

The Principle of Positive Intention

by Robert Dilts

One of the most important but often misunderstood (and therefore controversial) principles of NLP is that of 'positive intention'. Simply put, the principle states that at some level all behavior is (or at one time was) "positively intended". Another way to say it is that all behavior serves (or at one time served) a 'positive purpose'.

The positive intention behind 'aggressive' behavior, for example, is often 'protection'. The positive intention or purpose behind 'fear' is usually 'safety'. The positive purpose behind anger can be to 'maintain boundaries'. Hatred may have the positive purpose of 'motivating' a person to take action. The positive intentions behind something like 'resistance to change' could encompass a range of issues; including the desire to acknowledge, honor or respect the past; the need to protect oneself by staying with the familiar, and the attempt to hold onto the positive things one has had in the past, and so on.

Even physical symptoms may serve a positive purpose. NLP views any symptoms, including physical symptoms, as a communication that something is not functioning appropriately. Physical symptoms often signal to people that something is out of balance. Sometimes physical symptoms are even a sign that something is being healed.

Sometimes a particular problem behavior or symptom may even serve multiple positive intentions. I have worked with people who wanted to quit smoking, for instance, who discovered that it served many positive purposes. They smoked in the morning in order to "wake up". They smoked during the day in order to "reduce stress," "concentrate" and, paradoxically, "remember to breathe." They smoked at night in order to "relax." Often, smoking served to cover up or 'cloud' negative emotions. Perhaps most importantly, smoking was the one thing that they did "just for themselves" to bring some pleasure into their lives.

Another basic principle of NLP that is related to that of positive intention, is that it is useful to separate one's "behavior" from one's "self" - that is, to separate the positive intent, function, belief, etc., that generates a behavior from the behavior itself. In other words, it is more respectful, ecological and productive to respond to the 'deep structure' than to the surface expression of a problematic behavior. A consequence of combining this principle with the principle of positive intention is that in order to change behavior or establish viable alternatives, the new choices must in some way satisfy the positive purpose of the previous behavior. When the positive intentions and purposes of a problem state or symptom have not been satisfied, then, ironically, even "normal" or "desired" behaviors can produce equally problematic or pathological results. A person who stops being aggressive, for instance, but has no other way to protect him or herself, just exchanges one set of problems for another. Quitting the behavior of smoking without finding alternatives for all of the important purposes that it serves can lead a person into a nightmare of new problems.

According to another basic NLP principle - that of 'pacing and leading' - effective change would first involve 'pacing' by acknowledging the positive intentions behind the existing behavior. 'Leading' would involve assisting the individual to widen his or her map of the world in order to find more appropriate choices for successfully achieving those positive intentions. These choices would allow the person to preserve the positive intention or purpose through different means; this is what the various NLP techniques of 'reframing' attempt to accomplish.

Why people object to the principle of positive intention.

On one hand, the principle of positive intention - and the approach to change described above - seem quite natural and effective. Yet, the notion of 'positive intention' has also engendered much criticism and ridicule; even by some members of the NLP community. The objections range from the perception that it is more theoretical and philosophical than practical, to the belief that it is downright dangerous. One of the purposes of this article is to acknowledge and address some of these concerns.

The notion of 'positive intention' is more philosophical than scientific. It can't be proved.

Actually, the principle of positive intention does not come from religious or romantic idealism, but rather from the scientific discipline of systems theory. The fundamental premise of the principle of positive intent is that systems (especially self organizing or "cybernetic" systems) are geared toward adaptation. That is, there is a built in tendency to optimize some important elements in the system or to keep the system in balance. Thus, the ultimate purpose of all actions, responses or behaviors within a system is 'adaptive' - or was adaptive given the context in which those behaviors were initially established.

It is true that you cannot objectively 'prove' that there really is a positive intention behind a particular behavior; that is why it is considered a 'presupposition'. It is something that is presupposed, not proved. Similarly, one cannot 'prove' that the 'map is not the territory' and that 'there is no one right map of the world'. These are part of the basic 'epistemology' of NLP - they are the basic beliefs upon which the rest of the model is based.

NLP principles and presuppositions are like the fundamental concepts of Euclidian geometry. For instance, Euclid built his geometry upon the concept of the 'point'. A point is defined as 'an entity that has a position but no other properties' - it has no size, no mass, no color, no shape. It is of course impossible to prove that a point really has no size, mass, color, etc. However, if you accept this presupposition, along with a few others, you can build a whole system of geometry. The conclusions of this system can then be 'proved' with respect to their adherence to the fundamental but unproven concepts. It is important to realize that one does not have to accept Euclid's assumption about a point in order to create a geometry. There are other geometries based on different presuppositions. [For instance, MIT mathematician Seymour Pappert (1980) built his fascinating 'Turtle geometry' for children substituting the notion of a 'Turtle' for a 'point'; a 'Turtle' being an entity that has a position and a direction.]

Thus, accepting the principle of 'positive intention' is ultimately an act of faith. And in many ways, the notion of positive intention is probably the 'spiritual' core of NLP. If we accept that there are positive intentions behind every behavior, then we will find or create them as opposed to waiting for the proof that such intentions exist.

If people supposedly have positive intentions, then why do they do such bad things?

It is common wisdom that "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Having a good intention is not a guarantee of good behavior. People who have good intentions do bad things because they have limited maps of the world. Problems arise when a well-intended person's map of the world presents only a few choices for satisfying their intentions.

This is why it is important to consider the principle of positive intention in relation to the other teachings of NLP. Isolated from the other NLP presuppositions and the technology of NLP, the principle of positive intention would indeed be naive idealism. Without the mastery of the NLP change techniques, thinking tools, communication skills, etc., it would be irrelevant whether someone had a positive intention or not because we would be helpless to direct their attention to a new behavior anyway. As Einstein pointed out, "You cannot solve a problem with the same type of thinking that is creating it." The principle of positive intention must be coupled with powerful and effective creativity and problem solving skills.

It is also important to keep in mind that people can only have a positive intention for the particular part of the total system that they are aware of or identify with. Thus, an individual who is knowingly and 'purposefully' doing something harmful to another will often have a positive intention for himself or herself, which does not include the other. In fact, the concept of 'negative intentions' probably stems from this kind of experience.

The positive intention behind the belief in negative intention and the rejection of the notion of 'positive intention' is undoubtedly "protection." People who reject the notion of positive intention are often afraid of either being or appearing 'naive'. They also often feel helpless to change anything. Without the mastery of the appropriate NLP skills, people simply end up feeling, "If they were really positively intended, they would have changed by now."

It is important, however, not to confuse the notion that people are motivated by 'positive intentions' with the idea that people are always able to keep in mind the 'best interests' of others or the rest of the system. The fact that others are positively intended does not automatically make them wise or capable of being altruistic - these are the result of intelligence, skill and their map of the world. Adolph Hitler had a very positive intention - for the part of the system that he identified with.

A mugger who robs and perhaps even kills another to get money has a positive intention for himself but no identification with the victim. The European pioneers who killed Native American fathers and their families in order to protect their own families had a positive intention but had limited choices. In their map the 'red devils' were not human. The Native American warriors who killed European fathers and their families in order to protect their hunting grounds had a very positive intention, but had limited choices. They both lacked the skills to communicate effectively with one another, and their maps of the world did not allow them to appreciate and manage the cultural differences between them.

Doesn't accepting that a behavior comes from a positive intention make that behavior all right?

The fact that some action or symptom may have a positive intention behind it does not justify the behavior or make it acceptable or 'OK'. Rather, the principle of positive intention states what is necessary to be able to permanently change a behavior or resolve a symptom or resistance. The principle of positive intention addresses issues of 'change', 'healing' and 'ecology' more so than 'morality' or 'justice'. It is more about the future than the past. The principle of positive intention merely asserts that healing or "associative correction" involves adding new choices to the individual's impoverished model of the world. These new choices would need to be able to satisfy the positive intention or purpose that the individual is (consciously or unconsciously) attempting to fulfill, but not have the negative or pathological consequences of the problem behavior or symptom.

But I can't find any positive purpose to some behaviors.

Positive intentions are not always conscious or obvious. Because we are not used to thinking in terms of positive intentions, it is sometimes difficult to find them right away and therefore we find it easier to lapse into other explanations for a behavior or symptom. But if one is committed to finding them and looks deeply enough, they will be there.

Sometimes the intention or 'deep structure' is far removed from the surface level behavior. In these cases, the relation between the intention and behavior may seem paradoxical. For instance, I have worked with suicidal people whose positive intention is to "attain peace." Parents sometimes physically punish or even abuse their children to "show them that they love them." The mystery of the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the positive intention and the resulting behavior lies in the past events and model of the world in which the relationship was formed.

Another conclusion of combining the principle of positive intention with other NLP presuppositions is that any behavior, no matter how 'evil', 'crazy' or 'bizarre' it seems, is or was the best choice available to the person at that point in time, given his or her model of the world. That is, all behavior is or was perceived as necessary or appropriate (from the 'actor's' point of view) given the context in which it was established. What happens many times, however, is that the positive intention for which the behavior was established is no longer actually being served by the behavior. As an example, the positive intention behind 'revenge' is often initially to "put things right" in order to try to heal them. Instead, it creates an unending or escalating feud (like the Hatfields and McCoys). To truly heal the situation, it is necessary to break the cycle by finding a way of thinking that is different from that, which is creating the problem.

What is important to keep in mind is that, even though the situation in which the problematic response was established is now outdated, the positive intention behind it, or the purpose which it was intended to serve, may still be valid and important to acknowledge and address.

What if I can't find any positive purpose in the past?

In some situations the positive function of a symptom or behavior was not part of the initiating circumstances but was rather established later as a 'secondary gain'. For instance, a person may not have intended to become physically sick, but nonetheless received a lot of attention and relief from his or her responsibilities when he or she did become ill. This attention and relief, received as a positive by-product of the illness, could become a secondary gain - indicating areas of imbalance in the person's 'normal' life that need to be addressed. If they are not adequately dealt with, the person may be likely to relapse.

But when I make people aware of perfectly good alternatives they don't always accept them.

It is important to keep in mind at this point that there is a subtle but significant difference between 'alternatives' and 'choices'. 'Alternatives' are external to a person. 'Choices' are alternatives that have become a part of the person's map. An individual could be given many options or alternatives but really have no choice. Choice involves having the capability and the contextual cues to be able to internally select the most appropriate option.

In NLP, it is also considered important that the person possess more than one other alternative besides the symptom or problematic response. There is a saying in NLP that "One choice is no choice at all. Two choices is a dilemma. It is not until a person has three possibilities that he or she is really able to legitimately choose."

What about when someone admits that he or she has other choices but is still doing the same thing?

What often confuses people about the principle of positive intention is that it seems the person "should know better." They should have the intelligence or maturity to employ other alternatives to achieve their desired intentions. It is not uncommon for a person to say over and over again that they realize something is not good for them or achieving what they really want or intend, yet still persist in the behavior.

The influence of past events often extends beyond the specific memory of the particular situation. Under certain conditions, events can produce altered states of consciousness, which lead to a "splitting of consciousness," such that a part of the person's thinking process became disassociated from the rest. This disassociated part of consciousness, what Freud called a "secondary consciousness", could produce ideas which were "very intense but are cut off from associative communication with the rest of the content of consciousness."

In the view of NLP, people are always drifting or moving between various states of consciousness. There are a wide variety of states that the nervous system is capable of achieving. In fact, from the NLP perspective, it is useful and desirable to have 'parts'. In circumstances that require high levels of performance, for instance, people often place themselves mentally and physically into states that are different from their "normal state" of consciousness. Certain tasks require that individuals use their body and nervous system in special ways. For instance, athletic performances, labor and birth experiences, even tasks requiring high levels of concentration like surgery, are often accompanied by special states. The ideas, perceptions and thoughts that occur in these states can be "associated amongst themselves" more easily than experiences that occur in other states or circumstances. This kind of process is one of the ways that we keep from being overwhelmed by the vast contents of our experiences.

The degree of influence of a particular 'part' depends upon the 'level' at which it has been formed. Some parts are more at the capability level; like a 'creative' part, a 'logical' part or an 'intuitive' part. Other parts are more at the level of beliefs and values; such as a part that 'values health more than success' or a part that believes 'family is more important than career'. Still others may be at the level of identity; such as a part that is an 'adult' versus a part that is a 'child'.

Different 'parts' may have different intentions, purposes and capabilities that may or may not be connected to other parts of a person and to his or her normal state of consciousness. Thus, while one part of a person may understand something, another part may not. One part of a person may believe something is important while another part may believe it is unnecessary. As a result, an individual may have different parts with different intentions. These intentions may come into conflict with one another, or lead to behaviors that seem bizarre and irrational to others and even to part of a person's own consciousness. In other words, the fact that the "normal consciousness" of a person recognizes other choices does not mean that the "secondary consciousness" that is initiating the behavior understands or accepts those choices. A symptom is only completely 'reframed' when the part of the person that is generating the problematic response is identified, the positive intention behind the response understood and acknowledged, and when other effective choices for achieving the positive intention have been internalized by that part. (The specifics of how to conduct such communications have been detailed in a number of NLP books including Roots of NLP, Frogs Into Princes, Solutions, NLP Volume I, Reframing.)

Are you saying that there is no such thing as 'evil'?

The notion of 'evil' is certainly an ancient one. Yet, perhaps surprisingly to some, it has not always existed as an essential part of human consciousness. In his book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976), Julian Jaynes points out that references to the concept of "evil" do not appear in ancient writings or artifacts (Greek, Egyptian or Hebrew) until around 1200 BC. According to Jaynes, in order for the idea of "evil" to arise, people's behavior had to become perceived as being sufficiently disassociated from the will of the various gods that controlled them in order for people to have their own 'free will'. It was only with advent of ongoing contact and interaction between peoples of different cultures, and the resulting belief that the differences in people's behaviors came from their own internal thoughts and wills, that ideas such as 'deception' and 'evil' emerged. Without individual consciousness and will there can be no intent, positive or negative. It would seem that, historically, the concept of evil arose out of our struggle to understand and come to terms with our own internal programming.

Even from the earliest times, however, 'evil' was associated with 'darkness' and 'good' was associated with 'light'. Destructive and harmful behaviors come from 'darkness'. Loving and healing behaviors come from 'light'. This metaphor fits in very well with the NLP notion of positive intention. Positive intentions are like light. Their purpose is to bring illumination and warmth to the world. Symptoms and problematic behaviors emerge out of the darkness - the places that the light is unable to reach.

It is very important to realize, however, that 'darkness' is not a 'force', it is merely the absence of light. Light can shine into darkness, but darkness cannot 'shine' into light. Thus, the relationship between light and the shadow that it casts is not one of a struggle between opposing forces. The question is, "What is obstructing the light?" and "How can we get some light to where it needs to be?"

From an NLP perspective, 'darkness' comes from a narrow map of the world or from something in that model of the world that is interfering with the 'light' of the positive intention and casting a shadow. Change comes from 'widening the aperture' of the person's map of the world or by finding and transforming the obstacles to the light - not by attacking the shadow. According to NLP, the obstacles to the light come from limiting beliefs or 'thought viruses' in our mental maps of the world. Typically, these obstacles come as beliefs or assumptions, which stand in opposition to the basic NLP presuppositions.

For example, consider just how easy it is to create conflict and violence by taking on the following beliefs: "There is only one true map of the world. They (the chosen enemy) have the wrong map of the world - I/we have the correct map of the world. They are negatively intended - they want to hurt us. They are incapable of changing - I/we have tried everything I/we could. They are not part of our system - they are fundamentally different from us."

These beliefs, taken together, have no doubt been at the heart of every atrocity that has been committed in human history. The fundamental 'light' and healing capacity of NLP comes from its commitment to promote a different set of presuppositions:

"We are a system that is part of much larger system. This system is fundamentally geared toward health and adaptation. Therefore, we are all ultimately motivated by positive intentions. Our maps of the world, however, are limited and don't always provide us with all the possible choices. We are, nonetheless, capable of changing, and once we are able to perceive a truly viable option, we will automatically take it. The issue is to be able to widen one's model of the world to include other choices and capabilities for protection and wisdom and to assist others in doing so as well." ©Robert Dilts