

NLP Presuppositions

The working beliefs of Neuro-Linguistic Programming

A visual summary of what they say, how to use them, and their limits

Meaning · Diagrams · Practical applications · Questions · Cautions

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INTRODUCTION

What are NLP presuppositions?

Presuppositions are the **working assumptions** of NLP: a set of beliefs that practitioners adopt *as if* they were true, because acting from them tends to produce more useful results. They are not offered as proven facts. Developed from the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder, they draw on ideas from Alfred Korzybski, Gregory Bateson, Virginia Satir and Milton Erickson.

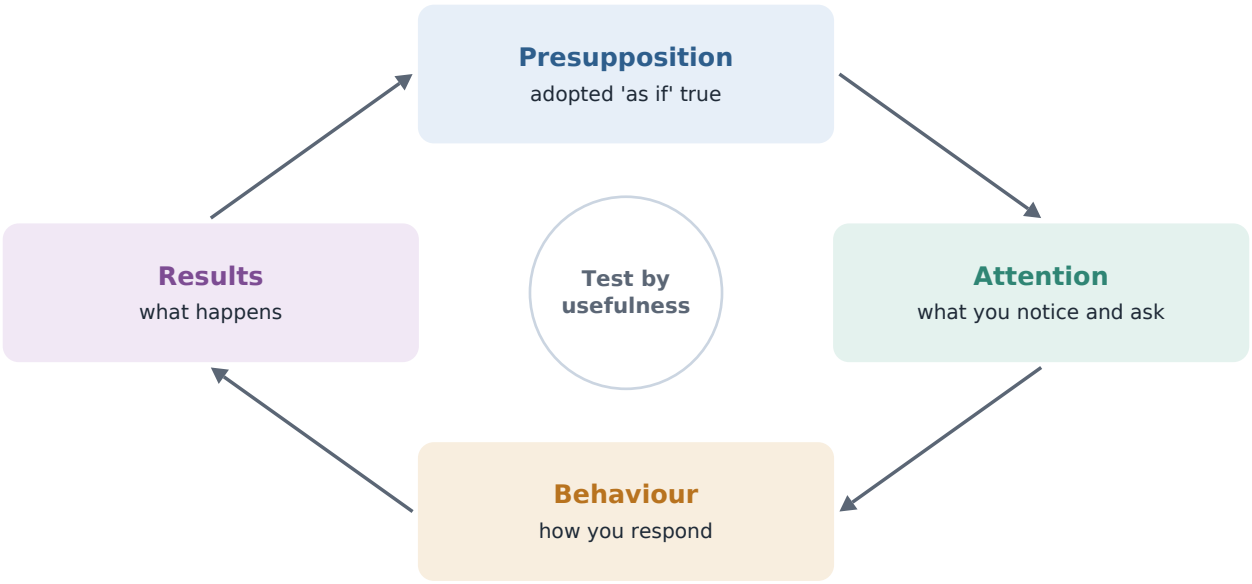


Figure: presuppositions shape attention and behaviour; their value is judged by results.

Feature	What it means
Working beliefs	Chosen because they are useful, not because they are proven true
Operating principles	They guide how a practitioner listens, questions and responds
Not a fixed list	Different trainers list between about 10 and 20+; the core set overlaps
Testable in practice	Adopt one for a week and notice what changes in your results

KEY POINT

A helpful way to read every presupposition is to add the words **“Act as if…”** in front of it. “Act as if there is no failure, only feedback” is a stance, not a claim about the universe.

INTRODUCTION

The core presuppositions at a glance

This guide covers fourteen presuppositions that appear in most NLP practitioner trainings, grouped into four themes.

Perception & meaning

1. The map is not the territory
2. Respect each person's model of the world
3. Experience has a structure

Mind, body & communication

4. Mind and body are one system
5. You cannot not communicate
6. The meaning of communication is the response you get
7. Resistance signals a lack of rapport

People & behaviour

8. Every behaviour has a positive intention
9. A person is not their behaviour
10. People make the best choice available & have the resources they need

Learning & change

11. There is no failure, only feedback
12. The most flexible element influences the system
13. If one person can do it, others can learn it
14. Having choice is better than no choice

Theme	Underlying idea	Main influence
Perception & meaning	We respond to our representations of the world	Korzybski's general semantics
Mind, body & communication	Communication is constant, whole-person and judged by effect	Bateson; Watzlawick et al.
People & behaviour	Separate a person's worth and intentions from their actions	Satir; Erickson
Learning & change	Results are information; flexibility and choice drive change	Ashby's cybernetics; modeling

PERCEPTION & MEANING

1. The map is not the territory

> **The map is not the territory.**
>
> *Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity (1933)*

Nobody experiences reality directly. Our senses, language, memories and beliefs filter events into an internal **map**, and we respond to that map. Two people in the same situation can have very different maps — and so very different reactions.

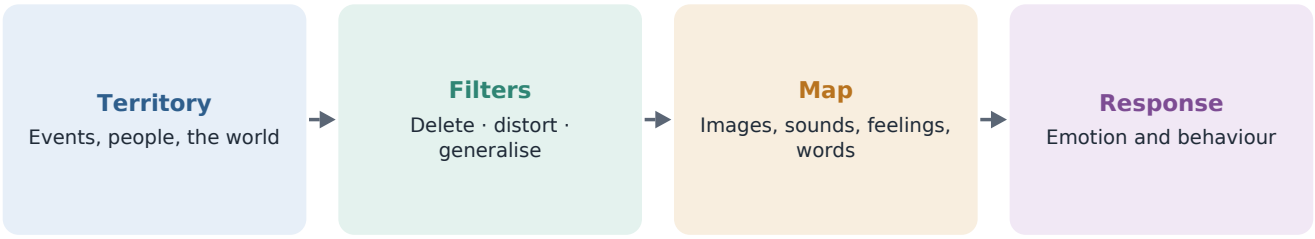


Figure: from events to response through filters.

Context	Applying the presupposition
Coaching	Explore how the client represents the problem before trying to solve it
Conflict	Assume each party is responding sensibly to a different map
Business	Test assumptions with customers rather than trusting the internal plan

Questions it prompts

- What am I assuming that might not be in the territory?
- How might someone else map this same situation?
- Which part of my map most limits my choices here?

USE WITH CARE

This does not mean facts don't matter or that all maps are equally valid. Some maps fit the territory better than others.

PERCEPTION & MEANING

2. Respect each person's model of the world

> **Respect the other person's model of the world.**
>
> *A foundation of rapport in NLP practice*

Because everyone has a different map, the starting point for influence is to understand and respect the other person's map — not to agree with it, but to treat it as making sense from where they stand.

Respecting a map
Understanding why it makes sense to them

≠

Agreeing with it
Adopting their view as your own

Context	Applying the presupposition
Coaching	Work within the client's values and language rather than imposing yours
Sales	Learn what 'value' means to this buyer before presenting features
Parenting	Acknowledge a child's fear as real for them before reassuring

Questions it prompts

- How does this make sense from their point of view?
- What do they value that I might be missing?
- Can I describe their position so well that they'd agree with my summary?

USE WITH CARE
Respect does not mean accepting harmful behaviour. You can respect someone's map and still hold boundaries.

PERCEPTION & MEANING

3. Experience has a structure

> **Experience has a structure; change the structure and the experience changes.**
>
> *Bandler & Grinder*

Thoughts and feelings are not random. They are organised in sequences and in qualities of images, sounds and feelings. Changing the **order** or the **qualities** — rather than only the content — can change how an experience feels.



Figure: an example structure of procrastination.

Context	Applying the presupposition
Habits	Find the step in the sequence where a new choice can be inserted
Anxiety	Notice how the worry is represented (size, distance, voice) and experiment
Learning	Elicit the steps a skilled learner uses and teach that sequence

Questions it prompts

- What happens first, and then what?
- How do you represent this: a picture, a sound, a feeling?
- What changes if one quality (distance, volume) changes?

USE WITH CARE

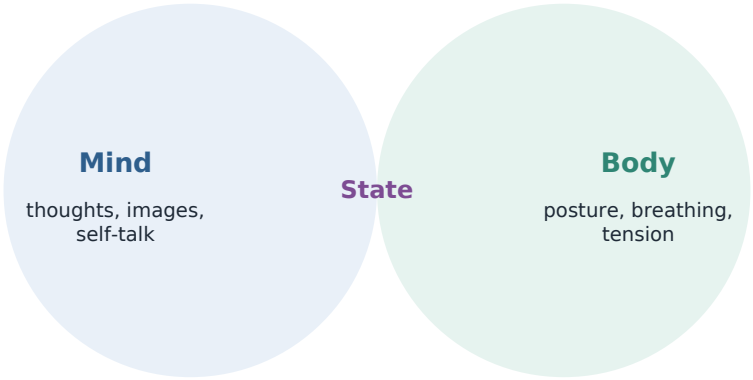
Changing structure can help with everyday reactions. Persistent or severe problems still need appropriate professional support.

MIND, BODY & COMMUNICATION

4. Mind and body are one system

> **Mind and body are parts of the same system.**
>
> *Influenced by Gregory Bateson's systems thinking*

Thoughts affect the body, and the body affects thoughts. Changing posture, breathing or movement can shift a mental state; changing what you picture or say to yourself can shift your physiology.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Performance	Use breathing and posture to support a calm, focused state
Coaching	Notice physical shifts as signals of internal change
Wellbeing	Combine mental techniques with sleep, movement and rest

Questions it prompts

- What is my body doing while I think about this?
- What posture goes with the state I want?
- How does changing my breathing change my thoughts?

USE WITH CARE

This is consistent with mainstream research on stress and emotion, but it does not mean every illness is 'in the mind'.

MIND, BODY & COMMUNICATION

5. You cannot not communicate

> **You cannot not communicate.**
>
> *Paul Watzlawick et al., Pragmatics of Human Communication (1967)*

Every behaviour in the presence of others sends a message, including silence, stillness and not replying. People will interpret what you do, so it's worth being aware of what you are signalling.



Figure: messages flow through many channels at once.

Context	Applying the presupposition
Meetings	Notice what your posture and silence communicate, not just your words
Email	A delayed or missing reply is also read as a message
Leadership	Teams read meaning into what leaders do not say or do

Questions it prompts

- What am I communicating without words right now?
- How might my silence be interpreted?
- Is my non-verbal message consistent with my words?

USE WITH CARE

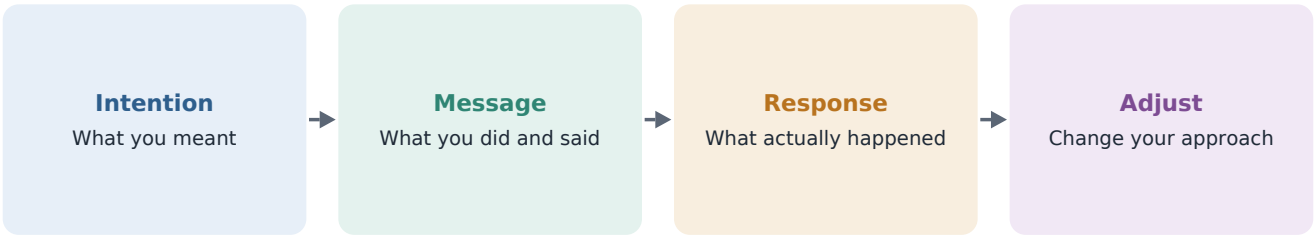
Others' interpretations may be wrong. Awareness helps, but you can't control every reading of your behaviour.

MIND, BODY & COMMUNICATION

6. The meaning of communication is the response you get

> **The meaning of your communication is the response you get.**
>
> *A core NLP principle of flexibility*

Judge communication by its effect rather than by your intention. If you didn't get the response you wanted, change your approach rather than blaming the listener or repeating yourself louder.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Teaching	If students don't understand, try a new explanation, example or diagram
Management	If instructions aren't followed, check how they were received
Relationships	If your words hurt, notice the impact even if it wasn't intended

Questions it prompts

- What response did I actually get?
- What could I do differently to get the response I want?
- What did they hear, as opposed to what I meant?

USE WITH CARE

This is a stance for the speaker's flexibility, not a rule that the speaker is always to blame for others' reactions.

MIND, BODY & COMMUNICATION

7. Resistance signals a lack of rapport

> **There are no resistant clients, only inflexible communicators.**
>
> *A common NLP training phrasing*

When people push back, NLP treats it as feedback that the communicator hasn't yet matched the other person's concerns, pace or values. Instead of pushing harder, slow down, pace and understand.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Coaching	When a client says 'yes, but…', explore the 'but' rather than argue
Sales	Treat objections as information about unmet needs
Change programmes	Involve sceptics early and address their concerns

Questions it prompts

- What concern have I not acknowledged yet?
- Am I leading before I've paced?
- What would make this easier for them to say yes to?

USE WITH CARE

Sometimes 'resistance' is a legitimate 'no'. Respect people's right to disagree; rapport is not a tool to override it.

PEOPLE & BEHAVIOUR

8. Every behaviour has a positive intention

> **Every behaviour has a positive intention.**
>
> *Drawn from Satir and the reframing work of Bandler & Grinder*

Behind any behaviour there is a purpose that is positive *for the person*, such as safety, comfort, love or recognition. Change becomes easier when you keep the intention and find a better behaviour to serve it.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Habits	Ask what the habit gives you before trying to remove it
Conflict	Look for the need behind someone's difficult behaviour
Self-talk	Ask what a harsh inner critic is trying to protect you from

Questions it prompts

- What is this behaviour trying to achieve?
- What else could achieve the same intention?
- What would be lost if the behaviour simply stopped?

USE WITH CARE

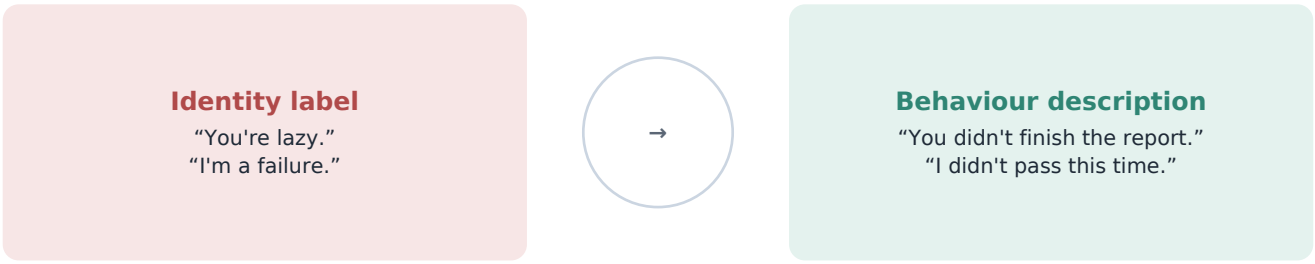
A positive intention never excuses harmful behaviour. The purpose is to find better ways to meet the need, not to justify the act.

PEOPLE & BEHAVIOUR

9. A person is not their behaviour

> **People are not their behaviours.**
>
> *Separating identity from action*

A behaviour is something a person does in a context, not who they are. Separating the two makes feedback easier to hear and change more possible: “You missed the deadline” invites action; “You're unreliable” invites defence.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Feedback	Describe the specific behaviour and its impact, not the person's character
Parenting	“That was unkind” rather than “You're a bad child”
Self-talk	Notice when a mistake becomes an identity statement

Questions it prompts

- Am I describing an action or labelling a person?
- In which contexts does this person behave differently?
- What would I say if I focused only on what happened?

USE WITH CARE

People are still responsible for their behaviour. Separating the two supports accountability without attacking identity.

PEOPLE & BEHAVIOUR

10. People make the best choice available and have the resources they need

> **People make the best choice available to them, and already have the resources they need.**
>
> *Two closely linked presuppositions*

People choose the best option they can see in the moment, given their map, state and skills. Many of the resources they need — calm, confidence, creativity — are already present in other contexts and can be accessed.



Figure: expanding resources expands visible choices.

Context	Applying the presupposition
Coaching	Find a time the client already showed the needed quality, and bring it in
Mistakes	Ask what options seemed available at the time, not just what went wrong
Teams	Expand options through training and support rather than blame

Questions it prompts

- When have you already shown this resource somewhere else?
- What choices could you see at that moment?
- What would make a better choice visible next time?

USE WITH CARE

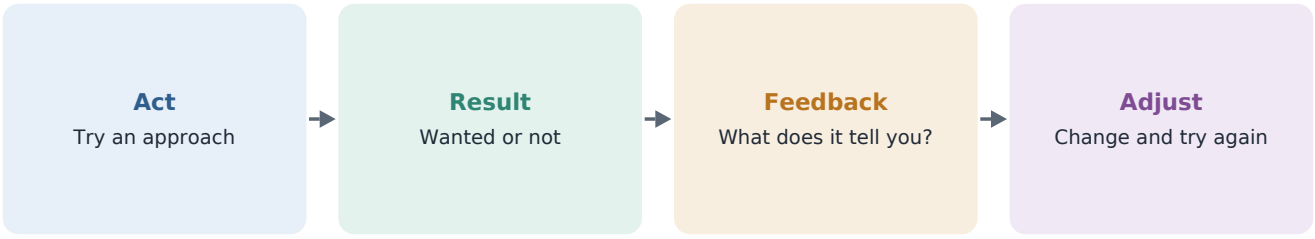
Some needs really require external resources: money, support, treatment, safety. This presupposition shouldn't deny those.

LEARNING & CHANGE

11. There is no failure, only feedback

> **There is no failure, only feedback.**
>
> *A learning stance central to NLP*

Any result, wanted or not, tells you something about what to do next. Treating unwanted outcomes as information keeps attention on learning rather than on blame.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Learning skills	Review each attempt: what worked, what to change
Business	Treat failed experiments as data for the next iteration
Personal goals	Track progress rather than judging single setbacks

Questions it prompts

- What did this result teach me?
- What will I do differently next time?
- What worked, even partly?

USE WITH CARE

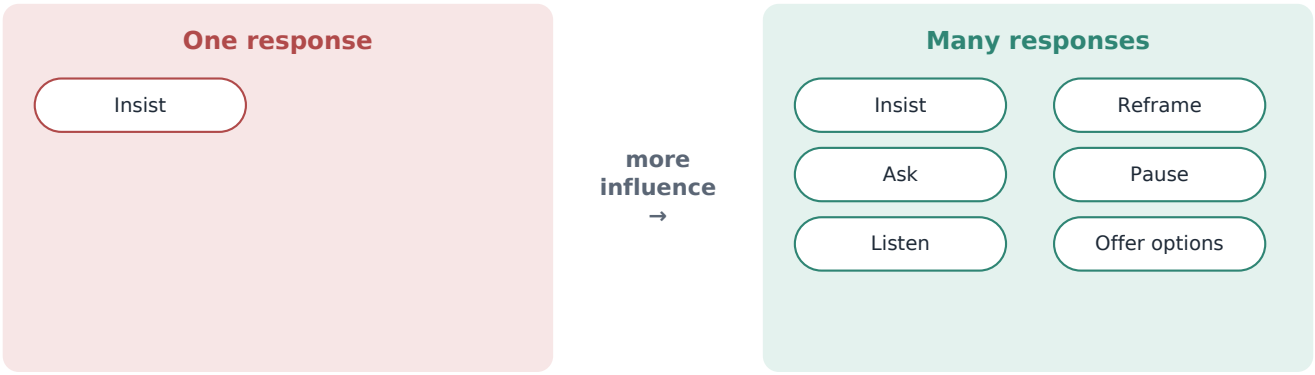
Disappointment is still a normal feeling. Failure as an outcome is real; this presupposition is about how you respond to it.

LEARNING & CHANGE

12. The most flexible element influences the system

> **The element with the most flexibility will have the most influence in the system.**
>
> *Adapted from W. Ross Ashby's law of requisite variety (1956)*

In any interaction, the person who has the widest range of responses is best placed to influence the outcome. If what you're doing isn't working, do something different.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Negotiation	Prepare several acceptable options rather than one fixed position
Parenting	Have different ways to respond to the same behaviour
Leadership	Adapt style to the person and the situation

Questions it prompts

- How many different responses do I have here?
- What haven't I tried yet?
- Where am I stuck repeating the same approach?

USE WITH CARE

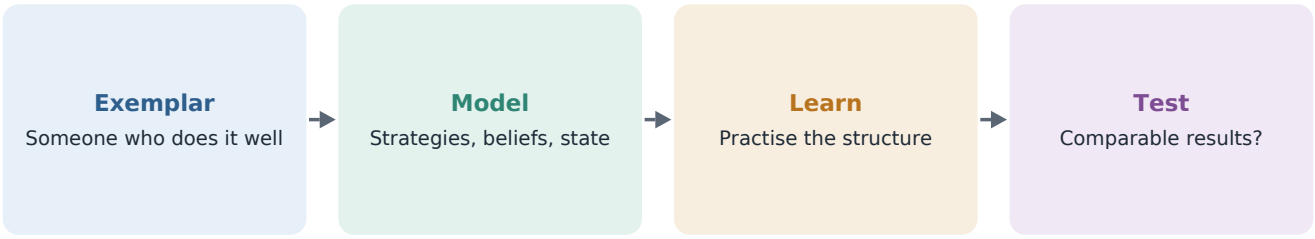
Flexibility means appropriate options, not unpredictability or giving up your values. Ashby's original law is a technical cybernetics principle.

LEARNING & CHANGE

13. If one person can do it, others can learn it

> **If one person can do something, it is possible to model it and teach it to others.**
>
> *The basis of NLP modeling*

Excellent performance has a structure: strategies, beliefs and states. By studying how someone does something well, that structure can often be described and learned by others — allowing for differences in physiology, context and starting point.



Context	Applying the presupposition
Skills	Study how top performers think through key decisions
Self-modeling	Model your own best days and repeat what worked
Education	Teach the strategies good learners use, not just the content

Questions it prompts

- Who already does this well?
- What do they do, think and believe that I don't?
- Which elements actually make the difference?

USE WITH CARE

Not everything is learnable by everyone: physical limits, years of practice and circumstances matter. Read it as 'often learnable', not 'always'.

LEARNING & CHANGE

14. Having choice is better than no choice

> **Having a choice is better than having no choice.**
>
> *The goal of most NLP interventions*

NLP aims to **add** options rather than take behaviours away. A person with several possible responses to a situation is freer than one with a single automatic reaction. One choice is no choice; two is a dilemma; three or more is real choice.



Figure: from automatic reaction to genuine choice (illustrative).

Context	Applying the presupposition
Habits	Add alternative responses to the trigger rather than only forbidding the habit
Coaching	Generate at least three options before deciding
Relationships	Develop more ways to respond in recurring arguments

Questions it prompts

- What are three different ways I could respond?
- Does this change add choice or remove it?
- What would increase my options here?

USE WITH CARE

Too many options can overwhelm. The aim is enough meaningful choices, followed by a decision.

USING THE PRESUPPOSITIONS

Applying presuppositions in everyday contexts

The presuppositions are most useful as **lenses** to look through in specific situations. The matrix suggests where each one tends to be especially helpful.

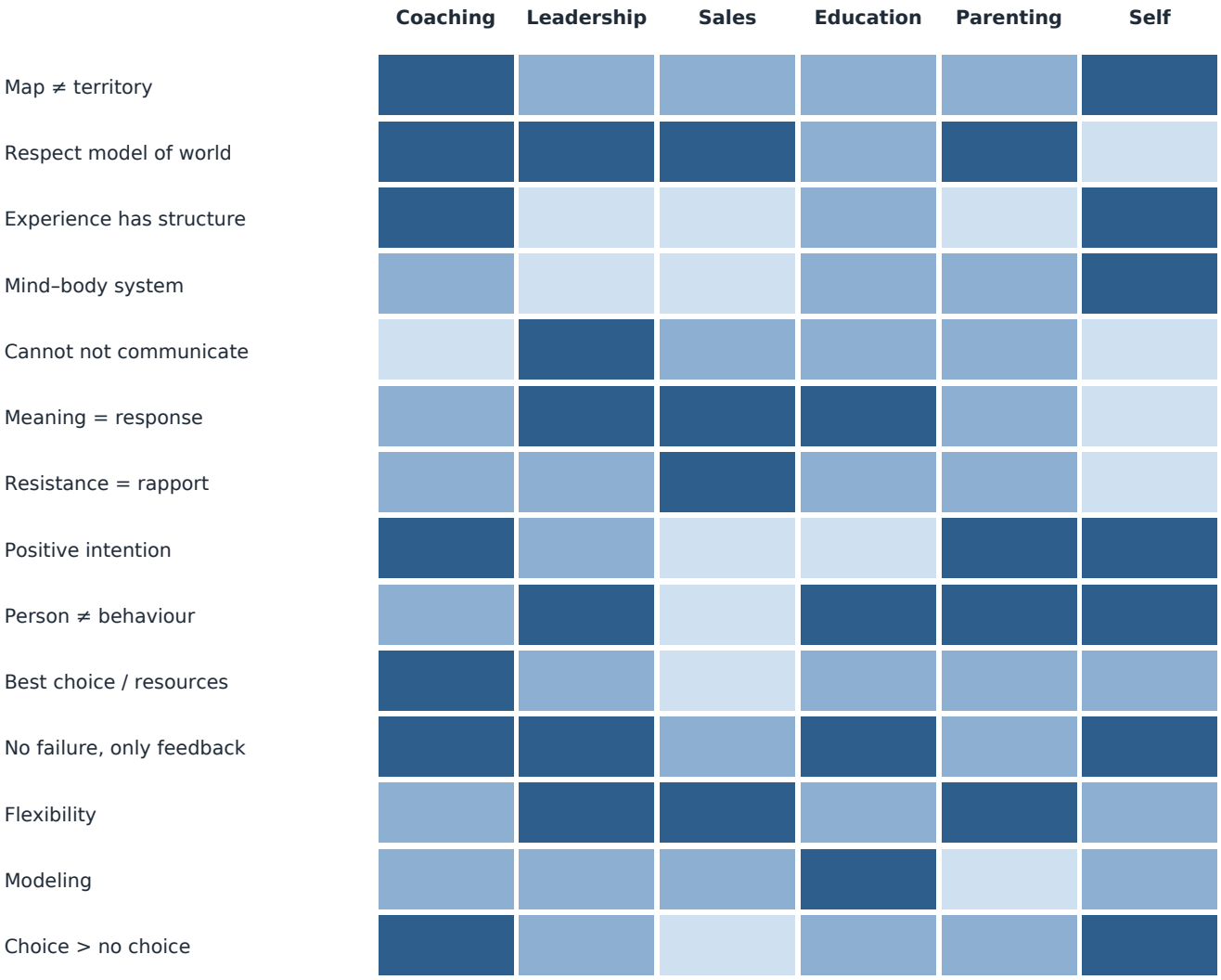


Figure: practitioner guideline; darker = more often useful in that context. Not empirically derived.

A one-week experiment

Pick one
Choose a presupposition

→

Act as if
Use it for 7 days

→

Notice
What changes in results?

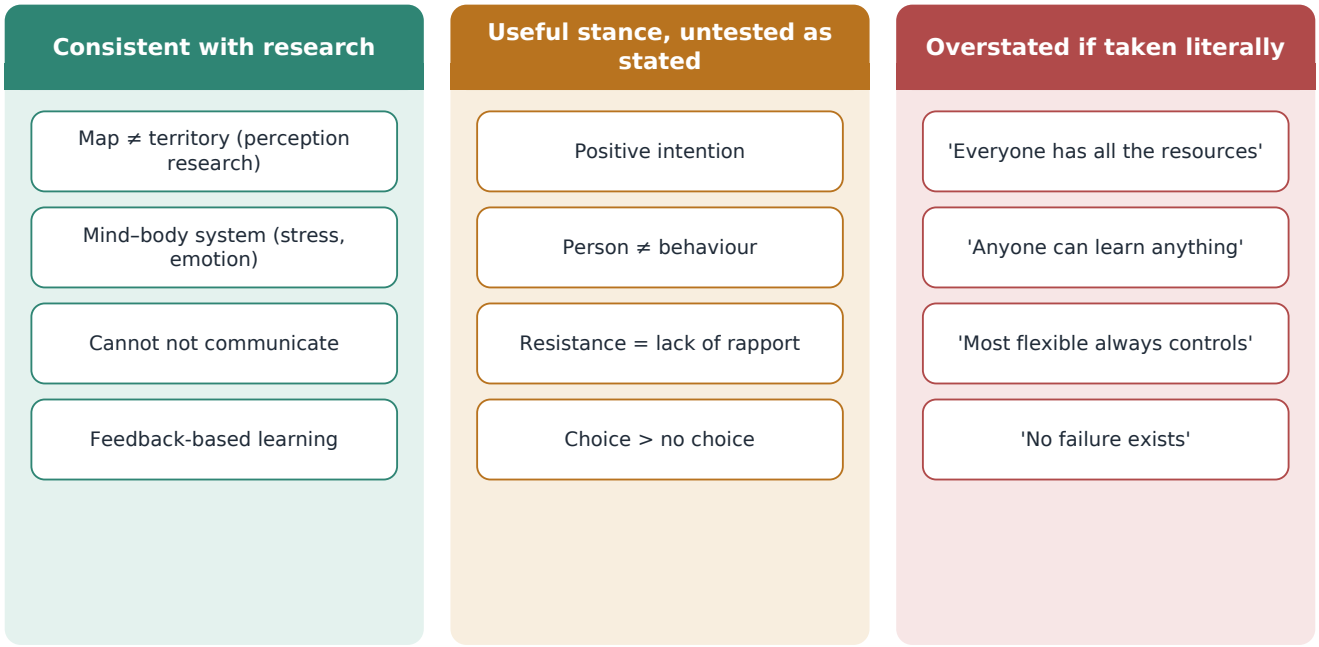
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Keep or drop
Keep what's useful

USING THE PRESUPPOSITIONS

Limits, misuse and evidence

Presuppositions are powerful precisely because they are simple. Taken literally or used carelessly, the same simplicity can mislead. NLP as a whole has limited empirical support (see e.g. Witkowski, 2010), although several presuppositions echo well-established ideas from psychology and communication research.



Interpretive summary, not a formal review.

Common misuse	Better use
“There's no failure” to dismiss real disappointment	Acknowledge feelings, then look for the lesson
“Positive intention” to excuse harm	Hold people accountable and meet the need another way
“Meaning = response” to take all blame	Adjust your approach; others still own their reactions
“Resistance = rapport” to override a 'no'	Respect real disagreement and consent
“You have all the resources” to deny needs	Recognise when external help or support is needed

KEY POINT

Treat each presupposition as a **hypothesis to try on**, not a truth to defend. Keep what improves your results and your relationships.

USING THE PRESUPPOSITIONS

Quick reference

All fourteen presuppositions with a one-line practical takeaway.

#	Presupposition	Practical takeaway
1	The map is not the territory	Check your assumptions; others see differently
2	Respect each person's model of the world	Understand before trying to influence
3	Experience has a structure	Change the how, not just the what
4	Mind and body are one system	Use posture and breath to shift state
5	You cannot not communicate	Your silence and body speak too
6	Meaning = the response you get	If it didn't land, change your approach
7	Resistance signals a lack of rapport	Pace more before you lead
8	Every behaviour has a positive intention	Keep the intention, change the behaviour
9	A person is not their behaviour	Give feedback on actions, not identity
10	Best choice available / have resources	Expand options; find existing resources
11	No failure, only feedback	Treat results as data
12	Most flexible element influences	Do something different
13	If one can, others can learn	Model excellence, test what matters
14	Choice is better than no choice	Aim for at least three options

Further reading	
Korzybski, A. (1933)	*Science and Sanity*
Ashby, W. R. (1956)	*An Introduction to Cybernetics*
Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. & Jackson, D. (1967)	*Pragmatics of Human Communication*
Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1979)	*Frogs into Princes*
O'Connor, J. & Seymour, J. (1990)	*Introducing NLP*