



SEVEN KEY DISTINCTIONS FOR TRULY MASTERFUL COMMUNICATIONS

Critical Distinctions for becoming more Professional and Masterful as a Communicator

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Neuro-Semantics is a discipline about *communication*, about high quality and masterful *communication skills*. Arising from NLP and the cognitive-behavioral sciences, I have identified seven critical distinctions for unleashing your best communication skills and performance and for mobilizing the resources for becoming the most professional and masterful communicator that's possible.

These *seven critical distinctions* are based the extended Meta-Model (see *Communication Magic*, 2001) and on the Meta-States Model. With them you have the ability to make seven distinctions that replicates those that every masterful communicator makes.

- What are these key distinctions?
- What do they signify?
- How does one learn the distinction so that it's intuitive?

The Seven Critical Distinctions of a Masterful Communicator

“Genius” in every area involves making distinctions, making finer and the critical distinctions which others do not. In the area of being a professional communicator, this involves distinguishing between the following:

- 1) Map and Territory
- 2) Person and Behavior
- 3) Meaning and Response
- 4) Sensory and Evaluation information
- 5) Frame and Feeling
- 6) Exploring and Asserting (questioning and telling)
- 7) Current and Desired state

Now when a person can clearly make these distinctions and use these distinctions as governing frames in communicating, it eliminates *the major communication diseases*. Do you know about those diseases? These create tremendous *dis-ease* in the process of seeking to understand and work

out negotiations. Ellis and Beck in Cognitive-Behavioral psychology describes these as the ways to make yourself and others miserable.

- Confusion of words with reality
- Mind-reading and hallucinating
- Judging, judgmentalism, exaggerating
- Emotionalizing: minimizing, maximizing
- Personalizing: over-identifying, defensiveness
- Blaming, accusations, insults.
- Distracting, changing the subject, refusing to focus.

By way of contrast, the seven critical distinctions create the foundation for those powerfully profound skills and states that facilitate the very best of communication. These include:

- Sensory awareness
- Ability to be present in to the moment and focus on the now
- Stepping back into an observing or witnessing state that facilitates objectivity
- Getting the ego out of the way to be as “clean” as possible
- Staying open and receptive to feedback
- Flexibility to adjust to real-time feedback and making on-course corrections
- Thinking systemically and recognizing leverage points
- Exploring curiously to discover what *is*
- Seeking clarity in problem-definition
- Solution-focus thinking in creating forward moving
- Suspending meaning so there can be true dia-logue

No wonder we describe these distinctions as the prerequisites of true genius in communicating in persuasive and masterful ways. The very distinctions, as high quality frames, facilitates the mobilizing of the best resources for *dialogue* (moving through, *dia-*, meaning, *logos*) to co-create mutual understanding and to unleash new possibilities for solutions and peak performances. Given that this is the ultimate design for coaching, training, educating, therapy, parenting, managing, and leading—these distinctions make up the component frames if you want to play the *Becoming more Professional and Master Communicator* game. So, who’s game? Who’s ready to play?

Master Frame #1:

DISTINGUISHING MAP AND TERRITORY

“The map is not the territory” summarizes the common-sense wisdom that a map never *is* the territory it is designed to represent. The menu is not the meal; the sex manual is not love making; the photo is not the person. These are different phenomenon. They operate at different levels and in different dimensions.

So simple, yet so profound. So simple and yet so easy to forget. How and when do we forget it? When we think (and feel) that what we think (our mapping), what we perceive, what we believe in, what we value, what we identify with, etc. *is* what is real. That’s the delusion. Yet it never is; it cannot be. At best it can be a good, useful, and fairly accurate map *about* it.

But when we forget, we *identify*. We identify map *and* territory. What I think about something *is* real, is the final word, is absolute, is beyond question, is unquestionable, etc. And this describes the concrete thinker, the absolutist, the pulpit pounding pundit who has “the answers,” the guru who demands blind and unquestioning obedience, the fundamentalist in any and every system (Christian, Moslem, Liberal, Conservative, Political, etc.).

Map is all of the stuff *inside*, from the way the outside world impacts upon your senses and sense receptors (eyes, ears, skin, etc.). *Map* is all of the ideas, beliefs, understandings, feelings, memories, etc. that you create inside *about* the outside world of experiences and events. We do not deal with the world directly, but indirectly. We interface with the electromagnetic spectrum as mediated through our sense receptors, neuro-pathways, brain cortexes, beliefs, belief systems, etc. *Territory* is the outside world, all of the experiences, words, events, and happenings “out there.”

The masterful communicator knows that *all of our mapping is fallible* and is, at its highest development, still our best guess. He or she also knows that the value of a map lies in its usefulness, lies in it being able to provide us some navigational guidance as we move through the world and experiences. Does the map correspond well enough so that we can use it to direct our thoughts and actions? Does it facilitate me having the experiences I want to have? To achieve the things I want to accomplish?

How well do you recognize that *all* of your mental mapping about things is just that, a map? How much is this your frame of mind? How quick are you to explore and ask questions rather than go into “deity mode” of telling, demanding, or giving advice? How grounded is your recognition that your feelings are functions of your maps, not of the world? How intuitive have you driven in this distinction so that you recognize that any and every emotion is *the difference* between your map of the world and your experience in the world?

These are questions that help us benchmark where we are in our own development of making the map/territory distinction and meta-stating ourselves with this as a premise for moving through the world so that it becomes our in-knowing (intuition) as we communicate.

Master Frame #2:

DISTINGUISHING PERSON AND BEHAVIOR

A person is not his or her *behavior*. What we *do* differs from what we *are*. In this, we are more than our behaviors. Our behaviors are *expressions* of our thinking and feeling, expressions of our states, understandings, skills, development, contexts, environment, and many other variables. In this our behaviors develop over time from incompetence (at the time of birth) to various degrees of competence, and perhaps even mastery in a certain number of areas. Our behaviors at 2 years old, 13, 23, 37, or 65 are just behaviors that reflect our learning, aptitudes, discipline, interests, etc. at that time.

Our behaviors also are always and inevitably fallible. What we *do* is a function of how our aptitudes, talents, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and learnings come together in any given context and time to express ourselves. This is performance. It leads to achievements or to the lack

of achievement. This is the area that we call self-confidence, *confidence* in what we can do, in our skills and competencies.

What we *are*, well that's a very different question and dimension. What *are* we? We are a class of life that's semantically governed. Without the kind of instincts that animals have, we have room to define what to do and how to be. We are not born knowing how to be, how to live, how to function. We have to learn; we get to learn. Using our mind to learn is the human instinct *par excellence*.

What else *are* we? We are a class of life that has the ability to reflect on ourselves and to create conceptual frames. We are a highly reflective beings who inevitably (and inescapably) reflect on ourselves, our states, our thoughts, our feelings, our experiences, our history, our future, our origin, our destiny, our values, our meanings. It is this *reflexivity* that gives us a special power, the power to *transcend* our state, our moment, ourselves, and to construct a whole set of frames, an entire matrix of frames.

This describes one of our biggest challenges in life—coping with our reflexive mind and managing our reflexivity. The problem is that if we don't manage our higher mind well, we can get into a spin. We can reflect back on ourselves with anger, fear, distress, worry, etc. and then reflect on our anger-at-our-self with more anger, fear, stress, shame, guilt, etc. Do that layer upon layer, and we can create self-sabotaging as our way of moving through the world.

Do that when you are simply trying to gather information as you communicate, and you can set yourself and another into a spin. It depends on what you meta-state the other with. Meta-state self and/or other with suspicion, fear, anger, hate, judgment, etc. and watch communication become a fight, become distortion, become mis-understanding, become ugly and hurtful.

No wonder this *person/behavior* distinction is critical for becoming more professional as a communicator. “I am more than my behavior; you are more than your behavior. Behavior is behavior and always fallible and therefore always game for correcting and adjusting.” Talking about behavior is not talking about *who we ultimately are*. Yet, if we don't make that distinction, we will feel that we ourselves are being attacked. And that will elicit defensiveness, judgment, yelling, closed-mindedness, self-righteousness, counter-attack, and escalating responses.

It is the *person/behavior* distinction that enables us to step into the state of being un-insultable so that we can defuse someone who has “lost it” and has become judgmental, blaming, accusing, etc. We become more professional and more masterful to the extent that we can manage our own state, stay focused on the issue and separate issue from person.

Master Frame #3:

DISTINGUISHING MEANING AND RESPONSE

This distinction is best expressed in the NLP premise, “The meaning of your communication is the response you get, regardless of your intention.” And the rest of this premise is, “We never know what we have *communicated*. We never know what the other person ‘heard.’ It is only in the

response of the other person that we can begin to discover what the other person ‘heard,’ the meanings that the other generated, and therefore the meaning that was inadvertently co-created (communication, the communing of meaning).”

Because Neuro-Semantic is about the meanings (semantics) that get communicated and programmed into our body (neurology) and the meanings that we then act out or perform, *meaning is a phenomenon of the mind-body system*. It does not exist “out there” in the world. In this, meaning is not externally real. It does not exist “out there.” You have never walked down the street and stumbled over some *meaning* that someone dropped. It’s not that kind of thing.

Meaning is a construct. Meaning is a construct that occurs within a mind-body-emotion system, and a construct that only arises from how we link and associate things, and then reflexively apply to ourselves as our frame-of-reference or frame of meaning. So *meaning* is an inside thing; *response* is an outside thing. These differ radically as they occur in different dimensions.

That’s why a person’s response begins to give us some clue about the meanings that must exist in the other’s mind. So we explore further. What did you hear? What does that mean to you? And if we discover that the other has constructed meanings that we did not intent to transmit, we can ask if we can try again. “Sorry, that’s not what I was attempting to say. I’ll give it another try.”

This *meaning/response* distinction also means that another person’s response is *not* the same as the meanings you give to it. The other’s stressed tone of voice is just a response. What meanings we give to that is *our* meanings. It may correspond to the other’s meanings, it may not. If we don’t *suspend* our meanings, and if we don’t ask, we won’t know if we are just hallucinating.

When we automatically and quickly attribute meaning to the responses of others we are *coming from our maps of the world* and so we are *hallucinating* what it means to us. To this extent, we are not communicating. We are not giving the other person a chance to transmit his or her meanings. We are jumping-to-conclusions and perhaps confusing map/territory and then assuming that the meanings we create *is* what the other is saying or doing. This is a great way to create confusions and distortions and to completely ruin relationships.

To avoid that we have to use the *meaning/response* distinction to our advantage and do one of the most challenging things for us meaning-makers to do, namely, *suspend our meanings* and explore with the other from the state of refusing to over-trust our meanings. This is what those most masterful at communicating do. They know that they don’t know. They know that the greatest seduction in the world is that of coming from our meaning constructs (our matrix) and seeing responses *through our filters*.

They also know that this is the formula for being blind and deaf to others. That’s why just *witnessing* responses and distinguishing responses from meaning is so important for staying in the game.

Master Frame #4:

DISTINGUISHING SENSORY AND EVALUATIVE DATA

When I took my first NLP training with Richard Bandler, a refrain was repeated over and over. It went like this,

“If you’re going to be a professional communicator, you have to distinguish sensory based information and evaluative based information. If you can’t do that, you will make a mess of the communication enterprise.”

This was my first introduction to the Meta-Model that maps out how to sort out the inner mapping of a meaning-maker so that we can ask precision questions and meet the other person at his or her map of the world, instead of at our map.

Sensory data occurs as information and events impact our senses and sense receptors and at first is outside of our conscious awareness. By the time it comes into awareness, we have the “sense” of seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting that information and so we can *representationally track* that information to the movie screen of our mind. That’s when we begin to make our inner movies as we bring the world inside our mind and *re-present* it to ourselves. This also was the stroke of genius from NLP, that we think in the sensory languages of images, sounds, sensations, etc.

Yet all of this is very, very different from *evaluative data*. While both occur in the mind, we first make sensory representations and then we make evaluations about it. This is the meta-stating process of stepping back from ourselves, in our mind, and bringing other thoughts and feelings to it. In doing so, we abstract at a higher level as we draw conclusions, make generalizations, create distortions, make decisions, invent beliefs, set intentions, etc.

You can tell that you or another has jumped a logical level to the evaluative level if you cannot put the terms, words, phrases, or language on a table. We can put the referents of sensory words on the table, or in a chair, or in a wheelbarrow. “Chair. Dog. Green grass. Man with large nose.” But we cannot put the referents of evaluative language out on the table. “Good, bad, brilliant, disappointing, rude, nice, mean, beautiful.” As evaluations, these things are *creatures of the mind*.

This is where the Meta-Model comes in as a tool for creating specificity, precision, and clarity. We use the linguistic distinctions to bring our high level evaluations *down* to the representational screen. With the precision questions, we step back down from our matrix of invented reality and back into sensory life.

Yet this is the challenge. Most of us are so easily seduced and hypnotized by evaluative language and do not make the *sensory/evaluative distinction*. Someone says, “He’s mean. He blasted that waiter.” And we’re off hallucinating and inventing our meanings about what those non-specific words means. In this, there is no “meanness,” no “rudeness,” no “kindness,” no “hurtful,” “healing,” *out there* in the sensory world. These are words from the evaluative world of mind. And unless we ask, “What do you mean by this word?” “How do you know that it is this X?” we are not communicating. Instead we are in a hypnotic trance or we are imposing our trance on others.

Whenever we accuse someone of being defensive, hypocritical, incongruent, loving, sensitive, intuitive, or ten-thousand other things, to be masterful at communication we need to immediately *feel* the lack of precision, the inability to track those words directly to the theater of our mind, and begin to explore with Meta-Model questions. If we don't, we will be seduced into a story. And to the extent we go into that trance, we are creating more and more mis-understandings and distortions, putting us further and further from clear communication.

Without this *sensory/evaluative* distinction we become poor communicators and great mind-readers. We can then even *impose* our judgments on others and never have a clue that we are doing so. With the best of intentions of trying to understand others, we are actually not seeing them at all, but seeing them through our filters. Our judgments then come out in a most subtle way, a way that may make it almost impossible for the other to push away those impositions.

That's why the kindest and most compassionate thing we can do with our loved ones is to drill in this distinction between *sensory/evaluative data* so that we stop imposing our maps and judgments on them. Doing so is not a loving thing.

Master Frame #5:

DISTINGUISHING FRAME AND FEELING

As the *sensory/evaluative* distinction occur inside us and differ at different levels of experience, so also the *frame/feeling* distinction. This is what makes both of these distinctions difficult to catch and takes training to develop this intuitive knowledge. They occur within and we can jump the levels in a nana second. In fact, if *sensory/evaluative* is tough to catch, the *frame/feeling* distinction is probably even more challenging.

Frame refers to our evaluative judgments, understandings, beliefs, decisions, history, values, criteria, and so on, and it is from these higher frames in our matrix that create our feelings. *Emotions* as the "moving" (*motion*) "out" (*ex-*) of a response as our motor cortex is activated by our evaluations. That's why an emotion is the difference between our mapping of the world and our experience of the world. We *feel movement and motion in our bodies* given the ideas, beliefs, and understandings in our mind in relation to how well the ideas work in the outside world.

Frame and feelings relate systemically. Generally, our frames create our emotions. Yet the circular nature of a system with interactive elements means that our emotions also can influence and even create our frames. Yet they are different phenomenon. Feelings are mostly *expressions* of our frames. That's why just because we feel something, that in itself is no reason to act on it, and certainly not to obey it. The frame may be toxic, distorted, or wrong.

Feelings are mostly *symptoms* of our frames and indicate that we may need to update or change the frame or update and enhance our skills in relating to the world as we navigate some arena. And while symptoms are important as information signals, they differ from the cause, the frame. Because our emotions reflect the difference between our mapping and experiencing of the territory, all of them are right. They rightly weigh the difference. They are also *relative*, they are relative to the mapping and the experiencing. Yet because our mapping may be off and our neurology (health,

skills, competencies, environment, etc.) may be off, emotions invite us to explore, to discover what's creating the difference.

The danger is setting a frame of believing in our emotions and thinking we have to “be true to them.” That was the big mistake during the 1960s with the emotive therapies. They made emotion primary rather than secondary. An even bigger mistake is to assume that “if we feel something, that's evidence and proof that something is real.” Believe that and you will become a slave of your emotions. Then every emotional experience will become so loaded semantically, that you can come to believe in all kinds of crazy things.

As we *suspend meaning* when we get responses that we don't want, don't understand, and then begin an exploration to seek to understand, so with our feelings, we sometimes need to *suspend becoming emotionally reactive* and first seek to understand the source of the emotion, recognizing that while they are always right, they are not always useful, accurate, or enhancing. Sometimes we have to acknowledge the feeling and act against it anyway. Sometimes we have to rise up and operate from our highest intentions and understandings rather than our immediate reactive emotion. Sometimes we have to refuse to “take counsel” from our emotions.

If we do that we can become more professional as a communicator. If we don't, we can kiss it goodbye because we will personalize things, emotionalize (assume that we have to obey every feeling that we experience, and that if we feel something, it's must be so), minimize, maximize, exaggerate, and be driven and tormented by other cognitive distortions.

Master Frame #6:

DISTINGUISHING EXPLORING AND ASSERTING

When it comes to communicating, there are dozens upon dozens of things we can do with words. Yet the two major categories are exploring and asserting. We *explore* by asking questions, being curious, wondering, just witnessing so that we can seek first to understand. We *assert* by giving advice, telling, making definitive statements, feel certain, close the mind to other possibilities, and push our way through.

In the *exploring/asserting* differentiation, the second feels much more powerful. We feel powerful when we are taking a stand and asserting something. We feel strong when we are telling someone something, giving advice, teaching, preaching, and informing. We are taking our model of the world, the maps and meanings we have created and we are imposing them on the other. And, true enough, there are times for this. There are situations in which we even get paid for this—as a lecturer at a University, a teacher in a classroom, a consultant with expert advice to offer, etc.

The other side of this distinction feels much weaker. When we are just asking questions, just exploring, seeking to gather information, and seeking to understand, we are coming from a place of openness and emptiness. We are not certain, not sure, not absolute, not definitive. And yet, *questioning* operates in the brain in a way that's a hundred times more powerfully. This is due to the nature of the brain, it is “the ultimate answering machine.” Put a question to a brain and it has a compulsive need to come up with an answer! Place a question in a brain, especially one that it

cannot answer, and the brain will primarily go into over-drive seeking an answer.

How different with a statement or advice. Because every brain already has answers, because we have already mapped out some meanings, the meanings as the ideas we literally “hold in mind,” also operate as a defense against contrary ideas. Because our minds like to know and has a vested interest in what we already know, it will automatically eliminate ideas that doesn’t fit. So to tell someone something that doesn’t have easy access in elicits the ego-defenses so that the ideas (even if they are great and brilliant ideas) can’t get in.

Obviously, in communicating, to commune meanings, to work through meanings (*dia*- “through,” *logos*, meaning), and to share and expand meanings, exploring and asking questions provides a tremendously more powerful approach. That’s why master coaches and communicators *ask questions*. Out of the gate they *ask questions*. They even ask questions about their questions. They explore meaning, significance, intention, etc. They assume little and massively explore. And when they assert, they can feel the difference.

Master Frame #7:

DISTINGUISHING CURRENT AND DESIRED STATE

The final distinction required for becoming more professional and masterful as a communicator is the *current/desired state* differentiation. This is the ability to look at ourselves and others and to recognize two temporal dimensions, *now/then*.

Current state asks such questions as:

- Where are we now?
- Where are you now?
- What’s currently going on?
- What are the challenges, problems, constraints, pros and cons, etc. of the current situation?

This is the ability to be present, to come into the now, to acknowledge and accept whatever *is* for whatever it *is* without needing to defend, argue, rationalize, or use any other ego-defense mechanism. Obviously, to do this takes a lot of ego-strength—the strength to accept what *is* without caving in or going into a fight/flight type of response

Desire state is the other time dimension, the dimension of imagining, envisioning, and creating a future that we can then move to. We elicit this by asking,

- Where do we want to go?
- Where will we go if we don’t make a change?
- How will we get there?
- What’s involved in the journey?
- What resources do we need?
- What are the steps and stages along the way?
- How will we know when we get there?

In *current state* we need problem solving skills, and the ability to create a well-formed problem.

Without that, we may be solving a pseudo-problem. Without that, we may be trying to work on a mere symptom, a paradox, or the wrong problem. In *desired state* we need to create a well-formed solution and to use the precision questions to clearly define what we want.

This distinction keeps problem and solution separate and empowers us to clearly define both so that we can think and communicate strategically as we develop the plans, tactics, and resources for making a dream come true. This distinction enables us to then synergize our away-from and toward motivational energies so that we build up a propulsion system and not suffer from a out-of-balance motivation strategy where we only are pushed by aversions or pulled by attractors.

Summary:

Rising up to your highest Communication Excellence

- How well developed are these distinctions in your repertoire of communication frames?
- Which one of these master keys for communication are you best at?
- Which one of these master keys are you the weakest in?
- What plans do you have for learning and drilling them into your response style?
- What coaching have you had or will you have to unleash your potentials for masterful communicating?

Because Neuro-Semantics is all about how we create the meaning frames that establish our use of language and communication, the best *communication performance* inevitably comes from establishing the most elegant and effective frames about communication. And these distinctions are the key ones that those most masterful in communication use.

Author:

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D. created the *Meta-States Model* which is the foundation of the field of Neuro-Semantics. Since then he modeled many expertises in communication, leadership, management, business, wealth creation, and coaching. He is the author of some 35 books and the developer of many models. Supporting books for this article include *Communication Magic* (2000), *Mind-Lines: Lines that Change Minds* (2005), *Frame Games* (2000).