

Perceptual Positions

The NLP notion of *perceptual positions* was originally formulated by John Grinder and Judith DeLozier (1987) as operational extensions of the earlier NLP concepts of ‘referential index’, and Gregory Bateson’s concepts of “double” and “triple” description. Robert Dilts and Todd Epstein (1990, 1991, 1995 & 1996) later made further refinements relating to the distinctions between third position, meta position, observer position, “company” position, and fourth position (or “system” position).

The notion of perceptual positions in NLP has its roots in the concept of *referential indices* (*The Structure of Magic Volume 1*, 1975), which are words that identify the persons or objects to which a particular statement is referring. One of the Meta Model processes, known as “the referential index shift technique” (p. 89) involved a linguistic shift in which one pronoun was exchanged for another. The example given by Bandler and Grinder is of a woman who claims, “My husband doesn’t appreciate me. . . My husband never smiles at me.” To “switch referential index” the person was asked, “Does *your* not smiling at your husband always mean that *you* don’t appreciate him?” The purpose was to help person to shift perspectives so that she could better understand and consider the generalization that she was making.

The development of *Meta Program* patterns in the late 1970’s brought with it a deeper exploration of some of this phenomenon. The earlier notion of the referential index shift in the meta model was contrasted with a *referential index switch* – which was essentially the equivalent of taking what would now be known as “second position.” This process was thought to be a less intense version of what was known as “deep trance identification,” in which a person would become identified with another to the point that he or she would lose ability to discriminate between ‘self’ and ‘other’ any longer.

One of the phenomena explored at this time was the experience of *simultaneous index*, or /multiple index, in which a person could take the perspective of several people simultaneously.

In the mid 1980’s Judith DeLozier and John Grinder established their formulation of First (self), second (other) and third (observer) positions. The usefulness of DeLozier and Grinder’s formulations was that they provided an operational process by which people could enter and experience each position, that could be connected with specific language patterns, physiology and internal representations (the three primary operators of NLP).

A “perceptual position” is essentially a particular perspective, or point of view from which one is perceiving a situation or relationship. NLP New Coding defined three basic positions one can take in perceiving a particular experience. *First position* involves experiencing something through our own eyes, associated in a ‘first person’ point of view. *Second position* involves experiencing something as if we were in ‘another person’s shoes’. *Third position* involves standing back and perceiving the relationship between ourselves and others from an ‘observer’ perspective. The notion of *fourth position* was added afterwards as a term to describe the sense of the whole system or ‘relational field’ (sense of a collective “we”) derived from a synthesis of the other three positions.

The basis for the various perceptual positions comes from the fact that relational experiences always involve more than one individual in the communication loop. The ability to understand the communication loop, and the ebb and flow of events that occur within the loop, is a powerful tool enabling people to both improve communication and produce ecological outcomes. Even when the participants within the communication loop do not agree, their relationship is enhanced and the possibility of future cooperation is created when they are able to shift perceptual positions in relationship to the interaction. This shifting of perceptual positions is referred to as “triple description” because there are, minimally, three different perceptual positions occurring within a communication loop at any time: those of me/myself (first position), the other individual (second position), and the witnessing of the interaction between these two (third position).

Like all other NLP distinctions, perceptual positions are characterized by specific physical, cognitive and linguistic patterns. These patterns are summarized in the following descriptions:

First position is you, standing in your own physical space, in your own habitual body posture. When fully associated in first position, you will use words like “me”, “I”, and “myself” when referring to your own feelings, perceptions and ideas. In first position, you are going through the experience of the communication from your own perspective: seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling everything that is going on around you and inside of you in that experience from an associated perspective. If you are truly in first position, you will not see yourself, but will be yourself, looking out at the world through your own eyes, ears, etc. You will be fully associated in your own

body and map of the world.

Second position is being able to assume another person's perspective within the interaction. (If there is more than one other person in the interaction, there may be multiple 'second positions'). This is a temporary, information gathering position in which you shift to another person's perceptual position, taking on his or her physical posture and world view, as though you were that person. You see, hear, feel, taste, and smell what the communication loop is like from that person's point of view; i.e., "walk a mile in his or her shoes," "sit on the other side of the desk," etc. In second position, you will be experiencing the world through another person's eyes, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, etc. In this position, you will be dissociated from yourself and associated into another person. You will address your 'first position' self as "you" (as opposed to "I" or "me"), using "second person" language. Temporarily assuming another person's position is a wonderful way of evaluating how effective you are on your side of the communication loop. (After you have stepped into another person's perspective, it is important to make sure you return to yourself fully, cleanly, and with the information which will aid you in your communication.)

Third position, or 'observer' position, puts you temporarily outside of the communication loop in order to gather information, as though you were a witness to, and not a participant in, the interaction. Your posture will be symmetrical and relaxed. In this position, you will see, hear, feel, taste, and smell what the communication loop is like from the position of an interested but neutral observer. You will use "third person" language, such as "she" and "he," when referring to the persons you are observing (including the one that looks, sounds and acts like you). You will be disassociated from the interaction, and in a type of "meta" position. This position gives you valuable information about the balance of behaviors in the loop. The information gathered from this perspective can be taken back to your own first position and use it, along with the information gathered in second position, to assist in enhancing the quality of your state, interaction and relationship within the communication loop.

Fourth position involves a synthesis of the other three perspectives, creating the sense of "being the whole system." It involves an identification with the system or relationship itself, producing the experience of being part of a collective, characterized by language such as "we" (first person plural). Fourth position is essential for producing a "group mind" or "team spirit."

In summary, perceptual positions refer to the fundamental points of view you can take concerning a relationship between yourself and another person:

1st Position: Associated in your own point of view, beliefs and assumptions, seeing the external world through your own eyes. Use first person language when talking about yourself – "I am seeing," "I feel," etc.

2nd Position: Associated in another person's point of view, beliefs and assumptions, seeing the external world through his or her eyes. Use second person language when talking about your self in first position – "You are", "You look," etc.

3rd Position: Associated in a point of view outside of the relationship between yourself and the other person with the beliefs and assumptions from both 1st and 2nd position. Use third person language when talking about your self in first position or the other person (2nd position) – "He is," "She says," "They are," etc. One common variation of 3rd position is *Observer Position*, which involves being associated in a 3rd position perspective, but suspending any beliefs and assumptions related to either 1st and 2nd position, as if one was an uninvolved "witness."

4th Position: Associated in the whole system or 'field'. Experiencing the situation with the best interests of the system. Use of 1st person plural language – "We are," "Us," etc.

Practicing Perceptual Positions

One way to develop a better sense for perceptual positions is through exploring "characterological adjectives." For example, think of someone you have a difficult time communicating with; or a situation that is not a creative or productive interaction, and doesn't bring out the best in you. You feel stuck in some way. Now imagine you are in a movie theater. See the person up there on the screen behaving the way they behave, and come up with a word to describe that person's behavior – a characterological adjective, a descriptor. Given all these bits of information of how this person is

behaving, this is the way you would describe them. For instance, you might describe the other person as “Self-absorbed” or “Aggressive.”

Now take a big, deep breath and see yourself up there on the movie screen in the loop with this person. Now you are in third position, watching and listening as a neutral observer. Observe the way you behave. What are the words you would use to describe your behavior? For example, when the other person is “self-absorbed,” you may become “withdrawn.” Or, if the other person is “aggressive,” you may become “defensive.”

You begin to see your part in the dance. They wouldn’t have any fun doing it by themselves and neither would you. This is what systems are about: getting a big enough piece of the interaction so that you can step back and say, “Oh, now I understand how I’m dancing with this person,” and realize what choices you have of changing the dance. From this position you can ask, “When I step back into the relationship with this new perspective, how can that information make a difference to the quality of that interaction?” If one part of the system begins to move, the whole system is going to move.

Another way of experiencing multiple perceptual positions, or “triple description,” that can be really fun and interesting, is in terms of creativity. Think of a piece of art that has really moved you in your life. It isn’t just something you look at and say, “Oh, that’s cool.” Rather it is a piece of art that you feel deep inside your soul. This is being in the position of appreciating that art from the perceptual position of the viewer. You can also do this with respect to hearing a piece of music, or watching a dance.

Now take the position of the artist who created it. Going to second position is a way in which we can start to stimulate that neurology within ourselves. When you occupy that perceptual position, begin to use the implicit muscle movements of the painter, the sculptor, or the composer in order to access similar kinds of neurology in yourself. It is there, it is just that you haven’t activated it in yourself in a long time. Then you can stand back and ask, “What are the differences between being a perceiver of this art and being the creator?” Do you have different beliefs when you are in the two positions? Do you have different beliefs about your ability to be creative when you are in the artist position versus the viewer position?

A third perceptual position would be to become the art itself. Most people report that, when they become the art work, they have a deep sense of just ‘being’.

Perceptual positions trigger off a whole set of other possibilities. The idea of triple description is that out of this dance of multiple perspectives, wisdom may begin to unfold. To really consider the movement from my personal map to an understanding of your personal map, and then to an objective position of the relationship, gives us a basis of wisdom. The ability to move to each of these positions cleanly and quickly can be a powerful tool.

Here are some exercises that will help you to practice the ability to move to each of the positions described above cleanly and quickly.

Drill 1: Intention to Move – Learning Second Position

In pairs, **A** and **B**

1. **A** and **B** are seated across from one another. **A** begins by showing **B** a decision to move toward the left. **A** moves toward the left several times until **B** thinks that he or she ‘knows’ when **A** is going to move. **A** moves less and less until **B** ‘knows’ earlier and earlier **A**’s intention to move.
2. **A** moves toward the right several times until **B** thinks that he or she ‘knows’ when **A** is going to move. **A** moves less and less until **B** ‘knows’ earlier and earlier **A**’s intention to move.
3. **A** now chooses a direction in which to move: left or right and **B** guesses in which direction **A** has chosen to move. After **B** has been able to guess correctly with a 60% or more accuracy, move to feedback and exchange roles. If **B** is unable to guess correctly, repeat steps 1 and 2 above until **B**’s accuracy increases.
4. After both **A** and **B** have exchanged roles, repeat the step 3 while **B** has his or her eyes closed.
5. Discuss how do you knew the differences in the direction your partner was going to move.

Drill 2: Where Do You End and I Begin?

In this drill, you are going to learn how to ‘walk in someone else’s shoes’. In order to make a true commitment to know another person through a second position shift, you have to be able to know who ‘me’ is and to know you are capable of returning to this ‘me’ at will.

In pairs, person A and person B. Person A takes on person B’s shoes. Choose someone who you sense is very different than yourself for this exercise so you will have a real basis for comparison when you are done.

1. Person A acting as him or herself, finds a particular ‘object of attention’ in the room; for instance a book, a tree outside the window, etc. Person A notices where his or her attention is drawn (In other words, notice what you notice). Person B, as him or herself, studies that same object and notices what he or she notices about this object. Person A and person B should not exchange information about their awarenesses. Person A then begins by anchoring ‘me’ to a location in the room. “I am (here on this chair) and I will be right back.”
2. Person B goes for a walk for 15 to 20 minutes. Person A follows person B and mirrors and matches person B as closely as possible; for instance: gait, breathing pattern, body position. Person A follows person B in this fashion, allowing his or her attention to be taken wherever person B’s attention is drawn, mimicking all of person B’s gestures, etc.
3. Person B ends his or her walk by returning to the original object of attention in the room.
4. Person A anchors the state of ‘being B’ (the state of second position) in some way. Person A then looks at the original object of attention. Person A notices where his or her attention is drawn now. What are the differences Note these to discuss later.
5. After person A has gathered information in the state of ‘being B’, person A then returns to his or her spatial anchor initially set for ‘me’. Person A allows him or herself to fully return to ‘me’. Person A tests his or her second position anchor (‘being B’) as a check before exchanging roles with person B now playing A’s role. Person A makes sure he or she is fully ‘me’ before exchanging roles.
6. Exchange feedback and switch roles.

Drill 3: Extension of Self – Three Points of Attention

In pairs, A and B, for fifteen minutes.

1. A and B should sit facing one another with hands on thighs. A and B should both take an inventory of his or her internal state(s). Just allow yourself to be aware of ‘you’.
2. Next, A place his or her attention on B’s eyes, as B places his or her attention on A’s eyes. As each of you becomes more comfortable, maintain your attention on each other’s eyes.
3. Next, allow your attention to also take both your own and your partner’s hands. As each of you becomes more comfortable, maintain your attention on each other’s eyes, your own hands and your partner’s hands.
4. Continue the process, noticing what you notice, until ‘time’ is called.
5. Take a moment to inventory your internal state before you return to ‘you’.
6. Exchange feedback regarding this experience.