

## Levels of Learning and Change

The concept of logical levels of learning and change was initially formulated as a mechanism in the behavioral sciences by Gregory Bateson, based on the work of Bertrand Russell in logic and mathematics (see Logical Types). The term *logical levels*, as it is used in NLP, was adapted from Bateson's work by Robert Dilts in the mid 1980's, and refers to a hierarchy of levels of processes within an individual or group. The function of each level is to synthesize, organize and direct the interactions on the level below it. Changing something on an upper level would necessarily 'radiate' downward, precipitating change on the lower levels. Changing something on a lower level could, but would not necessarily, affect the upper levels. These levels include (in order from highest to lowest): (1) identity, (2) beliefs and values, (3) capabilities, (4) behavior and (5) environment. A sixth level, referred to as "spiritual," can be defined as a type of "relational field" encompassing multiple identities forming a sense of being a member of a larger system than a particular individual identity.

### *Levels of Processing and Organization*

Any system of activity is a subsystem embedded inside of another system which is embedded inside of another system, and so on. This kind of relationship between systems produces different levels of processes, relative to the system in which one is operating. Our brain structure, language, and social systems form natural hierarchies or levels of processes.

In fact, people often talk about responding to things on different 'levels'. For instance, someone might say that some experience was negative on one level but positive on another level. In our brain structure, language, and perceptual systems there are natural hierarchies or levels of experience. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson identified four basic levels of learning and change—each level encompassing and organizing elements from the level below it, and each having a greater degree of impact on the individual, organism or system in which it is operating. These levels roughly correspond to:

	<i>Spiritual</i>	Vision & Purpose	<i>For Whom? For What?</i>
A.	Who I Am – <i>Identity</i>	Mission & Role	<i>Who?</i>
B.	My Belief system – <i>Values and Meanings</i>	Motivation & Permission	<i>Why?</i>
C.	My Capabilities – <i>Strategies and States</i>	Maps & Plans	<i>How?</i>
D.	What I Do or have Done – <i>Specific Behaviors</i>	Actions & Reactions	<i>What?</i>
E.	My Environment – <i>External Constraints</i>	Opportunities & Constraints	<i>Where? When?</i>

The **environmental** level involves the specific external conditions in which our behaviors and interactions take place. Our ability to perceive the external environment is primarily related to the ongoing information we take in through our senses and sense organs. For instance, you can walk around in a particular room and you can look out through your eyes and see the objects, listen with your ears and hear the sounds, smell the odors through your nose, and feel the temperature of the air on your skin. Such environmental perceptions shape our experience of the *where* and the *when* of a particular 'problem space' of change – i.e., the contextual factors, such as physical space and time constraints, that influence the way we approach a problem or goal.

The ability to sense and coordinate your body's **behavior** as you move through a particular external environment involves another level of experience. This level relates to the behavioral activities or results to occur within the environment – i.e., *what* is supposed to happen in a particular where and by when. Behaviors involve the psychomotor system, a deeper level of neurology than the sense organs. The psychomotor system coordinates our physical actions and movements.

While some behaviors are simply reflexive responses to environmental stimuli, most of our actions are not. Many of our behaviors come from "mental maps" and other internal processes whose source is within our minds. This is a level of experience that goes beyond our perceptions of the immediate environment. You can make pictures of things that do not relate to the particular room you are in, for instance. You can remember conversations and events that took place years ago. You can imagine events that may happen years from now. This level of experience has to do with your mental and intellectual **capabilities**. Behaviors without any inner map, plan or strategy to guide them are like knee jerk reactions, habits or rituals. At the level of capability we are able to select, alter and adapt a class of behaviors to a wider set of external situations. It involves *how* you are perceiving and directing your actions.

Our capabilities are in turn shaped and coordinated by our values and belief systems. Our

**beliefs and values** transcend any particular thoughts and serve to encourage, inhibit or generalize particular strategies, plans and ways of thinking. They have to do with *why* we think what we think and do what we do. Why, for instance, should a person consider changing his or her thoughts or actions? A person's degree of motivation will determine how much of his or her own inner resources he or she is willing to mobilize. Motivation is what stimulates and activates how people think and what they will do in a particular situation.

The level of **identity** consolidates whole systems of beliefs and values into a sense of self. It has to do with our experience of *who* we are. If you have ever looked at infants when they are first born it is obvious that they are not simply 'blank slates'. They are born with their own personalities. Even before they have perceived much of their environment, coordinated their behavior, formed mental maps or established particular beliefs and values, they have an identity; their own special way of being in the world. Identity level issues have to do with which roles and functions are involved in a problem or outcome? Who is supposed to be involved? What beliefs, values, capabilities and behaviors are associated with the various roles?

Finally, there is the level involving what is usually referred to as "**spiritual**" experience. This relates to our sense of something that goes beyond our own image of ourselves, and involves our vision of the larger system surrounding specific roles, values, beliefs, thoughts, actions or sensations. It relates to who and what else is in the larger system, and can be associated with the questions "For whom?" and "For what?" This level relates to what could be considered the vision and 'spirit' of an individual, group or organization.

As an illustration, the speed of a car is a function of change with respect to its environment—i.e., in the distance it travels in relationship to time. Pushing the gas peddle or brake of a car with one's foot is a behavior which alters its speed. The capability of maintaining the speed limit is a function of integrating a mental map with one's perceptions in order to regulate the way in which one uses one's foot. Respecting the speed limit is a result of valuing laws and believing that there are consequences if they are not kept. If one does not value the speed limit, one will not maintain it, even if one is capable. Being a good driver is a function of aligning all of these levels.

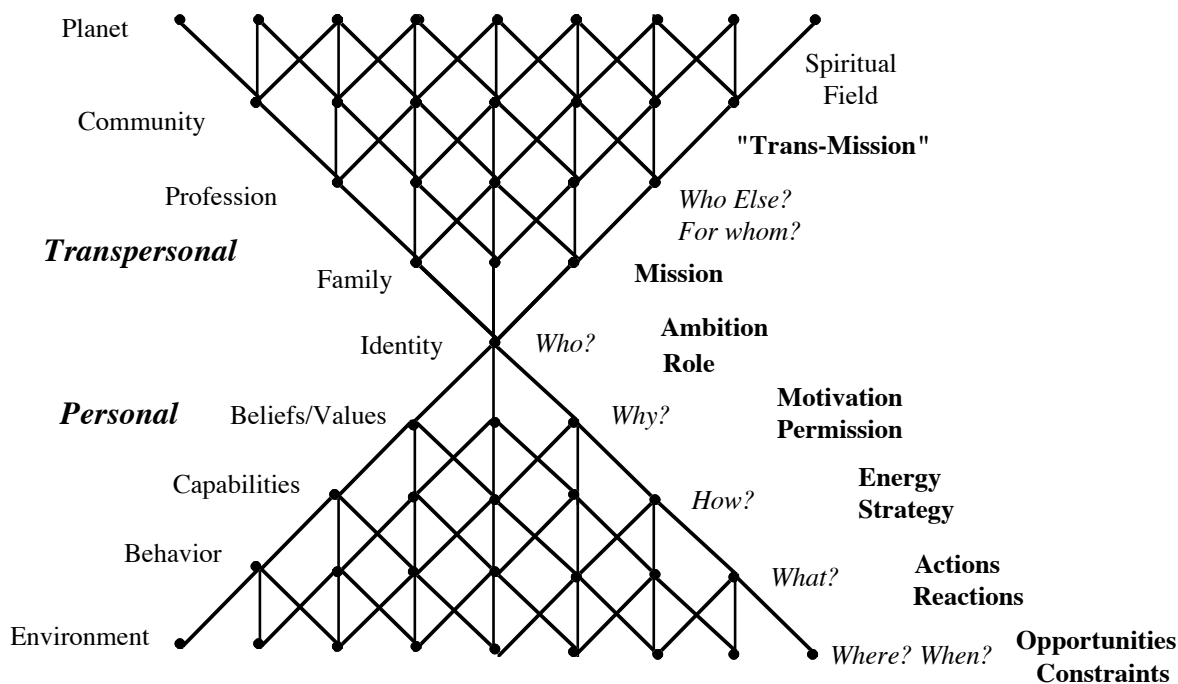
As another example, the keys of a piano and notes on a page of sheet music are in the environment. Pushing down a piano key with one's finger is a behavior. Playing music (sight reading the notes and coordinating one's fingers to produce sounds in the right order) is a capability. Appreciating music is a function of beliefs and values. Being a musician is a combination of all of these processes.

In summary, the environment level involves the specific external conditions in which our behavior takes place. Behaviors without any inner map, plan or strategy to guide them, however, are like knee jerk reactions, habits or rituals. At the level of capability we are able to select, alter and adapt a class of behaviors to a wider set of external situations. At the level of beliefs and values we may encourage, inhibit or generalize a particular strategy, plan or way of thinking. Identity, of course, consolidates whole systems of beliefs and values into a sense of self. While each level becomes more abstracted from the specifics of behavior and sensory experience, each one actually has more and more widespread effect on our behavior and experience.

- \* *Environmental factors* determine the external opportunities or constraints a person has to react to. Answer to the questions **where?** and **when?**
- \* *Behavior* is made up of the specific actions or reactions taken within the environment. Answer to the question **what?**
- \* *Capabilities* guide and give direction to behavioral actions through a mental map, plan or strategy. Answer to the question **how?**
- \* *Beliefs* and *values* provide the reinforcement (motivation and permission) that supports or denies capabilities. Answer to the question **why?**
- \* *Identity* factors determine overall purpose (mission) and shape beliefs and values through our sense of self. Answer to the question **who?**
- \* *Spiritual* issues relate to the fact that we are a part of a larger system that reaches beyond ourselves as individuals to our family, community and global systems. Answer to the question **who else?**

As a metaphor, our identity is like the trunk of a tree – it is the core of our being. The trunk of a tree unfolds organically from a seed by growing a support network of unseen roots that reach deeply into the ground to provide strength and nourishment. It has another network of "roots" that reach into the light and air to provide nourishment of a different kind. The roots and branches of a

tree both shape and are shaped by the ecology in which they exist. Similarly our identities are supported by internal, invisible “roots” in the form of neural networks which process our perception of our personal values, beliefs and capabilities as well as our physical being and environment. Externally, identity is expressed through our participation in the larger systems in which we participate: our family, professional relationships, community and the global system of which we are a member. Phenomena such as “healing,” “joy,” “compassion,” “commitment” and “love” are “fruits” of the spirit as manifested through our identity and are expressed and strengthened through development, enrichment and growth of these two systems of “roots” – the unseen system of our neurology which grows in the soil of our bodies, and the leaves and branches of the larger family, community and global networks of which we are a part.



According to NLP the combinations of these various dimensions of our subjective experience are embodied in the form of neurological circuits which may be activated and mobilized through language patterns, cognitive strategies and accessing cues.

For instance, there are different verbal cues associated with different levels of experience:

- Identity is associated with language like: “I am a ...” or “He is a ...” or “You are a ...”
- Belief level language is often in the form of statements of judgments, rules and cause effect, e.g. “if ... then ...” “one should ...” “we have to ...”
- Capability level language includes words such as “know”, “how”, “am able”, “think”, etc.
- Behavioral levels language refers to specific behaviors and observable actions, e.g. ‘do’, ‘act’, walk, say, etc.
- Language at the environmental level refers to specific observable features or details in one’s external context e.g. white paper, high walls, large room, etc.

The following statements indicate the different levels of response to a student who has done poorly on a spelling test.

- Identity – “You are a stupid/learning disabled person.”
- Belief – “If you cannot spell well you cannot do well in school.”
- Capability – “You are not very good at spelling.”
- Specific Behavior – “You did poorly on this particular test.”
- Environment – “The noise in the room makes it difficult to take tests.”

## Levels of Support for Learning and Change

There are various types of support and “guardianship” that help people to successfully change, grow and evolve at different levels.

### Guiding and Caretaking

Guiding and caretaking have to do with providing support with respect to the environment in which change takes place. Guiding is the process of directing another person along the path leading from some present state to a desired state. It presupposes that the ‘guide’ has been there before, and knows the best way (or at least a way) to reach the desired state. Being a caretaker, or “custodian,” involves providing a safe and supportive environment. It has to do with attending to the external context and making sure that what is needed is available, and that there are no unnecessary distractions or interferences from the outside.

### Coaching

Coaching is the process of helping another person to perform at the peak of his or her abilities. Personal coaching methods derive from a sports training model, promoting conscious awareness of resources and abilities, and the development of conscious competence. They involve drawing out another person’s strengths through careful observation and feedback, and facilitating him or her to function as a part of a team. An effective coach observes a person’s behavior and gives him or her tips and guidance about how to improve in specific contexts and situations. Coaching emphasizes generative change, concentrating on defining and achieving specific goals.

### Teaching

Teaching relates to helping a person develop cognitive skills and capabilities. The goal of teaching is generally to assist people to increase competencies and “thinking skills” relevant to an area of learning. Teaching focuses on the acquisition of general cognitive abilities, rather than on particular performances in specific situations. A teacher helps a person to develop new strategies for thinking and acting. The emphasis of teaching is more on new learning than on refining one’s previous performance.

### Mentoring

Mentoring involves guiding someone to discover his or her own unconscious competencies, and overcome internal resistances and interferences, through believing in the person and validating his or her positive intentions. Mentors help to shape or influence a person’s beliefs and values in a positive way by ‘resonating’ with, releasing, or unveiling that person’s inner wisdom, frequently through the mentor’s own example. This type of mentoring often becomes internalized as part of a person, so that the external presence of the mentor is no longer necessary. People are able to carry “inner mentors” as counselors and guides for their lives in many situations.

### Sponsoring

“Sponsorship” is the process of recognizing and acknowledging (“seeing and blessing”) the essence or identity of another person. Sponsorship involves seeking and safeguarding potential within others, focusing on the development of identity and core values. Effective sponsorship results from the commitment to the promotion of something that is already within a person or group, but which is not being manifested to its fullest capacity. This is accomplished through constantly sending messages such as: *You exist. I see you. You are valuable. You are important/special/unique. You are welcome. You belong here. You have something to contribute.* A good “sponsor” creates a context in which others can act, grow and excel. Sponsors provide the conditions, contacts and resources that allow the group or individual being sponsored to focus on, develop and use their own abilities and skills.

### Awakening

Awakening goes beyond coaching, teaching, mentoring and sponsorship to include the level of vision, mission and spirit. An awakener supports another person by providing contexts and experiences which bring out the best of that person’s understanding of love, self, and spirit. An awakener “awakens” others through his or her own integrity and congruence. An awakener puts other people in touch with their own missions and visions by being in full contact with his or her own vision and mission.