



Perceptual Positions – Different People Have Different Perceptions

“In order to evaluate a situation as well as possible, it is important to observe the situation from at least three points of view.”

Gregory Bateson

Flexibility is what makes a good communicator. Flexibility to identify the perceptual channels used by another person, flexibility to pace the other, flexibility to lead at the appropriate rhythm and through the appropriate channel—flexibility, flexibility, flexibility...

But there is another aspect of flexibility that is a source of wisdom:

flexibility to describe the world from a point of view different from your own.

The concept of perceptual positions in NLP was originally formulated by John Grinder and Judith DeLozier (1987) as an operational extension of early NLP concepts of “referential indices” and of Bateson’s concepts of “double” and “triple” description.

Robert Dilts and Todd Epstein (1990, 1991, 1995 & 1996) later made further refinements, going beyond the original model and creating distinctions between third position (meta-position, observer position, “companion” position), and fourth position (or the “System” position).

A **perceptual position** is essentially a particular perspective, or point of view, through which a person perceives a situation or a relationship.

FIRST POSITION

The **first position** is you, in your own physical space, in your usual body posture. When fully in first position, you use words such as “for me,” “I,” and “myself” when referring to your own feelings, perceptions, and ideas. In first position, you experience your own perspective directly: seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting what is happening around you and within you. If you are truly in first position, you will not see yourself, because you are being yourself—perceiving the world through your own eyes, ears, nose, skin, etc. You are fully associated with your own body and your map of the world.

SECOND POSITION

The **second position** is the ability to take on the perspective of the other person within the interaction (if there is more than one person, there will be multiple “second positions”). This is a temporary information-gathering position, in which you shift into the other person’s perceptual position, adopting their posture and point of view as if you were that person. You see, hear, feel, smell, and taste the communication loop from the other person’s point of view - “walking in their shoes,” “sitting in their chair at the table,” etc. In second position, you experience the world through the other person’s eyes, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and so on. From this position, you see yourself from the other



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person's point of view and refer to your "first position" using second-person language. Temporarily assuming another person's position is a powerful way to evaluate how effective we are on our side of the communication loop.

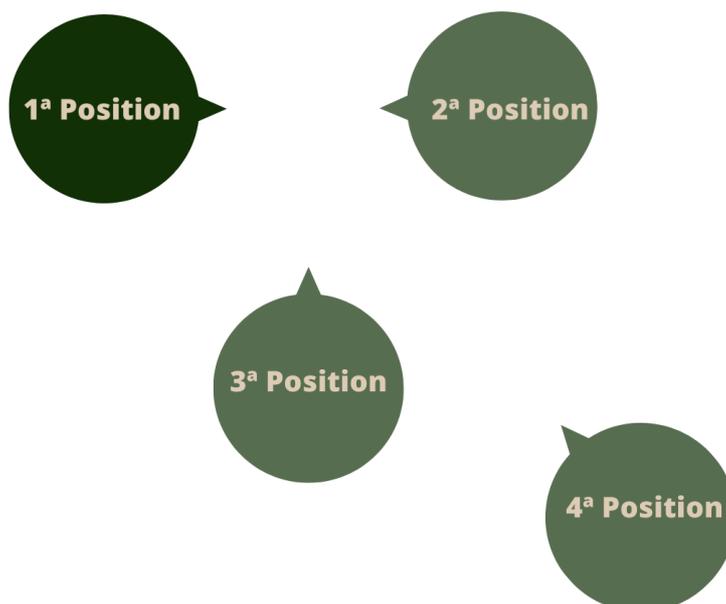
THIRD POSITION

The **third position**, or observer position, temporarily places you outside the communication loop in order to gather information as a witness rather than a participant in the interaction. Your posture is symmetrical and equidistant. In this position, you see, hear, and feel how the communication loop functions from the perspective of a neutral and interested observer. You use third-person language, such as "he" and "she," when referring to the people you are observing. You are in a type of meta-position. This position provides valuable information about the balance of behaviors within the communication loop. Information gathered from this perspective can be brought back to your own position and combined with information from the second position to help improve the quality of your perception, internal state, interaction, and relationship within the communication loop.

FOURTH POSITION

The **fourth position** involves a blend of the other three positions, creating a sense of "being the entire system" (such as a clinic, hospital, group, family, etc.). This position implies identifying with the system or with the relationship itself that is being observed, creating an experience of being part of the whole, linguistically characterized as "we" (first-person plural). The fourth position is essential for the development of a "group mind" or "team spirit."

Diagram of the Perceptual Positions





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Perceptual Positions Exercise Script

Think of a conversation, discussion, disagreement, or conflict that you had recently with another person and that may still be unresolved. It may be a conflict with a client, a colleague, a superior, or a conflict from your personal life.

Begin by defining the four positions for the exercise. You may use chairs, objects, or pieces of paper to clearly define where each of the four positions will be. Make sure that position 3 (observer) is at the same physical distance from positions 1 and 2, and define who will represent position 4 (the collective that includes the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd positions).

1. **First Position** - Go to the space of the first position. Recall the situation in as much detail as possible. Return to that event with the goal of recovering exactly what happened, what you felt, and what your physical posture was in that situation. Write down everything you consider relevant as you revisit the situation.
 - a) What don't you like about this relationship?
 - b) What is your objective with this relationship? What do you want to achieve with this dynamic?
 - c) How do you perceive the other person?
 - d) What do you think about the behavior of your counterpart?
 - e) What values are at stake in this interaction?
 - f) What do you think about your own behavior in this situation?
2. Step out of the circuit and break state. (*Like eating a piece of cheese during a wine tasting, to cleanse the palate. Jump a bit if you will*)
3. **Second Position** - Go to the space of the second position, the other person's position. Adopt in your posture all the elements you know about the other person, as if, for a few moments, you were that person. Now observe [Your name] in that situation.
 - a) What don't you like about this relationship with [Your name]?
 - b) How do you see yourself in this relationship?
 - c) How do you react?
 - d) What concerns you? What is important to you?
 - e) How do you perceive the behavior of [Your name]?
 - f) If you had to give [Your name] some advice from this point of view, what would it be?
4. Step out of the circuit and break state. (*Like eating a piece of cheese during a wine tasting, to cleanse the palate. Jump a bit if you will*)
 - a) What relevant information have you gathered so far?
 - b) Is there anything you had not considered at the beginning?



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5. **Third Position** - Now go to the third position. Make sure you are at the same distance from the first and second positions. Observe this interaction with a critical and neutral mindset.
 - a) What do you think of the behaviors of [Your name] and [Counterpart(s)]?
 - b) What are the positive intentions of each person?
 - c) If you had to give them advice, what would it be? What could each of them do differently so that the situation would have a more positive outcome?

6. Step out of the circuit and break state. (*Like eating a piece of cheese during a wine tasting, to cleanse the palate. Jump a bit if you will*)
 - a) What is now clear about the “Self,” the “Other,” and the relationship?
 - b) Is the “Self” solution-oriented, or is it part of the problem?

7. **Fourth Position** - Now go to the fourth position, the position of the collective. Enter this position and consider the entire interaction from this point of view, with the goal of guiding the whole system toward a greater good.
 - a) How is this system affected by this interaction?
 - b) What adjustments are needed to ensure the greater good of the system?
 - c) What impact will there be if this dynamic continues?

8. Return to the **first position**, resuming your own point of view in the interaction.
 - a) What has changed in your perception?
 - b) What did you learn from the different perspectives?
 - c) How is your behavior affected by all this new information?

9. You may go through all the other positions again if there is additional information you wish to add. Always finish in the first position.

10. Now imagine a future situation in which this interaction could occur again.
 - a) How do you imagine yourself responding?
 - b) What will you do differently?