

The Method of Levels

An overview for a Control Systems Group workshop July 18-21, 1999

The method of levels is an experimental approach to counseling or psychotherapy. Its bases are Hierarchical 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 level shift 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 this 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. We hope that this will lead to an internet discussion group aimed at further supporting the application and teaching of the MOL.

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 experience. It's as though a person can operate at two levels of attention at once, with the second "meta" level being less vivid and explicit than the first. While this second level can be like an intruding thought about something completely different, it is often about the first level in some way, or about the person in whom the thoughts at the first level are occurring.

This phenomenon may have something to do with the basic organization of the brain as envisioned in Hierarchical Perceptual Control Theory, or HPCT. According to this theory, the brain is organized into layers of control systems, one control system at one level operating by adjusting the goals toward which some set of systems at lower levels works. At the same time, the perception that the higher system is controlling is made up from sets of perceptions at lower levels.

For example, a perceived relationship like "The pencil on the table" is composed of perceptions of objects - the pencil and the table, which can each be perceived independently of any relationship between them. In that example, we can be aware of the pencil and the table as individual objects without paying any attention to the "on" relationship, or we can be aware of the "on" relationship specifically. When attention is on, say, the pencil, we can be aware of its color, its size, the sharpness of its point, any lettering on it, and so forth. In the backs of our minds, we may be aware of other objects, and even of relationships among the objects, but those perceptions are not clear and central. They only become the center of attention when we perform a hard-to-describe act and somehow bring the relationships into mental focus. Then we specifically notice the relationship, the "on"-ness.

It's not difficult to see that the perception of "on-ness" may have been in existence all the time, even though not in conscious awareness. And it may even be possible that some control process may have been going on, in which "on"-ness was being controlled (putting the pencil on the table), but that one's attention was on finding and picking up the right pencil to put on the table. Although unlikely in this simple example, it could be that some difficulty or misunderstanding had arisen about which pencil was to go on the table, and that in working out this problem the person's attention had focused on the

characteristics of the pencil to the exclusion of the purpose involved in finding the right pencil.

In that case, the process of finding and picking up the pencil might be in the foreground of attention, while the reason for wanting to do so has retired into the background. Most people have experienced this, too. Have you ever found yourself looking into a closet or a refrigerator and wondering what brought you there? After a moment you become aware of the purpose, and answer your own question, but in the time just before you remind yourself, you're in an interesting condition of pursuing some goal but not being aware of the higher goal that led to the setting of the lower goal.

When we consider things like getting a shirt out of a closet, this kind of episode doesn't seem very important. But suppose that what you find yourself doing is feeling an instant dislike for someone you have just met. You do not want to talk to this person or even be around this person - and you don't know why. Something inside you, clearly, is perceiving something in this situation that is to be avoided, and as a way of avoiding it is setting a goal of immediate departure or non-interaction, a goal which, unsatisfied, leaves you with a great urge to be elsewhere. All you've aware of, though, is the desire to get out of there.

At this point a psychologist might go into high gear and start speculating about traumatic childhood incidents, phobias, guilt, and all sorts of other possible explanations of this "irrational reaction." All sorts of treatments might be suggested, from a prefrontal lobotomy to electroshock to tranquilizers to desensitization therapy. But what we would look for under the method of levels is simply the next level up. We would assume that this goal of getting away is there for a reason, and the reason is that a higher system has specified this goal as a way of controlling something else.

Since we haven't the least idea about what this next higher system is or what it's trying to accomplish, the best thing we can do is ask the person having the problem. And rather than lead the person with suggestions and analyses, what we really need to do is to help the person move to a point of view from which the actual cause of the problem can be seen: the next level up. Then the person can tell us the right answer, if he or she wants to.

This is the principle behind the method of levels. By directing a person's attention to materials relating to the next level up, we effectively move the person's attention to that level, from which perceptions and intentions that were formerly in the background become a new foreground. If the unexplained reason for the behaviors in question now shows up as a foreground thought, the chances are that some kind of change will immediately take place or begin to take place. The reason for the "phobic" reaction may become immediately obvious (*"My God, he talks just like that son-of-a-bitch Uncle Charley"*). Or nothing dramatic may happen, but the person for some unknown reason loses interest in escaping the situation. One of the typical and obvious consequences when a person succeeds in going up a level is a complete and sudden change in the emotional content of experience.

How an MOL session works

I've already suggested that in an MOL session, we don't try to psychologize or advise or analyze, but instead focus on getting the person to go up a level. This may seem to be a vague and unhelpful description of what we do, but in fact going up a level is an easily recognizable phenomenon both to the guide and to the client. And for the most part, once the client catches on, the client will let the guide know what the next level is.

The MOL is conducted as a rather peculiar kind of conversation between the client and the guide (these terms, guide and client, are open to revision. Some prefer guide and explorer). In this conversation, the client picks some subject to talk about, quite likely some difficulty being experienced. The guide asks questions aimed at getting more details about the subject of discussion, but what the guide listens for are not the answers to those questions. The guide listens for meta-comments that are about what is going on: for example, a comment like *"Am I doing this right?"*

Pouncing on every meta-comment is not very productive, but the guide needs to listen for more comments that help establish the nature of the higher-level point of view. The client says, scattered here and there, *"I hope I'm doing what you want,"* and *"I'm not sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to,"* and *"I hope I'm not being too dumb about this,"* and eventually the guide will interpose another sort of comment: *"Are you unsure of what you're supposed to be doing? Tell me more about that."*

To make it plain what's being asked, the guide can elaborate. *“I'm just asking what you're thinking or feeling about that right now, while we're talking—not what you think in general, or might be experiencing, but what you can see really going on in your mind right now. Just a kind of observer's report.”* If that doesn't do the trick the guide can elaborate further: *“This unsureness—is that the right word?—are you feeling it right now? Are you thinking thoughts about it? For example? Does any physical feeling go with it?”*

Eventually the guide can get the client talking freely about the former background thought, feeling, or attitude, so it really becomes the foreground of the conversation. And as it becomes established in the foreground, the guide starts listening again for meta-comments (or watching for body language, or listening for tones of voice - any source of information) that will point to the next level up.

And that's basically the method. That's all the guide does. The focus of the method is not on helping the client or solving the client's problems or making the client feel better or giving the client advice or encouragement or prescribing behaviors for the client. The focus is entirely on getting the client to go up a level, and when that happens, to go up another level.

How does a session end, then? Once again, the client lets you know. It's unusual for a person to go up more than four or five levels in a session, and it's often less than that. The session ends when the client expresses satisfaction or progress or boredom or starts talking about lunch. It can end with the guide saying, *“I've kind of lost track of where we are—would this be a good place to stop?”* or *“Would it be OK with you if we leave it here until next time?”* Sometimes the client likes to review the session, noting the level shifts. Sometimes the guide, after the session has clearly ended, asks what was going on at some point where he or she found the proceedings mysterious.

In other words, there's no hard and fast rule.

Why is the method so limited and simple?

The short answer to that is that when we help other people, we seldom really know what we're doing, so the best thing to do is as little as possible. This principle is somewhat like

the admonition in the Hippocratic Oath: first, do no harm.

Perhaps a better, or more serious, answer is that there are dozens of psychotherapies and probably hundreds of individual variations on how to conduct them, yet in every psychotherapy there is some success rate. Obviously, if one therapy is nondirective and another is highly prescriptive, yet they both work, then directiveness or prescriptiveness can't be an explanation of why they work. If one therapy uses operant conditioning and another employs meditation, yet they both can help people overcome phobias, then clearly neither operant conditioning nor meditation explains their success.

The method of levels can be thought of as an attempt to express what is common to most successful psychotherapies. Most interactive therapies entail “listening with the third ear,” meaning listening not just to what the client is saying, but to the meta-content, the background, the up-a-level comments. And most progress in therapy comes about when the client has a sudden realization, sees the familiar old problem from a new point of view, finds a new level of self-awareness. It has been said that successful therapists, with experience and the passage of time, come to conduct their business in more nearly the same way, regardless of their theoretical foundations. They listen more and talk less. They analyze less. They advise less. They lead less. They stand by while the client works it out. They wait for the client to have the insight instead of trying to show how brilliant they are (unlike Robbie Coltrane's psychologist character, ‘Cracker’).

The method of levels is about as minimalist as one could imagine a therapeutic method to be. Maybe it's too much so, but we'll never know that until we try it. To mix it with any other approach is inevitably to confuse matters, and of course makes it impossible to judge whether the MOL is worth anything in its own right. The implication of the MOL is that most of what goes on in other therapies is (a) unnecessary, and (b) possibly detrimental. If you're a therapist, reading about the MOL will, I hope, suggest to you that you ask yourself what the effect of your various interventions is supposed to be, and how you know they are helping progress in therapy. And I hope that in the interests of science you are willing to suspend your customary approach long enough to test the method of levels in as pure a form as possible.

—Bill Powers, July 10, 1999