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Why Change Lasts (And Why It Doesn't): The Enduring Importance of the NeuroLogical Levels



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One of the key questions that has fascinated me throughout my career is: *Why do some changes last while others disappear almost as quickly as they are made?*

Many people experience frustration about making a sincere commitment to change, only to find themselves gradually slipping back into familiar patterns. They attend a seminar, read an inspiring book, learn a new technique or make a New Year's resolution. For a while their behaviour shifts, yet soon they discover that they are struggling again and falling back into old habits.

Through my decades of work with people as a coach, consultant and educator, I have come to realise that this is not because people lack motivation, intelligence or willpower. More often, it is because they are attempting to create change at one level while the forces maintaining the behaviour exist at another. This insight is the basis for what is known as the *NeuroLogical Levels* model.

This model did not emerge from abstract theory. It grew out of years of working with people and modelling exceptional therapists, teachers, leaders and innovators. Whether I was studying Milton Erickson, Gregory Bateson or highly effective therapists, coaches and consultants, I noticed that lasting transformation rarely occurred by focusing only on *what* people were doing. It occurred because something deeper had shifted.

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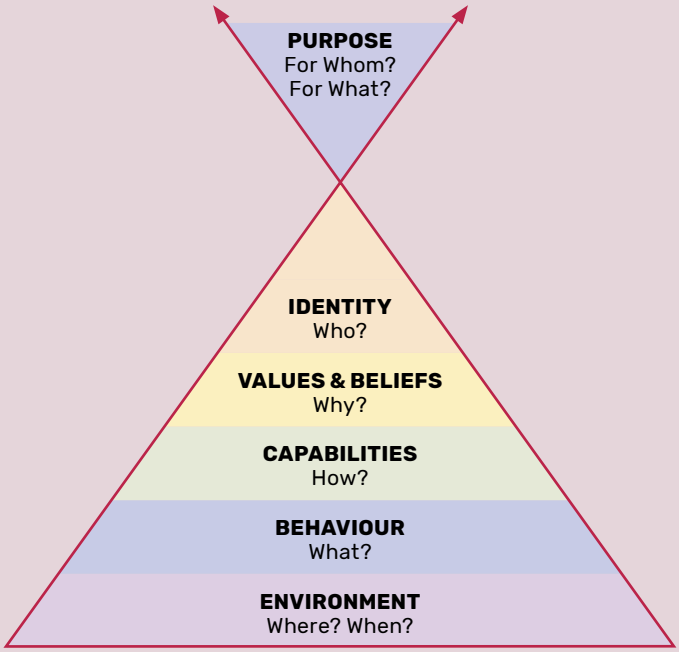
According to the NeuroLogical Levels model, human experience is organised as a hierarchy of six interacting levels. Our *environment* influences the opportunities and constraints around us. Our *behaviours* determine what we actually do. Our *capabilities* provide the skills and strategies that make those behaviours possible. Our *beliefs and values* determine what we consider important and what we believe is possible. Our *identity* shapes our sense of who we are. Beyond all of these lies our *purpose* – our relationship to something larger than ourselves.

Each of these levels influences the others, but they do not all influence one another equally. Generally speaking, the higher levels organise and give meaning to the lower ones. Purpose shapes identity. Identity influences our hierarchy of values and beliefs. Those values and beliefs determine which capabilities we develop and apply. Capabilities produce behaviour. Behaviours impact the environments in which we live.



Behaviours are often *beliefs* in action.



Understanding this principle alters the way to think about change itself.

We don't change behaviours by trying to change behaviours

Research shows that behaviour modification alone cannot permanently change existing behaviours. In diet, smoking cessation and exercise maintenance alone, there is a 97% failure rate for attempts to simply alter behaviours. This is because behaviours are often *beliefs* in action.

Suppose someone wants to become a better public speaker. One approach is to teach speaking techniques. Those techniques may be useful, but if the individual has the belief, "I'm not someone people listen to," the new skills will often remain underutilized. The behaviour has changed temporarily, but the person's limiting belief has remained in place.

Similarly, organisations frequently invest enormous resources in changing procedures while overlooking the beliefs and values that define the culture. The result is predictable. New systems are introduced, enthusiasm rises briefly, and then the organisation eventually returns to its previous way of operating. The surface structures changed; the deeper culture did not.

Thus, we can conclude that lasting change occurs when we work at the level where the problem or outcome is generated rather than merely where it appears.

Finding the differences that make a difference

The NeuroLogical Levels model provides a way of exploring the deeper structure of change. Instead of asking, "How do I start or stop something?" we begin by asking, "At what level is the experience to be changed or initiated being generated?"

Sometimes new knowledge or skill may be sufficient. In that case, change involves developing new capabilities: learning to think differently, communicate differently, or manage emotions more effectively. Often, however, the real leverage lies deeper. We discover that our behaviour is an expression of beliefs we have never questioned or a sense of identity we have not consciously chosen.

In a recent interview, 82-year-old Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards described how he quit smoking cigarettes in his late 70s after decades of being a smoker because he realized it was "childish". Richards explained, "Suddenly, I felt like after all these years of smoking – because, you know, a *man* smokes – I was sat around with this silly thing in my mouth thinking: how childish."

Richards realised that he started smoking because as a child he believed it was an expression of being a "man". That awareness made him realise that it is actually "childish" to smoke in order be a "man". A man does not need to smoke in order to be a man.

Richards also claimed that the change came about because he "listened to" his body "before it started screaming." This illustrates another important principle. Rather than trying to impose a change of behaviour, Richards aligned his behaviour with what was truly best for his body.

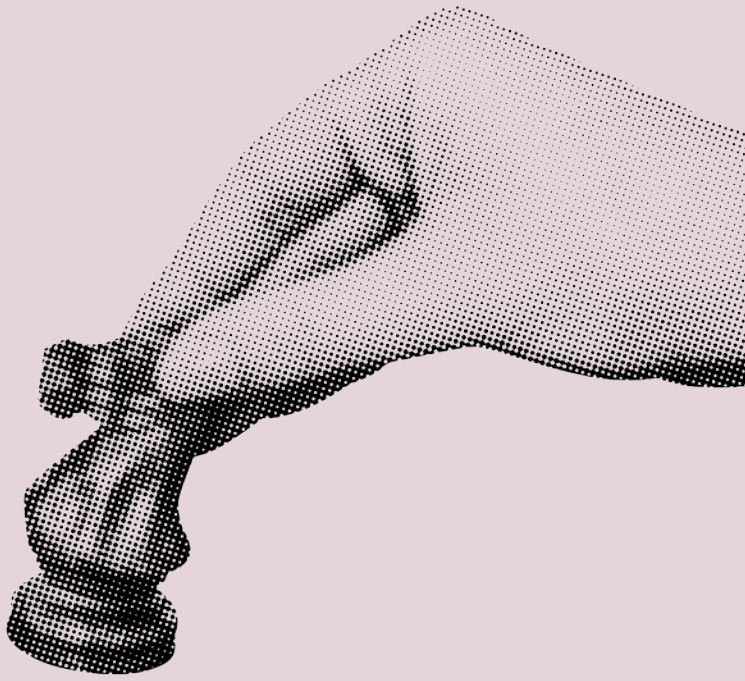
A change that aligns purpose, identity, values, capabilities and behaviour creates a sense of coherence.

The power of alignment

One of the reasons the NeuroLogical Levels model has proven useful is that it reminds us that human beings are whole systems. We often behave as though changing one isolated part of ourselves should be enough. Yet our beliefs influence our physiology. Our identity influences our motivation. Our purpose influences our resilience. Every level continually interacts with every other level.

A change that creates conflict between identity and behaviour is difficult to sustain. A change that aligns purpose, identity, values, capabilities and behaviour creates a sense of coherence. What once required discipline begins to feel natural because the different parts of ourselves are working together rather than against one another.

Perhaps this is the deepest contribution of the model. It shifts our understanding of change away from force and toward *alignment*. People often assume that successful individuals possess extraordinary determination. Certainly, determination has its place. Yet the remarkable people I have had the privilege of studying did not simply exert more effort than everyone else. Their various levels of experience were aligned around a coherent purpose and identity. Their behaviours expressed who they were rather than compensating for who they believed they were not.





When alignment is present, change becomes less about pushing ourselves forward and more about allowing our authentic identity to express itself. For example:

- Parents who consistently affirm a child's identity rather than simply rewarding behaviour often help create confidence that endures for a lifetime.
- Leaders who communicate a compelling purpose rather than merely assigning tasks inspire commitment instead of compliance.
- Teachers who cultivate curiosity instead of simply transmitting information develop learners rather than memorizers.

In every case, the deeper level creates the conditions from which sustainable behaviour naturally emerges.

The NeuroLogical Levels model continues to be relevant because it reminds us that human beings are more than collections of behaviours or skills. We are living systems organised by a sense of identity and purpose. When we recognise the level at which meaningful change must occur, we stop fighting symptoms and begin transforming the deeper structures that generate them.

The NeuroLinguistics of transforming deeper structures

According to NLP, all human change is ultimately a result of some type of 'neurolinguistic programming'. One of my favourite quotes is a saying attributed to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu which goes:

- *Watch your **thoughts** because they become words.*
- *Watch your **words** because they become actions.*
- *Watch your **actions** because they become habits.*
- *Watch your **habits** because they become your character.*
- *Watch your **character** because it becomes your **destiny**.*

The implication of this is that if we want to influence our destiny it begins with our thoughts (neuro) and our words (linguistic), which would seem to be lower levels of change and the opposite of what I have written above. This apparent paradox is resolved when we remember that 1) energy follows attention; 2) thoughts and words direct attention; 3) different types of thoughts and words direct attention to different levels of change; and 4) by directing our attention to the appropriate level of change, thoughts and words can align our actions and habits with our core values, our character with our authentic identity and our destiny with our purpose.

When beliefs shift through our thoughts and words, entire experiential worlds shift with them.

This is why language is a key factor in the process of change. Rather than merely describe reality, language directs our attention and 'frames' our experience. Beliefs, for example, are linguistic structures that shape perception, attention and expectation. When beliefs shift through our thoughts and words, entire experiential worlds shift with them.

As an example, I know a woman who for years told herself she needed to "lose weight". While the words requested a different behaviour, they did not bring attention to what was generating the old behaviours, nor how to generate new ones. She struggled for years with no sustainable results, trying many diets but always putting the weight back on.

After learning the NeuroLogical Levels model, she changed her focus from losing weight to becoming a healthy person who was sound in mind, body and spirit. She shifted what she said to herself from "I need to lose weight" to "I am a healthy person who seeks to find the best nutrition and exercise practice to get to the best weight for my body." This statement aligned her identity, values and capabilities with what she wanted to achieve instead of to "lose". She began studying nutrition, discovered she was eating foods that were unhealthy for her and changed the way she was eating entirely. She also started an ongoing exercise routine. As a result of her revised food and activity plan, which fit her healthy identity, she naturally slimmed down and has remained that way for many years.

The use of language to reframe our goals, intentions and beliefs is what I call **Sleight of Mouth**, which is about the potential magic of language.

And this is what I will be exploring in my next article. ■