rogers initiated along with many of the other pioneers of the Human Potential Movement was *a total paradigm shift in the field of psychology*. Rather than study sick people, those suffering from neurotic, psychotic, and character disorders which had been the focus of modern psychology from the late 1880s onward, Maslow began studying healthy people. Does that sound familiar? Bandler and Grinder did *not* invent modeling of experts; Maslow began doing that in 1935.

Let me extend the picture further. Where did Maslow get the seeds of this idea? From his mentors who just so happened to be some of the primary Who's Who in Psychology— Alfred Adler, Max Wertheimer, and Karen Horney. Yet it was Maslow who was the first one who actually began studying successful people, people highly admired and loved whom he later called self-actualizers. He studied them, noted their characteristics, detailed the factors that contributed to their experience of self-actualization, worked out a way to measure self-actualization with Everett Shostrum (the POI, Personal Orientation Inventory), established professional journals for it (*The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*), and worked with many students on doctoral studies of self-actualization, etc.<sup>1</sup>

### **Acknowledging Sources**

So what? Does it make any difference that NLP failed to acknowledge its sources and its place within the *Human Potential Movement*? Primarily it disorients us to our history, our heritage, and to where we belong in the line of people seeking to study, understand, and model healthy people, geniuses, self-actualizers, and human excellence. So because we have not even know about our heritage, let alone recognize it, we have falsely assumed that NLP invented this approach.

And, to the extent that we think we are doing something new and different by studying the best specimens of human nature and modeling positive examples, we are both under a delusion and arrogating to ourselves a false stance. Maslow studied literally thousands of people who had some or many of the characteristics of a self-actualizing person. And since then, there have been about a thousand *studies*, some for Master's thesis, some for Doctorate dissertations, of people. That's how many times the POI (Personal Orientation Inventory) that Everett Shostrum and Maslow developed as an instrument for measuring Self-Actualization has been used.<sup>1</sup>

Even when I first studied NLP, I wondered where the NLP Presuppositions came from. I

wondered where Richard Bandler and John Grinder got them. And I was told that these were just their beginning assumptions. So the question was dismissed outright. “In NLP we are not interested in theory or history.”

Later I went back and read everything of Perls and Satir. It then dawned on me that NLP got most of the presuppositions from them. But now, reading further, reading the works of Maslow and Rogers, I realized that the Presuppositions go back even further— many to the new paradigm shift that Maslow introduced.

### **NLP as Self-Actualization**

When I first encountered NLP, it was being presented as a Communication Model, as the human technology for “running your own brain,” and reading Robbins, as about State Management. That was enough to sell me.

Yet what if the field of NLP had maintained its connection with the *Human Potential Movement* and instead of positioning itself as a psychotherapy or an effective sales method, it positioned itself as the next step in developing models for self-actualization! If it had done that, it would have been in a great position for inventing and leading the world in the field of Coaching instead of catching up with that field. Well, that didn’t happen, but could it? Could we do it today?

As a term, *self-actualization* is hardly ever used NLP even today. And it almost never occurred in the early literature of the NLP movement. Before researching this, I never noticed it. Yet now, given that NLP sprang directly from some of the key people in the Human Potential Movement, it seems like a screaming void. Yes NLP is a “communication model” about human behavior whereby we can “run your own brain” and create more resourcefulness. Yet the larger frame is self-actualization —actualizing our highest potentials and possibilities.

Missing the higher frame, NLP as a field has not consciously sought to carrying on the work of Maslow, Rogers, Mays, and the many others who pioneered the first Human Potential Movement. Yet what if we did?

Recently I discovered, as if for the first time, what Ken Blanchard wrote in the Preface of Anthony Robbins’ best selling book on NLP, *Unlimited Power* (1987). In that Preface he thought NLP had

“... the capacity to be the definitive text in the human potential movement.” (p. 12)

Yet by 1987 the Human Potential Movement was essentially gone. To that end in 2007 I began launching a new or second Human Potential Movement. I did so with a series of workshop audaciously titled, *The Ultimate Self-Actualization Workshop*. To supplement that I also wrote my first book on self-actualization, *Unleashed* (2007), a second one, *Achieving Peak Performance*, with another one to be published in 2008, *Self-Actualization Psychology*. Already two-dozen NLP Trainers have been trained and licensed to train this workshop and already we have gathered leaders together for the Launch Day in the USA, Australia, and South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

The design in this is to reposition NLP and Neuro-Semantics as *the new Human Potential*

*Movement for the twenty-first century.* It is to recapture the original psychology (Self-Actualization Psychology) that Maslow initiated and which brought about the third force in psychology and to relate the models, processes, and tools in NLP and Neuro-Semantic to the original vision of *actualizing human potential*.

**Author:**

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**End Notes:**

1. Maslow assisted Shrostrum in creating the POI in 1964. By 1976 Robert R. Knapp published the *Handbook for the Personal Orientation Inventory* documenting the research of the *POI* and its psychometric characteristics. And in 1987 Welch, Tate, and Medeiros published *Self-Actualization: An annotated Bibliography of Theory and Research* and quoted 1079 studies using the *POI* to measure self-actualization.

2. For more about the launching of the new Human Potential Movement, see [www.self-actualizing.org](http://www.self-actualizing.org). For the books on Self-Actualization Psychology, *Unleashed: A Guide to Your Ultimate Self-Actualization* (2007) is available through Crown House Publications and the other books will be available in 2008.

