THE
STEP BACK SKILL

"People *do* find new solutions,
social organisms *are* capable of self-correction,
nature finds ever-new adaptations,
and the whole process of scientific discovery or artistic creation
is based precisely on *the stepping out of an old*
into a new framework..."
Paul Watzlawick (*Change*)

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D.

- Are you interested in raising your consciousness?
- Would you like to raise the quality of your consciousness?

You already know about *the Step Back Skill*. I know you do because you already do it. And you talk about it, or hear it talked about, all the time. Its obviousness, in fact, is what hides it so thoroughly from most people.

> "You're just too close to it, you need to step back."
> "At first, the task was too much in my face. So I stepped back and gained the perspective I needed, and then dealt with it."

The step back is the Neuro-Semantic skill par excellence.

What is a *Step Back*?

Imagine your face pressed so tightly against a wall that your lips are kissing it. Yuck. Not only does it taste bad, but you can't see much, can you? What building is this anyway? Is it an office building, a sky scraper, your home, a wall around a garden? When you're that close you can't tell. To find out, take *a step back*. So, it's an office building. Can you tell how tall it is from one meter back? No, then *step back* again. From a block away, you can tell that it's really tall, maybe 50 stories, but it's only when you're three blocks away that you can tell, and a mile away you can see

the fuller context of the skyline of the city. Physically when we *step back* from something that's right in our face, we are able to see more of it. We're able to get the big picture and we're able to see the context.

As this is true of actual perception, it is even more true of our mental, emotional, and conceptual perceptions. When we step back, we obtain a broader, larger, and more expansive view of things. We rise up in our mind to gain a larger vista.

This is what we call *the Step Back* or *the Step Up*. When we step back from a thought, a feeling, an awareness, a physiological response, a language expression, a behavior, or an experience, we are then enabled to think-feel-and-respond *to* it, *about* it, and *in relationship* to it. This is what we mean by the term *meta*. "Going meta" to one state creates a meta-relationship to it. It is in this way that we create meta-states, meta-frames, and psycho-logical levels.[1]

When we step back or up into a meta-awareness, we use our reflexivity, our self-reflexive consciousness, which is the most unique facet of our consciousness. This allows us to *transcend* our own thinking, feeling, and responding. It enables us to move to a meta-relationship to our previous experiencing and include it within a higher level context. This is the structure of language, context reframing, mind-lines, hypnosis, persuasion, human reasoning, and the Matrix of our minds.

Why is a *Step Back* or *Step Up* important?
There are numerous benefits and values for the magic and power of the *step back* (or *step up*). The most crucial benefits are these:

- An expansive perspective
- A mindfulness and self-awareness
- Awareness of the meta-frames of an experience
- An enlarged sense of choice and options
- A simplification of complexity
- A sense of empowerment for taking effective action
- Clarity of the content / process distinction
- Ability to quality control

1) An Expanded and Expansive Perspective
The *Step Back* prevents us from getting caught up in details or seduced into a narrow tunnel vision of things. A psychological *step back* is like moving up a hillside to get a broader view than is possible when we are in the thick of the action in the valley. Imagine a fifteenth century clash of conflicting armies. If you are in the midst of that conflict, you will focus on what's in your immediate vicinity. You're in the hand-to-hand combat. Your perspective will narrow to the sword in your face.

Now imagine *stepping back* from that action. Imagine feeling yourself stepping back and up the hillside several hundred meters and notice how much more you can see. Notice how your perspective expands as you step out of the fight and step into the view of the captain. You can now see the larger battle and you may be able to see what's happening overall and where the strengths

and weaknesses of each army lie. And if you continue to step back from that and move up the hillside even further, your vista of the whole will continue to expand. You will step into the view of the general. You will be able to recognize how the entire system of interactive parts is working and have a sense of what's going to happen. This is the power of the *step back.*

Mentally and emotionally, when we *step back* from first position, we *step out* of being the actor in the Movie in our mind. This allows us to *step into* the second position of another person in the movie, we can even *step out* completely and into the editor or director's position. Herein lies much of the magic of NLP. This creates the framework for all of the other benefits of the step back: choice, empowerment, flexibility, wisdom, etc.

2) A Mindfulness and Self-Awareness

As we gain more expansive awareness, we become more mindfulness of our world and of ourselves. This meta-awareness moves us to a higher level of consciousness. As it does this, it generates what we now call "emotional intelligence." Goleman's work highlights that EQ (emotional quotient) involves self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-mastery, and self-control.[2] Similarly, Dr. Ellen Langer's research identifies multiple values of this kind of *mindfulness* (i.e., more energy, health, longevity, quality of life, memory, etc.).[3]

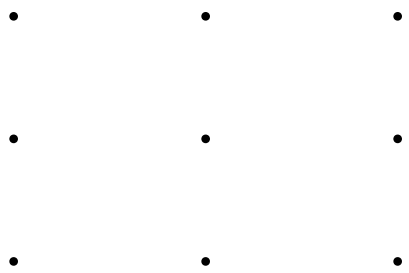
Stepping Back or *Stepping Up* creates this higher mindfulness which allows us to "run our own brain." As we now take an editorial position to the representations playing in the Movie of our mind, we can add color or reduce it, we can zoom in or out, we can add different sound tracks, etc. We are able to make all of these alterations of the cinematic features in how we code our Movie (i.e. the so-called "sub-modalities") because we have "gone meta." We have to "go meta" in the *step back* or *step up* in order to even notice these framing features. [4]

We can also do much more. *Stepping back* empowers us to move up the levels not only about our editing, but also about our style of directing the movies, and the screen play scripts that we choose to work with or that we choose to not work with, and to the executive level where we operate as the CEO of our mind and the Movie productions we create. Korzybski called this "consciousness of our consciousness"—a meta-state that elevates our awareness to new and higher levels as we *step out and back and up.*[5]

Obviously, all of this goes beyond just "running your own brain" at the primary level of representations. It's also moving to more than just the three perceptual positions. We can now move to many other perceptual positions of our mind.

Do you know about the nine-dot problem? Nine dots are set forth as you can see in *Figure 1,* and the problem is to simply connect all nine dots with four straight lines without lifting your pencil from the paper. Can you do that? If you're not familiar with this, stop and do this now. Piece of cake, right?

Figure 1



So how did you do? Did you connect the nine dots with four straight lines without lifting your pencil from the paper? The fascinating thing about this trick is that in first trying to solve the problem almost everyone fails. And even more interesting is the fact that everyone fails in the same way. Given that similarity, how does that work? We fail in the same way because we bring to the problem a set of frames about the problem—assumptive frames that prevent any solution.

Frames by implication describe this hidden facet of our mind. Everything we think, say, feel, and perceive occurs within a set of higher frames—implied frames, hidden frames, assumptive frames. It's built into language, it's built into the way our nervous system—brain maps perception and understanding, and it's built into the very matrices of our mind. Every frame is embedded within yet higher frames.

What *implied frames* do we bring to the nine-dot problem? First, we assume that the dots compose a square and second that the solution must lie within the square. Thirdly, we assume that we are not allowed to step outside of the square to solve the problem. Yet these self-imposed conditions (frames by implication) that we bring with us are the very frames that prevent us from finding a solution. Within those frames, we cannot figure out a solution. The solution does not lie *inside* those frames. We have to *step out* of them to solve the problem.

Yes, some people have to run through every possible attempt *within* the frame before their ready to admit that they can't figure it out. Yet it's that frustration which inevitably coaches them to step aside. Only then do we realize that the solution lies in leaving the field, in stepping outside the box.[6]

3) Awareness of the Meta-Frames of an Experience

As we *step back*, we first experience a higher awareness of ourselves and of our experiences. With that expanded awareness, we are able to see the meta-frames that embed the experience. *Meta-frames* refers to the nature of thought and reasoning. Because we classify and catagorize things, our minds work through the embedding of frames within frames like Russian dolls, like the layers of an onion, like the higher frames of a computer software that modulates and directs the operation of a program. The "embedded" reporters in the Second Gulf War operate *inside* the frames set by the Coalition Forces. They are *embedded* in their protection as well as in their rules for reporting.

By *stepping back* we are able to *exit* one context and *step up* into another. It's only when we step outside of the "square" assumptive frame of the nine-dot problem that we can see the whole. Now we can see the implied frames that create the problem in the first place, and that maintain it. Similarly, stepping back enables us to see our mental Matrix and all of its embedded frames for what it is. *Stepping back* allows and empowers us to detect the Matrix in the first place. If there's no stepping back, there's no awareness of the Matrix. Then the matrix *has* us.[7]

4) An Enlarged Sense of Choice and Options

As the *step back* facilitates our meta-awareness, something else happens—we experience *choice*. A pseudo-sense of choice occurs *inside* the matrix, inside the box. Inside, there is no answer. Our attempts at change or solution while inside is a first-order change—changes within the box, within the system. True choice only occurs by stepping outside that system through the meta-move. In transcending the experience, our meta-awareness empowers us to see what our true choices consist of. Stepping back puts us at choice point.

When we move around *inside* a frame, we can at best only move the *members* of the class around. This does allow us to create different sequences and combinations. Yet, at the same time, we are still inside the class, the category, the frame, the matrix. And as such, we can only perform first-order changes.[8]

It's like being inside of a dream—a nightmare. *Inside* the nightmare we can do all kinds of things. We can run, hide, fight, scream, jump off a cliff, we can also fly through the sky, become a super-hero, etc. Yet whatever we do, we are still *dreaming*. We are inside the dreaming frame. None of these changes *change* that, none terminates the dream itself, all are members of the class of dreams. We can alter the dream from a nightmare to a hero story, but all of that is first-order changes. A second-order change would be waking up. Waking up is not a member of the class of "dreaming." Waking is not a part of the dream. It is a different kind of change—it's a transformation to an altogether different state.

Stepping back moves us upward to a higher level of awareness. From there we can then choose how to frame things. Then we have the choice of stepping both in and out of an experience. We can hack back into our matrix, or we can obtain an exit from it. This increases our sense of personal empowerment and mastery.

5) A Simplification of Complexity

From inside the box of our frames of the nine-dot problem, any solution is not only "hard" to figure out, but in this case, impossible. If a change *inside* the classification or category isn't what we need, then no amount of intelligence, skill, competence, or creativity is going to solve the problem. Such "problem solving" will feel difficult, challenging, and grueling. Frequently that's because the kind of thinking that created the problem (the frames by implication that we bring to the problem definition) cannot solve the problem. We have to step out to a different kind of thinking. We have to step out of the thinking *inside* the class and *of* the class to *outside the frame thinking.*

And here's the magic, once we *step out,* once we use a higher level kind of thinking, the expanded

awareness then initiates a higher level understanding so that second-order change is easy. Frequently that is when we find that we are surprised, even ecstatic, about the simplicity of the solution. "Why didn't I think of that!?" "It can't be *that* easy!" The magic here is the magic of the outside perspective. From the outside we can see what we cannot see when within.

The key is that we see frames from the outside. *From inside a picture, it's impossible to see the frame.* That's why, from inside a problem, every second-order solution it seen and felt as not only hard, but impossible. That's why we keep struggling from the inside doing "more of the same." Yet that only gives us more of the problem. That, in turn, leads to feeling tired, discouraged, defeated and helpless. This leads to a meta-pessimism. We fight inside a system of frames (a matrix) using the very thinking that creates our problem.

I have identified this as lying at the heart of the structure of stuttering along with Bob Bodenhamer. The *thinking* that creates "stuttering" is the very thinking that keeps people locked into an unsolvable problem. The thinking begins by taking non-fluency (which everybody experiences everyday) and defining it as "stuttering," attaching very strong prohibitions against it, anchoring it to feelings of fear, dread, inadequacy, worthless, failure, etc. and then ordering or demanding in a perfectionistic way to never, but never "stutter."

Obviously the first thing that results from this kind of thinking is a total focus on speech and non-fluency, semantically overloading it with so much meaning that it becomes utterly critical to one's self and self-esteem. The second thing is that it a person tries like hell *not* to do what is inevitable—search for words and speak non-fluently. The more consciousness of non-fluency a person develops, the more one anticipates with fear and dread to *not* engage in it, so the person starts to block the stuttering. This blocking then makes the person's speech forced, controlled—over-controlled. Then, the more the person does this, the more it happens. This confirms the person's worst semantic fears of being inadequate, embarrassed, imperfect, etc.

Now we have a "complex" problem—*if viewed from within the system.* And no way out. Speech pathologists have concluded, "The problem is physiological." Yet once we *step outside*, the problem is simple. The leverage point to solving the problem is to undo its structure. Welcome, accept, and practice non-fluency enjoying it and laughing at it. Of course, *from inside* that's the worst thing in the world. The prohibition frame forbids the very solution.

Yet when a person can *step back* from the dynamics and mechanisms of the thinking-feeling meta-stating structure and see it for what it is, that very *step back* begins the transformation. All first-order changes inside the stuttering framework—controlling breathing, relaxing, perfecting one's controlled speech, etc. —never affect the structure that creates the problem in the first place. It is the *step back* that allows a higher, second-order transformation to occur.

That's why there's a skill and art to *stepping outside* of our frames, our matrix of frames, and gaining a meta-state perspective about the structure of the framework. We frequently find ourselves caught in a box that makes life and relationships and work and motivation "hard," if not impossible. We find ourselves in a painful reality that's made up of a matrix of frames full of self-imposing

constraints. Our problem is then compounded because we don't know that it's actually *a problem of our frames.* We think that the problem is with the world, with others, with ourselves, or with the problem. Yet, in truth, we are just caught up in a Matrix, and don't know it.

Caught up in a self-imposed set of frames within frames is the first problem. Not realizing that this is the problem is our second problem. And it's the blindness, the unconsciousness of the second problem that locks us inside of the first problem. We can run around all we like trying to solve the first problem. But that's a lot of first-level changes that are preempted by the second-level structure.

Paul Watzlawick, along with John Wealand and Richard Fisch (1974) write this:[8]

> "We have all found ourselves caught in comparable boxes, and it did not matter whether we tried to find the solution calmly and logically or, as is more likely, ended up running frantically around in circles. But . . . it is only from inside the box, in the first-order change perspective, that the solution appears as a surprising flash of enlightenment beyond our control. In the second-order change perspective [the meta-state] it is a simple change from one set of premises to another of the same logical type. The one set includes the rule that the task must be solved within the (assumed) square: the other does not. In other words, the solution is found as a result of examining the assumptions *about* the dots, not the dots themselves. . . . *The problem is solved in the here and now by stepping outside the 'box.'"* (p. 26)

6) A sense of empowerment for taking effective action

In the nine-dot problem, there is no effective action that we can take while *inside* the frames that create the problem. The problem is not that there's no solution. There is. The problem is not that the solution is hard. It is not. The problem is not that we're helpless. We are not. *The problem is our frames.* Our hidden frames (those frames by implication), and the kind of thinking involved in this, is precisely what prevents us from succeeding.

This is a metaphor of how any and all second-order change and success in solving life's problems depends upon the *Step Back Skill.* We have to step out of our present state and move *up* to more resource thinking-and-feeling in order to gain a larger structural perspective. This puts us in a place where we can texture the present state with more empowering resources. That, in a word, is what Meta-States is all about. And because the higher level classifications sets the frames for how the non-linear system of our mind-body-emotion system works— it modulates and governs a new experience.

7) Clarity of the Content / Process Distinction

The *Step Back Skill* does something else. It enables us to distinguish between content and process. We have to "go meta" to make this distinction, a distinction that has been fundamental in NLP. Yet while this has been critical in NLP, the *content/process distinction* takes on special meaning in Neuro-Semantics.

The difference between *content and process* is the difference between *details and structure.* Yet when we step back from these words, what kind of terms are these? If you use the Meta-Model to

classify these terms, what are "content and details, process and structure?" Nominalizations, are they not? Yes, of course. While they sound like things, we can't put them on the table, so they are processes (verbs) turned into nouns. That makes them *class terms*. And using Korzybski's linguistic distinction of multi-ordinality, they are also nominalizations that can refer to themselves. Can we have content about content? Content about process? Process about content? Process about process? *Yes*, of course.[9]

This means several things. It means that sometimes the details of content do matter. It means that we can have *content* at higher levels. For example, what's the *content* of your ideas and beliefs about your "self?" By the way, this explains why the Matrix Model has three *process* matrices and five *content* matrices, which explains its unique power as a unifying framework for all of patterns and models of NLP.

By way of contrast, classical NLP seek to eliminate all content. The mantra of NLP has been, "Content doesn't matter." Yet in so dismissing content, and especially the content of the higher levels of our frames of mind, NLP became less and less capable of handling some states and experiences. The Matrix model resolves this by recognizing the multi-ordinality of these terms.

This is where the *Step Back* skill, enables us to distinguish what's *on our mind* (what and how we are representing) and all of the content information *in the back of our mind*. This refers to the entire labyrinth of the Matrix, the rabbit hole that we fall into and explore.

8) Ability to Quality Control

The final benefit of the *step back* that I'll mention here is that it puts us outside the system of the Matrix of our mind so that we can run an ecology check. It is by *stepping back* that we gain a richer mindfulness of the ecology of our entire mind-body system. From this emerges what we typically call "wisdom." We gain a higher perspective. Stepping back and up puts us in touch with our highest intentions.

As long as we don't know the Matrix we're living in, the Matrix *has* us. Waking up to the Matrix is our first task. Matrix detection means becoming aware of the frames and meta-frames that govern our mind-body-emotion system.

How do you do it?

Simple. Take a deep breath and relax your body. Good. Now think *about* some experience, feeling, thought, words, behaviors in which you would like to have more perspective. Think about some experience in which you have too much tunnel vision, in which you feel too negative, pessimism, in which you keep going around in circles, making first-order changes, but the overall problem remains year after year.

- What does the Movie on the theater of your mind look like?
- What's the sound track like?
- What do you think about that?
- How well does it serve you?
- What beliefs drive it?

- What frames by implication are there?

With these, and the many, many other meta-questions you can ask, you are now *stepping back*, in your mind, from that thinking and feeling *of* the experience. Just that quickly, you made a *meta-move* and you have transcended your first experience and state.[10]

Practicing "going meta" to engage the *Step Back Skill* is critical. As with any skill, *practice develops mastery.* So practice *Step Backs* every day. Step back or step up before you begin your day to refresh your highest intentions. Step back to access the resources you want to experience and develop this day. Step back at the end of the day to review your performances and receive feedback to set new learning goals, enjoyment goals, performance goals, etc. for the coming days.

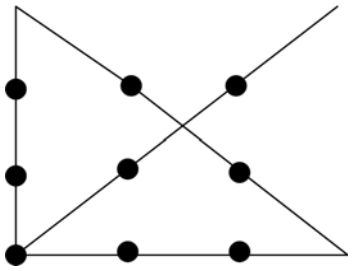
Summary

- With our self-reflexive consciousness, we can always *step back* from ourselves, our states, our mental-and-emotional experiences to *think-and-feel* new thoughts about those. This is meta-stating. It is your second thought about the first one. It is your fifteenth thought about your previous fourteen thoughts. Use it now as your "infinite progress" for higher level outframing.
- Neuro-Semantic *ecstasy* is the *step back.* After all, ec-stasy (*ec*, "out" and *stasis* "to stand") literally means to stand outside yourself, outside your typical frame of mind. There's something *ecstatic* about the *transcending power* of meta-stating.

End Notes:

1. *Meta* is Greek and literally means "about, beyond, above, after."
2. Daniel Goleman (1995), *Emotional Intelligence.*
3. See *Mindfulness,* by Ellen Langer.
4. See *The Structure of Excellence* (1999, Hall and Bodenhamer) and *MovieMind* (2003, Hall).
5. See Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity* (1933).
6. One solution to the 9-dot problem is in Figure 2. There are many other ones. For instance, draw a line that's so think it draws through the whole box in one stroke. Or draw the line around the planet so that in three revolutions you have draw one line through all nine dots.

Figure 2
The 9-Dot Solution



7. See *The Matrix Model* (2003, second edition).
8. See Paul Watzlawick, *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution.*(1974). The difference between the different types or levels of change according to Watzlawick is that a first order change

is that occurs *within* a frame. Change of change or second-order change is when we move to a meta-level and change the frame itself. He and his associates wrote:

> "The Theory of Logical Types makes it clear that we must not talk about the *class* in the language appropriate for its *members*. This would be an error in logical typing and would lead to the very perplexing impasses of logical paradox. Such errors of typing can occur in two ways: either by incorrectly ascribing a particular property to the class instead of to the member (or vice versa), or by neglecting the paramount distinction between class and member and by treating the two as if they were of the same level of abstraction." (p. 27).

9. See *Communication Magic* (2001) for the expanded Meta-Model which includes Multi-Ordinality.

10. See *The Matrix Model* (2003, second edition) for an extended list of 26 meta-questions for exploring the matrix.

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