Wyatt Woodsmall

"Logical Levels" and Systemic NLP

> Whether one is speaking of language, description, explanation, theory, or epistemology, discussion of these topics is often structured in terms of levels, strata, order, or frames of reference. Having a theory about theories or a description of descriptions involves differences in logical frames of reference. To mark a distinction in space is to indicate two different levels – for example, an inside and an outside. Similarly, distinguishing between a system and subsystem implies different orders of demarcation.   Bradford Keeney, *Aesthetics of Change* (p.29)

First of all, two quotations to set the scene:

> Gregory Bateson pointed out that in the processes of learning, change, and communication there were natural hierarchies of classification. The function of each level was to organize the information on the level below it, and the rules for changing something on one level were different from those for changing a lower level. Changing something on a lower level could, but would not necessarily, affect the upper levels; but changing something in the upper levels would necessarily change things on the lower levels in order to support the higher level change. Bateson noted that it was the confusion of logical levels that often created problems.
>
> Robert Dilts, *Changing Belief Systems with NLP* (p.209)

The brain, and in fact any biological or social system, is organized into levels. Your brain has different levels of processing. As a result you can have different levels of thinking and being. When we are working to understand the brain, or to change behavior, we need to address these different levels. The same thing will be true inside a business system where there are different levels of organization.

From the psychological point of view there seem to be five levels that you work with most often. (1) The basic level is your environment, your external constraints. (2) You operate on that environment through your behavior. (3) Your behavior is guided by your mental maps and your strategies, which

define your capabilities: (4) These capabilities are organized by belief systems – and (5) beliefs are organized by identity.

So when a person is experiencing a difficulty, what you might want to know is whether this difficulty is coming from his external context, or is it that he doesn't have the specific sort of behavior required by that environment? Is the reason because he hasn't developed the appropriate strategy or map to generate that behavior? Is it because he lacks belief, or has a conflicting belief that interferes with his life or his outcome? Finally, is there some interference at the level of identity, of the whole system?

These become very important distinctions for anyone working in the areas of learning, communication or change.

Robert Dilts, *Changing Belief Systems with NLP* (pp. 1–2)

These are the terms Robert Dilts uses to describe his popular model called "logical levels". He says that these levels are in ascending order: your environment, your behavior, your capabilities, your belief systems, your identity and "spiritual." These represent your boundaries and constraints, your strength, your mind, your heart, your Soul and your God. Dilts calls them "logical levels" and arranges them in a column one above the other. Later he changed this to a pyramid. We will refer to it as "the totem pole model" after the custom of American Indians who carved totem poles with figures one above the other.

In later versions of his model, Dilts adds an upside-down totem pole on top of his original totem pole. Its base is *identity/role* which answers "Who?" Above this is *team/group,* and then *organization*, and then *community,* and then *global system* and all of these are the system or "who else?" In an even later version Dilts expands *identity* to include a person's role, mission and/or sense of self.

In a private conversation at the NLP Leadership Conference, Dilts emphasized the distinction between logical *types* which he ascribed to Russell and Whitehead and viewed as categorical and Bateson's logical *levels* which he viewed as hierarchical and recursive. Dilts said that his metaphor for levels came from mathematical derivatives and not from philosophy. When I asked him about the names for his levels Dilts said that he had chosen them based on the responses of his students and that some of the labeling came from doing criteria utilization patterns. He also emphasized that logical levels were intimately connected to levels within the nervous system itself.