

Seven "Keys" to Personal Change

Ten Years of NLP

Bobby G. Bodenhamer, D.Min.

For the past ten years I have poured my life into learning NLP and applying it in the therapeutic, teaching and writing world. Over the past ten years I have had the honor of working with approximately 600 therapy clients involving approximately 3000 hours of therapy. I have also had the unique privilege of teaching NLP at Gaston College for the past seven and one-half years. In addition I have taught seven Practitioner Certification Courses and four Master Practitioner Courses. The numbers of one-session seminars I have led are too numerous to count.

Needless to say, the past ten years have been quite eventful. What a joy and privilege life has afforded me with all the above experiences. Well, so what? That is a question I have been asking myself. So what? If I were to take all the above and summarize it down to its essence (according to Bob of course), how would I summarize what I have learned into one article?

Now, since the major thrust of the work I do involves assisting therapy clients and class participants toward positive change, I will direct the following remarks to what I believe is the essence of personal change from the structural viewpoint of NLP and Meta-States as developed by L. Michael Hall, Ph.D. We call the merged fields of NLP and Meta States, Neuro-Semantics. What were the key elements in the lives of those countless hundreds whom it has been my privilege to work with that brought about positive changes in their lives?

Seven Key Structural Elements Involved in Personal Change:

In this article I will provide the groundwork by defining some basic beliefs we have in Neuro-Semantics about just "how" your brain works. Note the word "how." That word is important. In Neuro-Semantics we place prime importance on the mental processes that determine behavior. What do you do inside your head in order to have a problem and what do you have to do inside your head in order to "fix" your problem? What kind of pictures, feelings, sounds and word meanings do you need inside your head in order to do the problem? What kind of pictures, feelings, sounds and word meanings do you need to activate in your head in order to not to have the problem? By the way, we believe that brains aren't broken; they just run sick thought patterns really well. Indeed, the brain doesn't care whether or not you think yourself sick or whether you think yourself well. Your brain just does what you tell it to do. This is what this article is about. Those who change their thinking understand and accept these beliefs:

- 1. The brain primarily processes information from the outside world through the five senses.** You experience your world through what you

see, hear, feel, smell and taste. Now, importantly to Neuro-Semantics, we believe that when you re-present your world on the screen of your consciousness, you utilize the same programs involved in the event of recall. When you recall something you have seen before, you will recall it with a picture (**V**isual). When you recall something you have heard before, you will recall it with remembered sounds (**A**uditory). The same is true for feelings (**K**inesthetic), smells (**O**lfactory) and tastes (**G**ustatory). We call these the Representational Systems or VAK for short.

Your brain not only does this with remembered experiences, it does the same with constructed experiences. I can ask you to imagine seeing yourself where you want to be one year from now. Your brain knows how to construct a picture of the desired you one year from now.

Now, these experiences we re-present on the screen of our minds (images) often contain more than just one system. We can recall a picture and also have sounds with it as well as feelings. Furthermore, these images have finer qualities. Usually images that we hold as very important to us will be very close to our eyes visually. They will often be very bright and colorful to let us know this image is important.

2. **The brain gives meaning to these images with words.** So, I have pictures, feelings, sounds, smells and tastes in my mind, so what? Your brain doesn't stop there, as a thinking class of life; the human brain has the marvelous ability of giving meaning to these images with words. These words are "about" the images composed of pictures, sounds, feelings, smells and/or taste.
3. **The brain doesn't stop at just the first level of word meaning you gave to the image. Your brain keeps having thoughts (primarily with words) about thoughts.** The brain does not stop at one thought, it continues having thoughts about thoughts and there is where the "magic" lies. In Neuro-Semantics we realize that as important as Representation is, there is yet something more powerful and more magical—Reference. That's how the brain works. It starts with a referent experience, the event. Something happens. Then we re-present it on the screen of our mind with the Representational System (VAKOG). But by reflexive awareness, we develop a thought and a feeling ABOUT it, now we have our first frame of reference.
4. **Repeating thoughts will create unconscious frames-of-mind that will direct our consciousness to the five to nine items we can focus on. These frames of mind operate inside our head totally outside of consciousness.** Our brains do not stop at just one thought. It will keep on thinking thoughts about thoughts. These thoughts about thoughts when habituated (drop into the unconscious) become our Frames of Mind—our perceptual filters through which we view our world. These frames become like eyeglasses through which we view and experience our world. And that doesn't end it. We develop frames-within-frames, each frame embedded in another frame.

These higher frames determine our neuro-semantic states that governs the way we think, feel, our health, skills, everything. All the while we are having thoughts about thoughts, these thoughts are interaction with our physiology through our central nervous system and out of that interaction comes what we call "states" of being. And, out of our "states" of being comes our behavior. Thus, "as a man thinketh, so is he" (Proverbs 23: 7).

These "repeated" unconscious frames of mind become our blessing or our curse. In problem framing, we can have frames of mind that say, "I am worthless." "I can't ever do anything right." "In order for me to have personal worth, I have to do for other people; I am not an OK person in myself." Etc. Such frames inevitably come from our earlier years and for that reason become quite unconscious and difficult to change on our own. However, they are changeable and they do change for they are just thoughts no matter how much they operate outside of consciousness. In "fixing" ourselves, metaphorically we delete those old frames of mind and install new frames of mind that serve us. This is what Neuro-Semantics is all about.

The individuals who make personal changes accept that they have constructed these frames themselves with their internal representations and with the levels, however many, of the meanings that they have given these internal representations. In therapy, I constantly discover old memories of the person hearing dad or mom tell them that they are worthless or that dad or mom was absent in their lives and from that they developed a word meaning frame that "I must be worthless because dad and/or mom was not here for me." Etc. Important to personal change is to accept the reality that these frames are constructed and therefore can be de-constructed.

5. **People that change believe and are aware that "The Map Is Not The Territory" or "The Menu Is Not The Meal" and they believe it is their map and their map alone that they operate out of.** This is another way of saying that our perception is not reality. It is only our perception of it. However, because it is our perception (our Internal Representation and conceptual meanings) it is what we operate from. It doesn't matter how accurately it maps (perceive) our present reality. We will operate from our perceptions as governed by our higher-level frames of mind. This means:

*a. Those who change recognize the value of creating a map (perception) that accurately, as far as **symbolically possible**, maps the present moment.* We are a "symbolic class of life." We do that with the VAKOG and Word meanings acting as "symbols" from our experience of our world through our five senses. But, these are just symbols about our world. They are not the world. We get into trouble when we confuse the two and label our "symbols" as being "real" in the sense that they accurately map out our world. When we consciously or unconsciously operate from frames of mind that we learned in childhood, we certainly are not operating from a map that even comes close to accurately mapping out the adult world we now live in. This is the root of most problems if not all of them.

- b. *Those who change their thinking by recognizing that their map is not the territory will eliminate the problem of **cause-effect** in their lives.* What do I mean? I mean that the individual who understands and accepts that our internal map/perception is not and cannot be the territory (the external world) will stop the foolishness of believing other people control his or her mind without his or her permission. No one can make you believe or feel anything you choose not to believe or feel.

Just because we may have grown up in a dysfunctional family does not mean that we are or have to remain a dysfunctional person even if we learned some poor ways to think and behave. We can "own" our own brain, take control of it and learn new ways of thinking. Brains are very flexible. As an example, think of something unpleasant. Now think of something pleasant. Note how rapidly you can change your thinking. Old unwanted patterns of thinking are just habituated thought patterns that "seem real" because they have become unconscious and "feel" real. But, guess what? They can change.

Now, many have an "invested" interest in getting you to believe that these thought patterns are "real" and that you can do nothing about them. DON'T BUY THAT LIMITING FRAME. You can change these thought patterns. You can "renew your mind." You can think on things that are pure, just, right, lovely, etc. Indeed, you can think on anything you choose to think on. Just give yourself permission.

- c. *They recognize that the words and images inside our heads are not "real" in the sense that they are set in concrete - they are changeable.* They are just "symbols" of the external world. We have instruments that will detect the nerve cells and the neuro-transmitters that allow one nerve cell to communicate with another nerve cell. However, can neuro-scientist go inside the brain and find/measure a picture, a sound, a feeling or a word? No, they are "abstractions" of the mind hence our conceptual states that are generated at the moment of thought and then they disappear until we think the thought again. Because the images and word meanings inside our head are not "real" in the sense that they are set in concrete, they only have the reality we give them.

Consider this, think of a mildly unpleasant memory and note what pops into your mind and how you feel. Now, think of a pleasant memory and notice what pops into your mind and how you feel. Which type thinking best serves you? Why would you want to "create" an image and a thought inside your head that makes you feel bad? Have you ever thought about just not doing that anymore? After all, these thoughts aren't real unless you generate them.

How can we use this knowledge? Simple. Since the thoughts including the decisions inside our heads are just thoughts, we can change them as we will. In other words, if you don't like a decision you have made, say "no" to it. Apply "no" to the unwanted decision. When you do this

you are meta-stating (applying one thought to another. See #7 below.) the unwanted decision with a higher level “no.” What happens when you say “no” to that unwanted decision? Now, create a decision that will serve you and say “yes” to it. Again, you are meta-stating your desired decision with a “yes.”

Have you ever thought of this— the only difference between a thought and a belief is that a belief is a thought to which you have said, “yes.” A belief is a thought that you have affirmed by saying, “I believe this. This thought is for me.” Now, utilize the same processes of the mind in changing original thoughts by thinking other thoughts about them by saying “no” to the decision/thought you don’t want and “yes” to the decision or thought you do want.

How many times do I need to do this? Good question. The brain learns through repetition. Remember how you learned to ride a bicycle or to drive a car? You rehearsed until the knowledge dropped into your unconscious and it became habitual. Do the same thing with saying “no” to what you don’t want and “yes” to what you do want. Every time the decision/thought pops up you don’t want, say “no” to it and then immediately say, “yes” to the one you do want. By doing this you are “breaking” the old unwanted habitual pattern and installing a new direction for your mind to go towards— a direction that will best serve you. After all, they are just thoughts so think thoughts that serve you.

- 6. The awesome power of knowing the difference between associating and dissociating.** Before I explain this difference, consider this simple exercise. Imagine yourself walking up to your refrigerator. You open the refrigerator door. Once inside the refrigerator you open the vegetable drawer. Inside the vegetable drawer you see a lemon. You take out the lemon, close the vegetable drawer and then the refrigerator door. Lemon in hand, you walk over to your kitchen cabinet; take out a cutting board and a knife. You proceed to slice the lemon in half then you take one of the halves and slice the half in half and you have two-quarter slices of lemon. You then pick up one of the quarter slices of lemon and put it in your mouth and squeeze the lemon as you feel the lemon juice pouring into your mouth. Is your mouth watering “as if” you actually had a slice of lemon in your mouth? Most people’s mouth will water. This little exercise illustrates that the brain doesn’t know the difference between what you imagine and what you are actually experiencing in the present.

Similarly, suppose we consciously or unconsciously imagine ourselves as a little boy or little girl back in our dysfunctional family. Suppose we recall hearing and seeing a parent screaming at us. We hear them telling us how stupid they believe we are. How do you think you would feel even though you are now a grown adult and not a child? You would feel bad, wouldn’t you? That is what I mean by associating. Almost universally, I discover clients are having problems in adulthood due to their imagining themselves still children. They continue using their childhood experiences as their present frame of reference.

We call this "associating." You know if you are associating into a memory if when you recall it you do not see yourself in the picture. Let's experiment. Recall a mildly painful memory. Get a picture of it. Now, in the picture note whether or not you see yourself or you just see the other people and environment in that picture. If you do not see yourself, mentally, you have associated back into that memory and you will tend to experience the same negative feelings you had when you experienced it.

Now, because the brain does not know the difference between what you represent by imagination or by current input, when you mentally place yourself back into some painful memory, you will have negative feelings very similar to what you experienced during that event. If you see yourself in that picture as the younger you, we call that dissociating. When people say something like, "That doesn't bother me anymore, I have distanced myself from it." They have in fact dissociated from the memory by seeing themselves in the picture and by pushing the picture away from their eyes so it is at a distance. This diminishes the feelings whereas associating into a memory tends to increase the feelings.

When we consciously or unconsciously associate back into our past hurtful memories and operate from the mental frames (conceptual meanings) that we gave them, we are confusing the map with the territory. When we do this we are living our adult lives inside the painful experiences of childhood. The thinking we developed then served us then but it doesn't serve us in adulthood. If you find yourself:

- (Jumping to Conclusions) *generalization*
- (Being Narrow Minded) *centration*
- (Playing the "blame game") *transductive reasoning*
- (Personalizing) *egocentrism*
- (Making mountains out of molehills.) *inductive logic or castraphizing*
- (Black and white thinking) *thinking in absolutes* and
- (Blocking out past positive examples.) *irreversability*

then you are operating from childhood frames. John Burton, Ed.D. has an article on the Neuro-Semantics' web site that defines the thinking styles of children. The title of the article is "[Hypnotic Language: Solutions in a Word.](#)" If I were to list one common element of the problems that I have confronted during these ten years as a therapist, I would list associating into past painful memories. The problem of unconsciously associating into childhood problem states and bringing that forward into the adult world lies at the root of many problems that I see therapeutically.

Note: You may have tried through years of reading and/or attending trainings to "fix" your thinking without it working. Experience has taught me that often times a person will need assistance in activating these associated frames in order to bring them to conscious level. From there it becomes fairly easy to meta-state and reframe them. But know this, you can change your thinking no matter how unconscious the problem state. If you do not know whether or not you are associating into some past memory, you can bet you are doing just that unconsciously if you are having problems with unwanted behaviors and thoughts.

7. **People who change know how to apply higher meta-level states to lower level problems.** As we have learned, our brains do not stop at just one thought. It will keep on thinking thoughts about thoughts.

When we have a “thought about a thought” the second thought will change the first thought and that is where the magic lies. In thinking and behaving the ability of the brain to have thoughts about thoughts is crucial. Here is the secret. When you have one thought (thoughts are composed of images and conceptual meanings) and then entertain another thought “about” the original thought the original thought will change.

What in the world does that mean? It is simple. If you have an experience that scares you and from that experience you become afraid of your fear, what will happen? In this case the fear will intensify. Indeed, applying fear to fear leads to paranoia. What if instead of becoming fearful of your fear, you welcomed your fear? You applied the thought that this fear has value to me and I will welcome it? What will happen to the fear? It will modulate the fear where you can step outside of it and learn from it. Then, once you learn what you need to learn from the fear, you apply the thought of faith to your fear, what would happen? What happens to fear when faith is applied to it? Fear disappears in the face of strong faith.

Play with your brain. Get a thought of anger. Now, apply to your anger the thought of forgiveness. Take the same anger and apply the thought of love. What about taking your anger and applying the thought of calmness to it, what happens? Would you have ever guessed how easy you could change your states of mind by applying one thought to another thought?

Every time we take a thought and apply another thought to it, the original thought will modulate or change in some way. We call this Meta-Stating— applying one thought to another thought. And, herein lies the magic. Herein lies your ability to re-format and re-program your thinking. Those whom I have seen who have changed their thinking, inevitably have meta-stated their problem state with higher-level resource states. Instead of meta-stating themselves sick, they learned to meta-state themselves well. They left re-building a new set of higher-level mental frames that served them.

I encourage the reader to “process” the materials found in this article. Access some personal problem and take that problem through all seven of the steps explained in this article. You may experience utter amazement at how that “problem” becomes a lesser problem.

References:

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*. (1972). New York: Ballantine.

Bodenhamer, Bobby G., and Hall, L. Michael. (1999). *The User's Manual for the Brain: The Complete Manual for Neuro-Linguistic Programming Practitioner Certification*. Wales, UK: Crown House Publishing.

Burton, John, Ed.D. and Bodenhamer, Bobby G., D. Min. (2000) *Hypnotic Language: Its Structure and Use*. Wales, UK: Crown House Publishing.

Hall, L. Michael. *Secrets of Personal Mastery: Advanced Techniques for Accessing Your Higher Levels of Consciousness*. (2000). Wales, UK: Crown House Publishing.

Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933/1994). (5th. Ed.), Lakeville, CN: International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Co.

Bobby G. Bodenhamer, D.Min.
The Institute of Neuro-Semantics
1516 Cecelia Dr
Gastonia, NC 28054
Phone 704-864-3585
Fax 704-864-1545

Bob@neurosemantics.com
<http://www.neurosemantics.com>

Note: Permission to Reprint - Permission is granted to reprint and distribute this article as long as it is distributed in total including the information about the author.