

# TOOLS OF THE TRADE



In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she focuses on the NLP technique of **Perceptual Positions**



**P**erceptual Positions is a Neuro Linguistic Programming technique devised by founder **John Grinder with Judith Delozier**. Its origins are rooted in the theories of the various psychologists that **Grinder and co-founder Richard Bandler modelled while developing NLP, including Milton Erickson, Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir**. (The process that **Grinder and Bandler termed 'modelling'** means **observing and copying someone's thoughts, gestures, words and actions in order to understand and learn from them**.)

The benefit of Perceptual Positions comes primarily from looking at situations from different perspectives and its simplest analogy is 'walking a mile in someone else's shoes'.

The process can take two forms:

### Perceptual Positions with another person

The subject explores being firstly herself, then another person (for example, someone she is having a difficult relationship with) and thirdly a neutral observer, watching herself and the other person. We will refer to these positions as A, B and C respectively. The subject physically moves to a different place in the room each time and experiences each state as fully as possible, prompted by the facilitator who will ask questions like:

- What do you see now regarding B?
- What do you feel about B?
- What do you hear from, and say to, B?
- What do you want from B?
- What would be your ideal relationship with B?
- Imagine you have your ideal relationship with B: how does that look/sound/feel?
- What has changed?

These questions are explored in depth and can deliver new awareness to the subject straight away.

Now the subject moves into a second position, choosing another place in the room, imagining she is the other person she has nominated. The facilitator encourages her to ground herself fully in that experience – to imagine what it feels like physically to be the other person as well as

emotionally – asking similar questions to the ones above. In this position, if she addressed herself, ie the person sitting in position A, she would say 'you' rather than 'I'. So the questions would take the form of:

- What do you see now regarding A?
- What do you feel about A?

Thirdly, the subject chooses another site in the room and from there is asked similar questions about the other two people: herself and her nominated person. From this position, she would refer to the other two as 'she' or 'he', in the third person, and the questions would be posed as:

- What do you see now regarding A and B?
- What do you notice about how A is feeling?
- What do you notice about how B is feeling?
- What is A saying to herself?
- What is B saying to himself?
- What does A want?
- What does B want?

There could be a fourth position, perhaps looking at the situation from the point of view of the organisation, the world, or the extended family as appropriate.

Between each position, the facilitator ensures that the subject does what in NLP is termed 'breaking state'. This means simply getting right out of one position before assuming the next. Techniques for doing this are to shake oneself, recite one's phone number backwards, have a drink, or do anything else that engages the mind and body.

The first three questions above are based on the NLP technique known as VAK – Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic (feelings). There are five VAK types altogether, the other two being Gustatory (taste) and Olfactory (smell). They are less frequently used but questions can be asked from these perspectives where appropriate.

Asking questions from multiple angles increases the capacity for different perspectives within each of the three positions and helps the subject ground herself in the metaphor of each.

### Perceptual Positions with oneself

In this form, the second position does not have to be another person whom

a subject knows. For example, he can choose an object in the room that represents what he wants to explore, or think of a metaphor, or choose a character from history or myth, an idea, a movie, a principle; he could choose an animal, bird or plant. In the third position, he would do the same as before, ie regard the first two positions, and the relationship between them, from a neutral standpoint.

The power of this exercise is that it frees the subject's mind to go into a metaphor of his own choosing, which tends to bring the unconscious mind, or, to put it another way, his intuitive powers, strongly into play when attempting to solve a problem or move forward in an area of his life or work.

The questioning pattern is the same as for the first version and this exercise is intended to provide



insight to the subject about himself, rather than about his relationship with a particular person.

The Perceptual Positions process relates to the 'R' in the GROW coaching model (Goal, Reality, Options, Will: a framework devised some 30 years ago as the most effective way of achieving insight, action and goals). Exploring their current reality is highly effective in bringing clarity and awareness to coachees (see diagram 3 right).

It is often more effective to approach an issue obliquely rather than with direct questions about what is happening. This was fundamental to the discoveries outlined in Tim Gallwey's *Inner Game* techniques upon which performance coaching is founded. Gallwey was the Harvard tennis

|         |                        |                  |
|---------|------------------------|------------------|
| Goal    | What do you want?      | Solution focus   |
| Reality | What is happening now? | Clarity          |
| Options | What could you do?     | Explore          |
| Will    | What will you do?      | Commit to action |

Diagram 3

coach in the 1970s (and a keen pursuer of psychology and spirituality) when he realised that his pupils taught themselves better tennis if he left the court than when he was there to tell them how to hold their racquets.

He began to develop a series of questions that would promote this 'self-directed learning' and discovered that the most efficient questions were the ones that did not focus the student's mind directly on hitting the ball; for example, he would ask: "How many times does the ball spin as it goes over the net?" or: "How many centimetres above the net is the ball at its highest?"

He found that this focused the mind more clearly and resulted in a higher score rate. There is a parallel here with asking people what they are seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling and tasting, rather than directly about a conflict they want to resolve or a goal they want to achieve.

Another method that has progressed in this area is Clean Space, devised by David Grove out of his own Clean Language methods. The beauty of Clean Space (now incorporated into Grove's Emergent Knowledge) is that it is entirely client-led, so the facilitator does not ask the subject to move to a position that represents anything in particular; the subject is simply asked to move to a position that knows something about the current position. In this way, the subject will make his own map in a room, or even go outside it, or change height by standing on furniture or sticking Post-its on the ceiling.

This freedom greatly increases the power of the metaphor to engage the resources in the unconscious mind.

There are also some parallels here with the relatively new

technique of Mindfulness, which is about being aware of the present in the smallest detail; noticing what is happening in the mind and the emotions without judging or trying to change what is happening there.

Coaches sometimes spend time agonising over which question to ask next; the key thing to remember in this, and many other coaching practices, is that it does not matter too much which question you ask; the important part is to identify the most useful place to be in the process.

The purpose of coaching questions is to create new awareness and, by asking Reality questions, or VAK questions, or Clean questions of the different places in Perceptual Positions, the coach is enabling the coachee to achieve this by viewing a situation from different angles. ■

#### Further reading

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