
Perceptual Positions

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A perceptual position is a particular perspective or point of view that a person perceives a situation or relationship from. A perceptual position is a phrase that refers to varying ways to perceive the world from the positions referred to as “1st Position or Self”, “2nd position or other” and “3rd Position or observer”. Skillful communicators are able to use multiple perspectives in communication interactions.

First position involves experiencing the situation from your own perspective, seeing through your eyes, hearing through your ears and sensing and feeling through your own experience. When in first position, you will be in your own body position, using your own postures, using words like “I, me, myself” when referring to thoughts, feelings and ideas. First position is useful when thinking about your own goals, plans and interests, when you want to stand up for yourself, set limits or when you simply want to take care of yourself.

Second position involves experiencing the situation as though you were in “the other person’s shoes”. You see, hear and feel things from the other person in the interactions perspective. It’s as if you take on the characteristics of the other person, and perceive the situation or relationship as if you were they. From this position you will be disassociated from yourself and associated into the other person’s experience. Second position is useful when you want to understand another person’s perspective. Second position is also useful when you meet with confusion, hesitation, resistance or hostility, or whenever you don’t understand another person’s perspective. Second position aids in gaining rapport, understanding and empathy, sometimes simply by asking the question from the second position of “what must be true in order for this reaction or communication to exist”.

Third position involves standing back as an observer, perceiving the situation of the self and the other from an observer position. In the third position, you take on the role of an outside observer, taking on neither the characteristics of the other person or people in the interaction, or that of yourself. It is like taking the position of a neutral observer of the interaction/s. Third position is useful when emotions run high as a way of calming down and gaining perspective. Observer position is also useful in gaining a perspective of the situation from a more objective place or view.

The ability to take on various and multiple perspectives allows you, as a professional communicator to gain insight into the communication situation and the relationship/s that are not evident from your own perspective. As in so many other NLP techniques, taking on multiple perspectives allows one more options and more choices, leading to more flexibility, variety and influence in the communication transactions. References are provided for further reading.

The Encyclopedia of Systemic NLP, Dilts, R. and DeLozier, J. 2000

Turtles All the Way Down, Grinder J, and DeLozier, J. 1987

Visionary Leadership, Dilts. R. 1996