

## Chapter 30

---

# The method of levels

The experience of finding a new, clarifying, refreshing point of view is probably about as ancient as awareness itself. We have a few terms for it: insight, intuition, revelation, epiphany. And a few phrases likening it to a burst of light: bring to light, dawn on, awaken. And a few calling up an internal feeling: come alive to, feel an enlargement of mind. But a new view is not always enlivening and invigorating; one does not always shout “Eureka!” Sometimes we simply feel as if we are standing off to one side, looking back at a previous understanding. Sometimes the outcome is even quieter than that, as when we feel relieved of conflicts, tensions, and even curiosity, and we simply feel peaceful.

Every level of the control hierarchy is itself a point of view, a collection of internal standards through which perceptions can be understood. To give an example of one of my own invigorations, I remember the burst of light I felt when I read (long ago) Lobachevsky’s *Theory of Parallels*. I had previously thought of Euclid’s geometry as a system concept quite isolated from other parts of mathematics. That is, I was viewing Euclidean geometry as an event (a thing) having its meaning within itself, not illuminated by other mathematics. When, however, I struggled with Lobachevsky’s construction of a geometry built without Euclid’s twelfth axiom—a geometry in which any number of lines through a given point could be drawn parallel to another line—and came to understand the logic of it, I was overcome with awe and delight in suddenly realizing how Euclid’s geometry could belong to an entire family of geometries, each taking its character from its own set of axioms.

Moving up a level can reveal a viewpoint that enables the person to become aware of previously unimagined resources. A new viewpoint can often resolve a conflict. Systems at a higher level of control

can set the values of reference signals at lower levels. Consequently, what seems at the lower level to be a situation of unresolvable conflict (I want to get through this narrow door at the same time he does but I don’t want to struggle with him) can often become quickly resolved at a higher level (getting through the door at this exact moment is not necessary to carrying these groceries to my car). Helping a person, therefore, to adopt a viewpoint from a higher level than the level at which she is perceiving a perplexity or a conflict can be used as a method of therapy. Doing so is called the method of levels.

In the method of levels, the helper does not act as an expert. The helper (or guide, or therapist) does not give advice; she does not know better than the helpee (or explorer, or client) what the helpee should do. Refraining from taking the role of expert is unusual among helpers, especially among paid helpers, but it does happen. Carl Rogers published a book in 1951 called *Client-centered Therapy* in which he described a method of “reflecting” the client’s thoughts simply by paraphrasing what the client said. The therapist made no assertions or guesses about the client’s history, about causes, or about any deficiencies, disorders, afflictions, or demons the client might be harboring. Often, the client found his way to a new view of his situation or himself—a new understanding—while talking, so to speak, to himself. I am sure there have always been some friends, siblings, spouses, teachers, parents, and priests who have helped others through this “non-directive” method. Rogers made it respectable for psychologists. I do not know how many present-day psychologists follow Rogers’s lead. Rogers, however, did not know about the hierarchy of control; he did not know about the method of levels. But he was bold enough to relinquish the authoritative role of the expert.

In the method of levels (MOL), the therapist or guide does not merely reflect what the client says. Indeed, the therapist talks very little about the matter (the perplexity, problem, conflict, trouble) the client brought to the conversation. Instead, the therapist encourages the client to talk about talking or thinking *about* the topic with which he arrived. The therapist encourages the client to look back at the topic, so to speak, from another level. Below are some examples of conversation that I borrow from a communication from Powers to the CSGnet on 30 August 1995. First, here are five examples of typical advice-giving, *not* what you would hear in an MOL session. I have labeled the utterances C and T for client and therapist:

- (C) I don't want to be left alone. (T) Try being alone for just 15 minutes.
- (C) I want to get over this problem. (T) You can do it, I'll try to help.
- (C) Nobody likes me. (T) I like you; I'll get your mother to like you.
- (C) I am a terrible person. (T) Tell me some things that are good about you.
- (C) I don't know what to do. (T) If you like, I'll tell you some things to try.

Now here are five examples of the way a therapist using MOL might respond to a client. In each case, the therapist asks the client to say something *about* what the client has just said:

- (C) I don't want to be left alone. (T) What's it like to be left alone?
- (C) I want to get over this problem. (T) Is this a very strong feeling right now?
- (C) Nobody likes me. (T) Is that OK with you? How do you know they don't? Are you thinking of anyone in particular? What's it like not to be likable?
- (C) I am a terrible person. (T) What are some of the terrible things you're thinking about? Are any of them going on right now?
- (C) I don't know what to do. (T) Can you tell me more about not knowing what to do?

Notice that there is no "content" in those remarks of the MOL therapist—no mention of what might be right, wrong, good, or bad; no advice about actions to take; no explanations about motives, repressions, or reinforcements; no warnings about a prescribed

course of therapy; no demands. The remarks simply invite the client to say whatever he wishes as an observer of his own perceptions. The therapist will not tell the client what he should think either about the problem he came with or about the observations he makes of it; the client will tell the therapist—and himself.

The next few pages contain most of the text of a handout Powers distributed at a workshop in 1999.

## THE METHOD OF LEVELS

An overview for a workshop  
conducted by W.T. Powers  
July 18–21, 1999

The method of levels is an experimental approach to counseling or psychotherapy. Its bases are . . . Perceptual Control Theory and the naturalistic observation that a person's consciousness can apparently operate from different viewpoints within the brain's organization. The objective of this method is to draw a person's attention to perceptions at levels higher than perceptions in the primary or central focus of attention. When a shift of level has occurred, the same process is repeated, and so on for as many times as possible or useful.

This simple procedure seems to facilitate therapeutic change, with productive sessions lasting only about half an hour or even less. In this workshop we will describe and demonstrate how this method works in practice and teach participants how to direct an MOL session, with and without coaching, participating as both guide and explorer.

At the end of the workshop, participants should understand the method well enough to test it by themselves when they return home. One approach that has worked well is for individuals to organize discussion groups in which they pass on what they have learned and gain experience with each other, trading roles to develop their understanding of both sides of the process. . . .

### How the Method May Work

Most people have had the experience of being engaged in some train of thought or conversation, while at the same time being aware of a background thought, attitude, or feeling *as a commentary about the foreground*