

Attitude in NLP Counseling

Dolf J.H. van der Haven

Attitude is in my vision both the most central and the most difficult skill that a counsellor or therapist needs in order to get good results with his or her clients. As probably known, a significant part of the techniques and structures of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) was derived from modelling successful therapists (e.g. Virginia Satir, Milton Erickson and others), but from this mainly language patterns, such as the Meta Model, and procedures, such as Change Personal History, have come about. Those patterns and procedures, however valuable, do not yet touch the core of what therapy is about. That core is about the attitude of the therapist. The importance of the attitude is in short to create a rapport between therapist and client that goes farther than the “chemistry” between the two, which is how rapport is often defined.

A good attitude create open space: space that enables the client to express his experience; space that is important for the therapist to be touched by what the client expresses and based on that to react on what is expressed. This is not only valuable in counselling or psychotherapy, but as well in coaching, mediation and other situation where you want to get to a deeper understanding between yourself and the other. For convenience' sake I will in this article refer to “therapy” and “therapist”, though. I would like to touch on a difference between classic NLP and NLP Counseling. Classic NLP bases itself on patterns, structures and processes, without dealing explicitly with the contents of what the client expresses. This has often led to criticism of people stating that NLP is because of this a rational, abstract or even superficial approach. NLP Counseling wants to fill in this gap by dealing explicitly with the contents of the clients' experience. This does happen based on techniques that are derived from NLP, but these techniques are mainly used to go into the depth of the clients' experience and come to the essence of it. This approach can therefore provide healing at a far more fundamental level than classic NLP can.

This article wants to make clear what it is that is crucial in the therapist's attitude and does so in three parts. First, I explain how attitude fits in developmental psychological models. Then I deal with the various elements that attitude consists of and finally I approach attitude from a transpersonal perspective. These three parts want to show that attitude can on the one hand be created by a number of behavioural elements, but that the real core of attitude goes beyond merely behaviour. It deals in fact with an expression of the Essence of a human being from the creativity comes forth to effectively support clients. That goes farther than just a skill that can be learnt like a technique or a procedure and would be measurable. It is about a state of our being, an expression of who we really are. And that is not quantifiable.

I. Psychological Development

According to many models that describe the personal development of man, every person goes through a development in which various lines of development go through a number of phases or stages. Lines of development are to be understood as elements of one's personality that grow relatively independently from each other. Examples of lines are morality, cognition, value patterns, relational capacity, spirituality, etc. The

phases through which these lines go have been described by a large number of psychologists, philosophers and spiritual teachers (such as Piaget, Beck and Cowan (*Spiral Dynamics*), Ken Wilber, Maslow, Robert, Kegan, Sri Aurobindo, etc.) in different ways, but are in general agreement about a hierarchical model in which later stages include earlier stages: later stages are more developed than earlier stages and don't leave earlier stages behind, but take them along with themselves. That means that later stages are not only hierarchical, but also holistic.

This hierarchy can be described in terminology of Wilber and Piaget in the following manner. Human development starts at a phase that is called *Sensorimotor*, in which experience is based on physical aspects of the environment: the human being that is looking for basic needs such as food and shelter. The next phase is called *Pre-operational* and here the human experience is based on emotional and symbolic aspects: feelings are being developed and the world is seen as subject to a realm of spirits and gods. *Concrete Operational* is the phase in which external rules and roles within the community are important. From this phase, one can develop oneself to *Formal Operational*, in which the worldview is based on abstractions and where the individual frees himself from the community and finds his own path. Beyond this phase lies the *Post-formal* one, where pluralism, or the acknowledgement of multiple, equal, worldviews, is the determining factor. After this follow several post-post-formal or *Transpersonal* phases. These are the phases in which aspects are important that are more spiritual in nature, that emphasise the unity of humankind and in which a unifying or integral vision is developed. The following scheme shows these stages in a visual way, where the direction of development is from the bottom upwards.

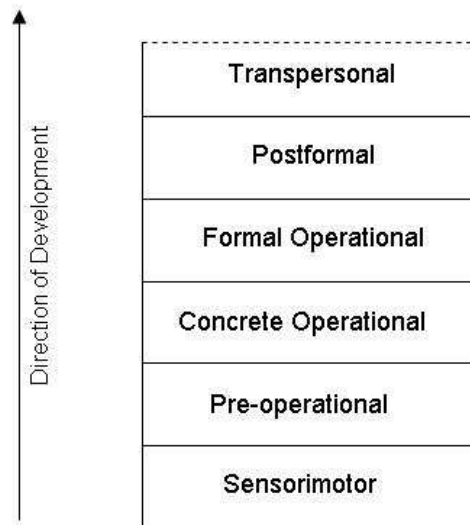


Figure 1. The Stages of Development of Man.

In the majority of the cases, the current psychological development of people reach to somewhere in the first five stages, that are together also called the *Personal* stages. The Transpersonal stages that follow these are those in which an integral vision is developed with which the whole of the personal stages can be overseen. This integral vision does not only involve oversight of all previous stages, but also oversight of aspects that are to do with someone's inner development (psychology, emotions, spirituality, etc.), someone's physical development (health, physical condition, food, etc.), someone's culture (ethnic background, communication, etc.) and someone's social structures (structure of society, politics, communities, etc.). Furthermore, someone who has developed into the Transpersonal stages can make use of any of the previous stages in situations where it is appropriate: different situations can call for the use of elements of any of the five Personal stages. This applies both to situations where one finds oneself individually and to communication and interaction with others.

A client that comes to a therapist is therefore in general (viz. in 99% of humanity) in one of the Personal stages. The problem of the client, however, has its origin in one of the earlier stages: for example, a traumatic event at an early age may have happened in a Pre-operational stage, whereas the client at this moment in time suffers from the consequences and has already developed himself to a Post-formal stage. Healing can then consist of going back to the time or period when the trauma has developed itself and to re-evaluate the events that took place at that time, but then from the current (adult) level of development. *Inner Child Work* is a method that is partly based on this. The first task of a therapist in this context is to assess the psychological level of development of the client and to *adapt* to it. The assessment of the level development of the client serves two aims: the creation of *rapport* (it is necessary to build a level of affinity between client and therapist that encourages the creation of a trust-relationship) and the separation of models of the world of the client and the therapist (the therapist will never use his own model of the world to approach the client from, but work primarily from the model of the world of the client). In this, adaptation to the level of development of the client is crucial. In fact, it makes no sense to approach the client from a Transpersonal model of the world if the client is still far away from it. That could lead to confusion, misunderstanding, lack of rapport or socially acceptable behaviour (where the client pretends to understand the therapist, but in fact does not manage to do so), which leads to the therapy becoming ineffective. There therapist will therefore have to go to a level at which the client understands him: the same level as where the client is at or, in order to stimulate development with the client, slightly above it.

For the therapist this means in practice that he has developed up to a level that is Transpersonal or Integral, because at that level an integral vision has developed from which it is possible to oversee the personal levels and the therapist can from there use the personal levels to approach the client in the right way.

II. Affective Affirmative Presence

The expression "affective confirmative presence" was comes from my teacher NLP Counseling Chris van de Velde and indicates the essence of the attitude of the therapist. By analysing this expression I want to make clear what this essence is. "Affective" means that the client is approached for an important part based on his emotions. In fact, in the previous section it became clear that emotions are developed in one of the earliest phases of life of a human being. Therefore it is particularly

emotions where we can start from to heal a client: in situations where for example emotions were not permitted, but had to be concealed because it was socially not acceptable to show them, a void in the personal development was left. Here, the therapist can help to have the client fill up that void again, for example using the aforementioned *Inner Child Work*.

“Affective affirmation” is that instrument to fill up the void. With it, the therapist give open space to the client to show his emotions about certain events in the past, such that the client is accepted having those emotions, such that is OK to have those emotions and that they can be expressed freely. The only task of the therapist at that moment is to affirm the client in his emotions: express that emotions are a normal, natural reaction to what happened and that it is good to express them. This phase can already be a major step towards healing for the client.

“Presence” finally is the most intangible element of this attitude but can be explained as the combination of a few elements. I base these elements on the work the A.H. Almaas has called “*The Diamond Approach*”. This is a method of self-inquiry and growth in which someone evaluates his experience in a certain situation – thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and reactions – and subsequently uses a method of asking the right questions to go deeper into those. This process leads to personal development. Note that Almaas uses this approach as a method for self-inquiry, whereas I use the same elements for the attitude of the therapist towards his clients. In fact, *evaluating* your own experience is the same as the *presence* of the therapist at it. Important elements of this attitude are the following:

- *Openness* – being open and sensitive to change, to new things, to the truth that shows itself in the process of working with the client.
- *Observation* – the direct and unprejudiced observation of your own experience and the experience of the other in a certain situation.
- *Intelligence* – sharpness and mindfulness for what the client expresses, paired with an analytical ability to distil the essence from this.
- *Concentration* – aiming oneself at the observation of the client and his experience without letting oneself be distracted by irrelevant things.
- *Interest* – departing from a point of not-knowing, therefore being unprejudiced, to find together with the client the truth about his experience.
- *Love for the Truth* – a state of wondering where a certain state or emotion of the client of the therapist comes from without necessarily wanting to go to a solution. The *Truth* is in this case the reality of the moment, that what really happened, without being veiled by layers of beliefs, fears, blockades of emotions, etc.

Based on the above elements of attitude, the right *questions* can be asked that can help the client to penetrate further into the essence of his problems. Those questions will arise automatically if the abovementioned elements of attitude are followed.

Note that these elements are not only intended to give the client the open space to express himself, but also to invite him to assume the same attitude – in this way the therapist invites the client to do the client’s self-inquiry together and as such go through a process of healing.

III. The Witness

What has been described before as the Attitude of the therapist has a lot of commonalities with what is called the *Fair Witness* in Gestalt Therapy. The Witness can be described as that part in us that observes our experience and the world around us: both that what observes the personal experience of the therapist (physically, emotionally, rationally and spiritually) and that what observes the same experience of the client and everything that happens at a certain moment in present time. By sitting down and only noticing what is happening in presence, what one observes, what one's thoughts are, what one's (physical and emotional) feelings are, without wandering away, this Witness can already be practically experienced. This is a pretty difficult task, as can be observed when trying to do the previous thing for ten minutes. The Witness is already present from birth as a baby observes as well, but access to it is a separate line of development that is called *Causal* development. "Causal" here means that the Witness is the cause of awareness, attention, of the Essential Emptiness as the creative source of all there is, in short of the presence of the therapist. With this, I want to emphasize that the attitude of the therapist has a direct link with the Witness from Gestalt and with the causal line of development of the therapist. It was shown that the causal line only really comes to fruition in the transpersonal stages of human development. The fact that this lies in the higher stages of development shows again that the personal development of a therapist should be particularly advanced and it explains furthermore why the right attitude is so difficult to grasp. Nevertheless it is the more rewarding when the right attitude can be assumed in order to attain great results with clients.

Conclusion

In the previous sections you have been able to read that the attitude of an NLP Counsellor is a central aspect of how he deals with his clients. That attitude has a lot to do with the personal history and psychological development of the therapist. There can also be shown a number of behavioural elements that lead to the right attitude, whereas the core of it in fact goes much further than those behaviours alone. The core of attitude is to make contact with the own Witness, with that part in man that observes, that which is the cause of awareness, empathy and creativity. The Witness is worth developing not only in a therapeutic context, but also in everyday communication with others. A well-developed Witness and with it a well-developed attitude can then lead to more effective, purer communication and to a better understanding between people.

Literature

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2. A.H. Almaas – Spacecruiser Inquiry, Shambhala, 2002.
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Author

Dolf van der Haven is NLP Master Practitioner and graduated NLP Counsellor. He works as Manager Engineering in a telecom company and next to that as a counsellor in his own practice. More info and contact: <http://www.icc-vanderhaven.nl/>.