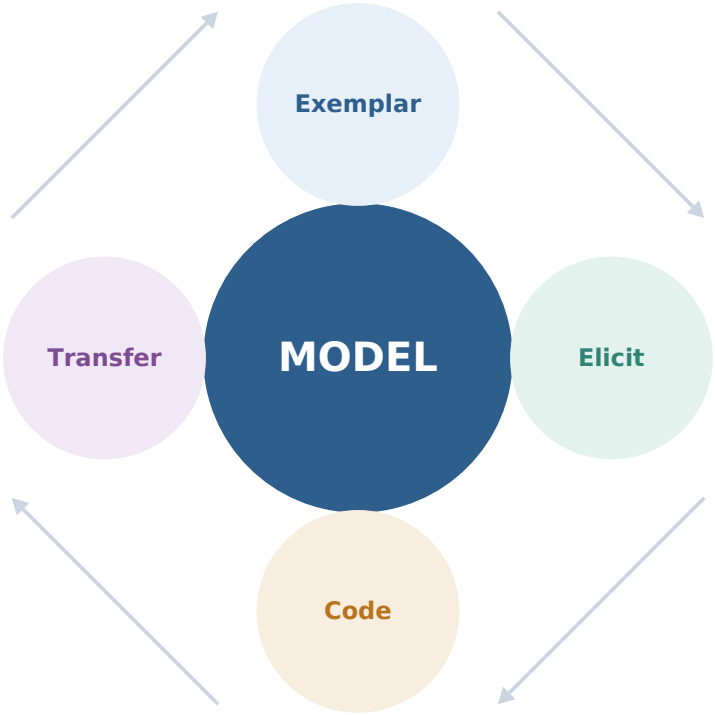


Modeling in Neuro-Linguistic Programming

A visual summary of how NLP captures, codes and transfers excellence

Origins · Frameworks · Approaches · Step-by-step process · Applications · Evidence

November 2026

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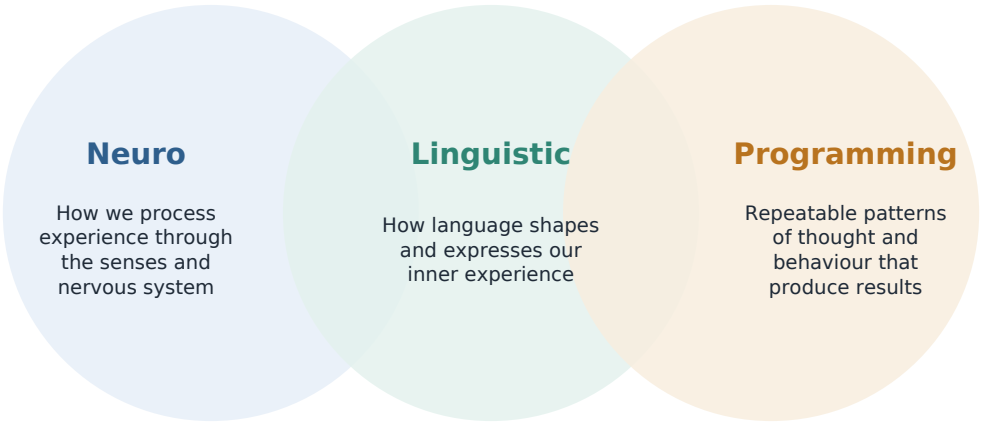
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1 · FOUNDATIONS

What is NLP?

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) emerged in the early-to-mid 1970s at the University of California, Santa Cruz, from the collaboration of Richard Bandler and John Grinder, with early contributions from Frank Pucelik and the intellectual influence of Gregory Bateson. Its founders described it less as a set of techniques and more as a method for studying the **structure of subjective experience**.



Modeling sits at the centre: it studies all three together in a skilled person.

Element	What it covers	Relevance to modeling
Neuro	Sensory input, internal representations, physiology, state	Captures how an expert sees, hears and feels while performing
Linguistic	Words, metaphors, questions, self-talk	Language is both a window into and a lever on the expert's map
Programming	Sequences (strategies) that run reliably	The goal is a repeatable sequence others can run

KEY POINT

Many NLP trainers describe modeling as the 'heart' of NLP: the techniques taught today are the *products* of earlier modeling projects. Learn the techniques and you learn results; learn modeling and you learn how results are made.

1 · FOUNDATIONS

What is modeling?

Modeling is the process of identifying how a person achieves an outstanding result, capturing the patterns that make the difference, and packaging them so that other people can learn to produce comparable results. The target is not the expert's content (what they know) but the **structure** (how they do it).

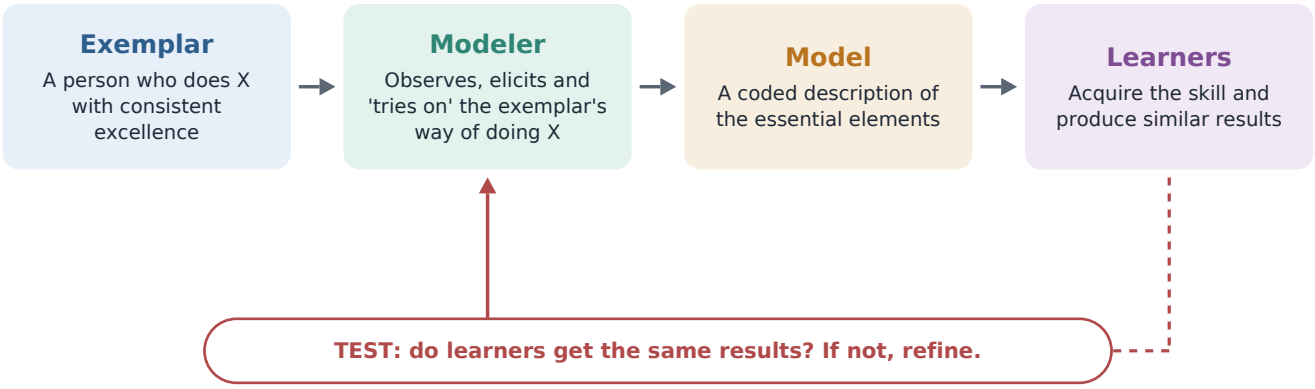


Figure: the basic modeling cycle — from exemplar to transferable model, closed by a results test.

Three things a modeler looks for

Layer	Question	Example (a calm crisis negotiator)
Behaviour	What do they visibly do?	Slows speech, lowers voice, mirrors breathing pace
Internal process	What happens inside, in what order?	Pictures the other person's goal before speaking
Beliefs & criteria	What must be true for them?	“Everyone is doing the best they can right now”

KEY POINT

A model is judged by **usefulness, not truth**. It does not claim to describe what is 'really' happening in the expert's brain; it claims that if you do these things, you will get results like theirs.

1 · FOUNDATIONS

Why model excellence?

Experts are often the worst people to ask how they do what they do. Their skill has become automatic, so their explanations are incomplete or even misleading. Modeling closes that gap between *what experts say* and *what experts actually do*.

1 Accelerate learning

Shortcut years of trial and error by copying what already works

2 Capture tacit expertise

Make 'gut feel' and intuition explicit and discussable

3 Preserve know-how

Keep critical skills when experts retire or leave

4 Scale excellence

Turn one top performer's approach into a team standard

5 Create new techniques

Most NLP change patterns began as modeling projects

6 Build self-awareness

Modeling yourself reveals your own success strategies

Training vs. modeling

	Conventional training	Modeling-based learning
Starting point	Theory, rules, content	A living exemplar who already gets results
Focus	What to know	How to think, feel and act in sequence
Source of tacit skill	Usually left out	Explicitly sought and coded
Success test	Knowledge check / exam	Comparable results in a comparable timeframe

KEY POINT

Modeling assumes that if one person can do something, the **structure** of that ability can, in principle, be learned by others — allowing for differences in physiology, context and prior skill.

1 · FOUNDATIONS

The founding models

NLP began as a modeling project. Bandler and Grinder studied three exceptional therapists whose results far outstripped their peers', and codified the language and behaviour patterns that seemed to make the difference.

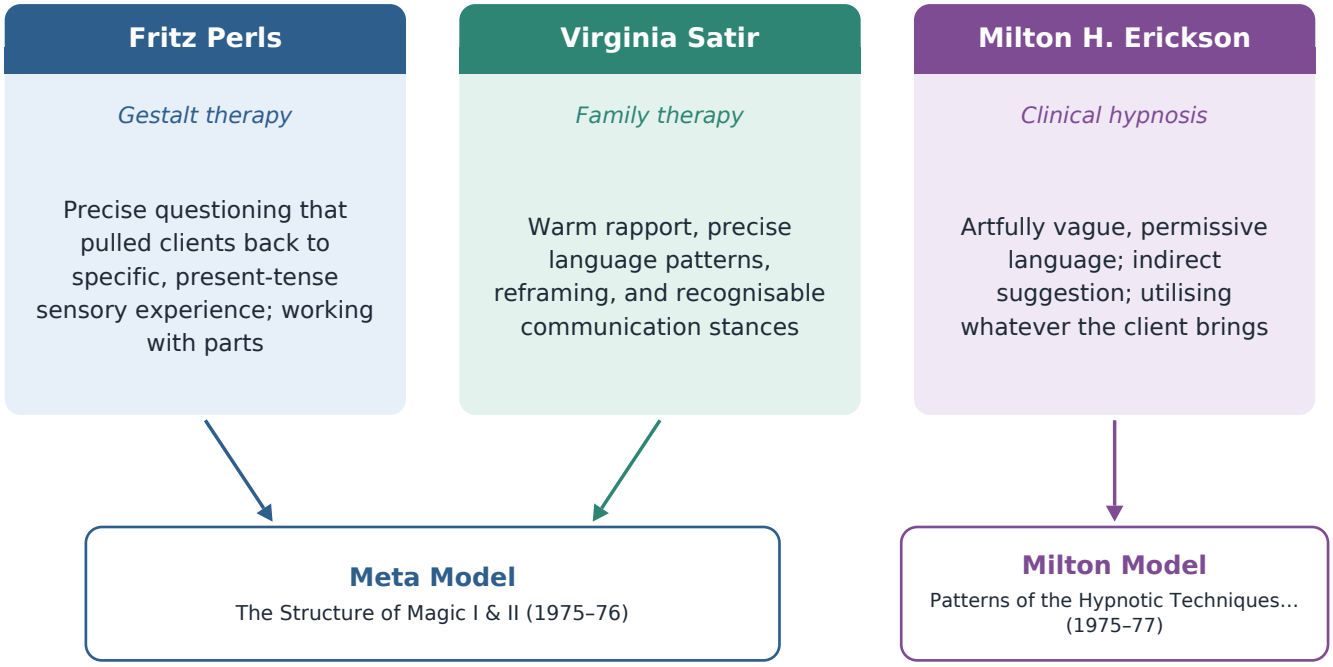


Figure: three exemplars and the two foundational NLP models derived from them.

Exemplar	What was modeled	Lasting NLP contributions
Fritz Perls	How he used questions to get clients to recover specific, sensory-based experience	Meta Model questions; parts work
Virginia Satir	Her rapport, language and ability to reframe family situations	Meta Model; reframing; Satir categories
Milton Erickson	His hypnotic language and pacing-and-leading	Milton Model; anchoring; utilisation
Gregory Bateson*	Not modeled as an exemplar but a key intellectual influence	Logical levels of learning; systems thinking

* Bateson introduced Bandler and Grinder to Erickson and wrote prefaces to early NLP books.

1 · FOUNDATIONS

A timeline of modeling in NLP

Modeling in NLP grew from early therapeutic studies into a family of distinct methodologies. The milestones below show the key ideas and publications that shaped how practitioners model today.

Precursors

1933 — **Korzybski, Science and Sanity**
'The map is not the territory'

1960 — **Miller, Galanter & Pribram**
TOTE model of goal-directed behaviour

Classic Code

1972–75 — **Bandler & Grinder at UC Santa Cruz**
Modeling Perls and Satir

1975–76 — **The Structure of Magic I & II**
The Meta Model is published

1975–77 — **Patterns of Milton H. Erickson**
The Milton Model

1980 — **NLP Volume I (Dilts et al.)**
Strategies, TOTE and notation

Expansion

1987 — **Turtles All the Way Down**
DeLozier & Grinder: New Code

1994–95 — **Dilts, Strategies of Genius I–III**
Modeling historical geniuses

1998 — **Dilts, Modeling with NLP**
Implicit vs. explicit modeling

Methodologies

2000 — **Lawley & Tompkins, Metaphors in Mind**
Symbolic Modeling, Clean Language

2001 — **Grinder & Bostic St Clair, Whispering in the Wind**
Unconscious uptake methodology

2005 — **Gordon & Dawes, Expanding Your World**
The Experiential Array

2015 — **Dilts, Success Factor Modeling series**
Modeling entrepreneurs & teams

Three broad eras

Era	Emphasis	Typical output
Classic Code (1970s–early 80s)	Language patterns, representational systems, strategies	Meta Model, Milton Model, anchoring, strategy notation
Expansion (mid 80s–90s)	Beliefs, identity, logical levels, genius studies	Neurological levels, Disney strategy, belief change
Methodology era (2000s–)	Explicit modeling methods and their epistemology	New Code modeling, Symbolic Modeling, Experiential Array, SFM

2 · EPISTEMOLOGY & PRESUPPOSITIONS

The map is not the territory

Alfred Korzybski's phrase is the foundation of NLP's epistemology. No one responds to reality directly; we respond to our internal **map** of it. Exceptional performers have *better maps* for a given context, and modeling is the art of copying the map.

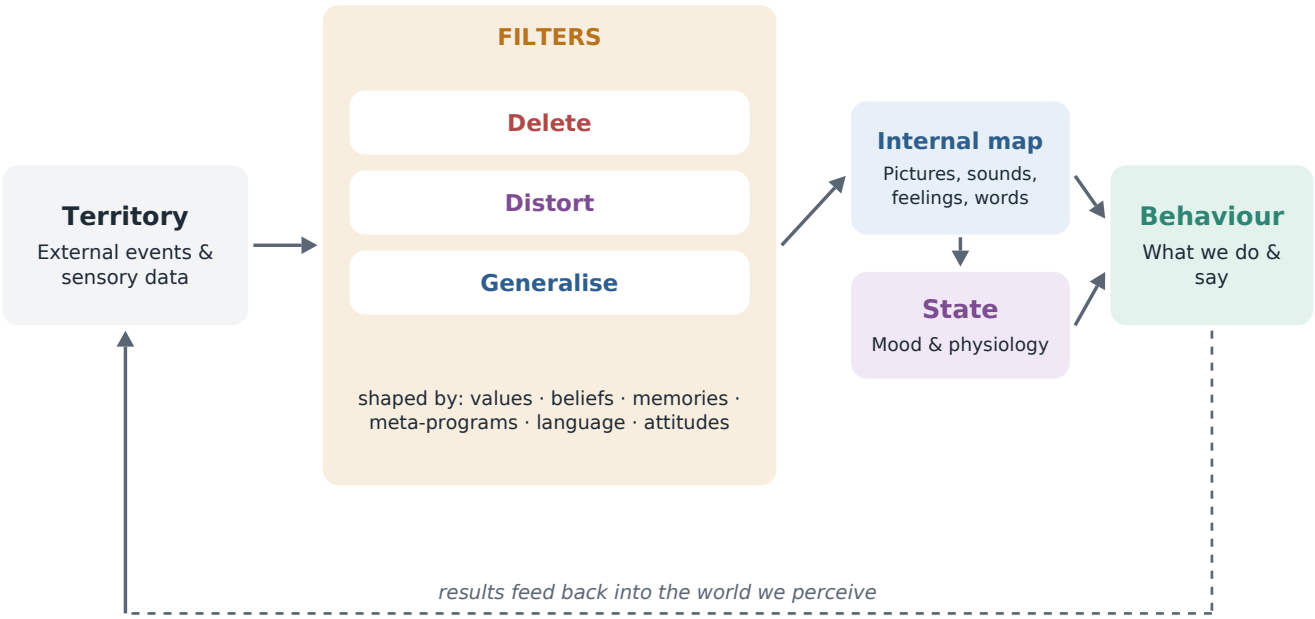


Figure: the NLP communication model — how filtered perception becomes behaviour.

Filter	What it does	Example in an expert	Modeling question
Deletion	Selectively ignores information	A chess master ignores irrelevant pieces	What do you not pay attention to?
Distortion	Re-shapes or reinterprets data	A coach sees 'potential' in a failed attempt	How else could you see this?
Generalisation	Draws rules from examples	“A silent client is still thinking”	What rule are you following?

KEY POINT

When you model, you are not copying behaviour alone but the **filters** that make that behaviour the obvious choice for the expert.

2 · EPISTEMOLOGY & PRESUPPOSITIONS

Presuppositions that guide modeling

NLP operates from working assumptions called **presuppositions**. They are not claimed as facts; they are useful beliefs that make modeling possible and productive.

Presupposition	Implication for the modeler
The map is not the territory	Study the exemplar's map, not your own assumptions about the task
If one person can do it, others can learn it	Excellence has a learnable structure; look for it
Mind and body are part of one system	Capture physiology, breathing and posture, not just thoughts
Every behaviour has a positive intention	Ask what each step achieves before removing it
The meaning of communication is the response you get	Judge the model by the results learners get
There is no failure, only feedback	A failed test shows which element is missing
People have all the resources they need	Help learners access states they already possess
The element with the most flexibility influences the system	Models should include options, not a single script
Experience has a structure	Change the structure (sequence, submodalities) and the experience changes

Two mindsets at work

Curiosity

Approach the exemplar in a 'not-knowing' state.
Avoid early labels. Assume the obvious is wrong until tested.
Ask 'How do you know?' more than 'Why?'

Pragmatism

Keep only what makes a measurable difference.
Prefer the simplest model that still works.
Let results, not elegance, settle disputes.

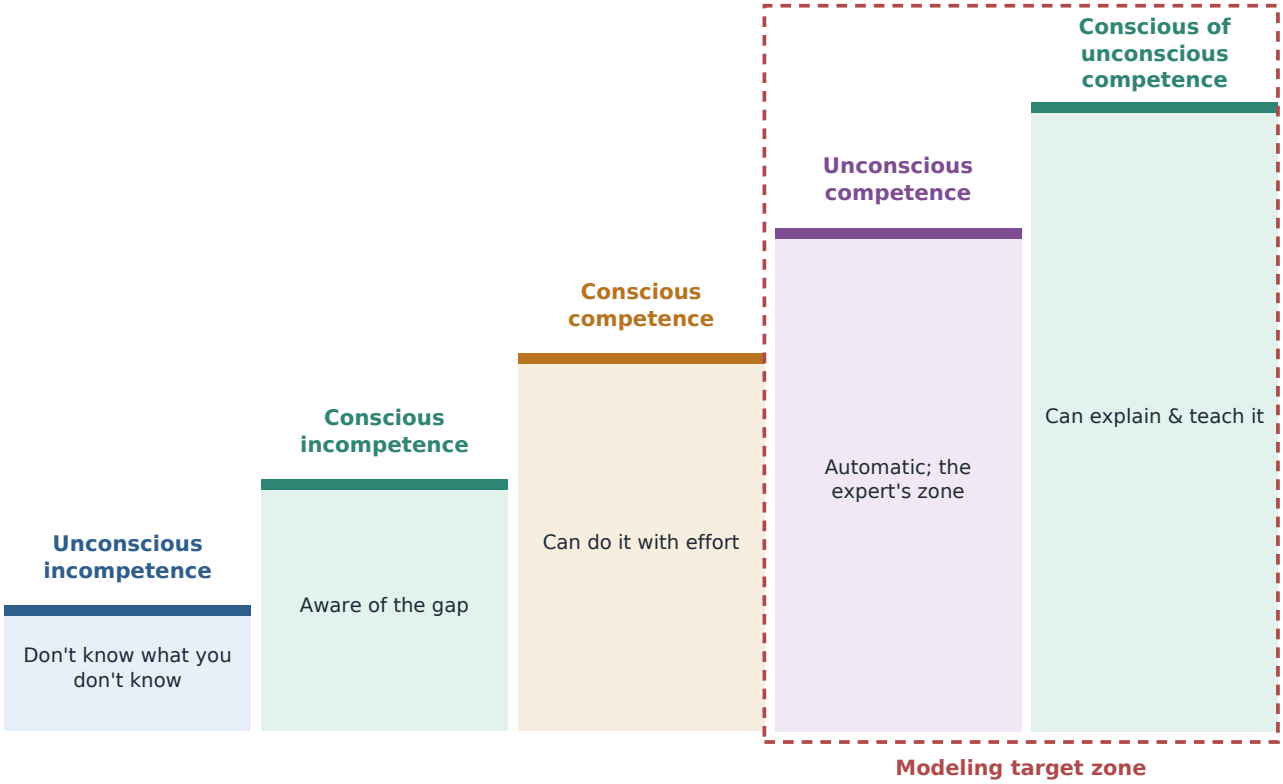
KEY POINT

Presuppositions are adopted 'as if' true because they generate better questions — they are tools, not doctrine.

2 · EPISTEMOLOGY & PRESUPPOSITIONS

Conscious and unconscious competence

Experts operate mainly from **unconscious competence**: the skill runs automatically, beneath awareness. That is exactly why it is hard for them to teach. Modeling moves expertise from the fourth stage to a fifth — being consciously aware of the unconscious competence, so it can be described and transmitted.



Stage	Typical expert statement	What the modeler does
Unconscious competence	“I just know when it's right.”	Slow the process down; ask for a specific recent example
Partial awareness	“I think I look for confidence.”	Ask how they recognise confidence: what do they see, hear, feel?
Conscious of competence	“First I check X, then compare with Y.”	Test the description: does following it reproduce the result?

KEY POINT

Experts' explanations are hypotheses, not data. The modeler treats each 'because' as something to test.

2 · EPISTEMOLOGY & PRESUPPOSITIONS

Tacit knowledge & the difference that makes a difference

Philosopher Michael Polanyi observed that *“we know more than we can tell.”* Most of an expert's skill sits below the waterline. Gregory Bateson's definition of information — a **difference that makes a difference** — tells the modeler what to look for: the few elements that separate excellent from average.

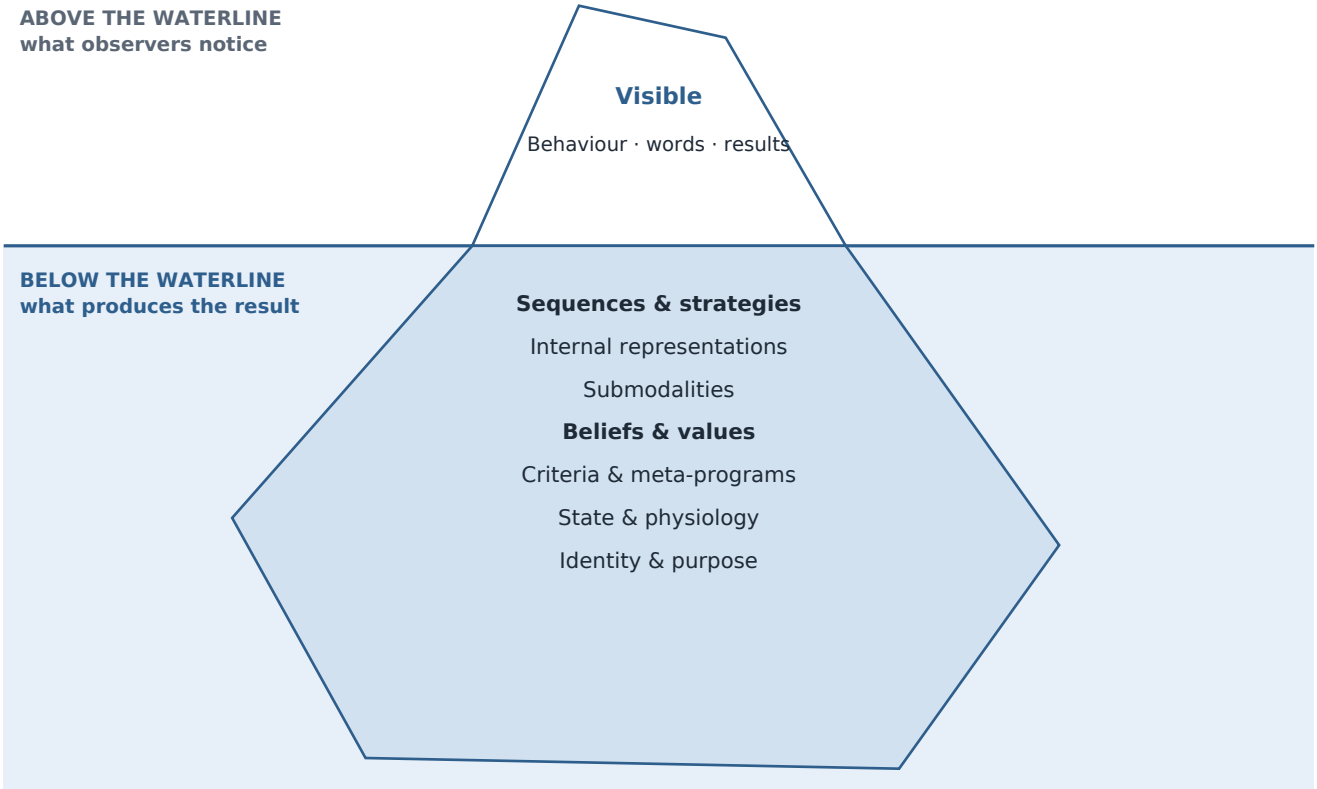


Figure: the expertise iceberg — modeling targets what lies below the surface.

Finding the difference that makes a difference

Technique	How it works
Contrastive analysis	Compare the exemplar with an average performer doing the same task, or with the exemplar on a bad day
Counter-examples	Ask: “When does this not work for you?” — the missing element often appears
Subtraction	Remove one element at a time; keep it only if results drop without it
Multiple exemplars	Elements shared across several experts are more likely to be essential

Neurological (logical) levels

Robert Dilts adapted Gregory Bateson's ideas about logical levels of learning into a practical framework of **neurological levels**. It is one of the most widely used organising tools in modeling because it ensures a model captures more than behaviour.



Figure: Dilts' neurological levels with the question each level answers.

Principle	Meaning for modeling
Higher levels organise lower ones	A belief or identity shift changes many behaviours at once
Lower levels support higher ones	A capability without the right environment may not show up
Problems are often solved one level up	If copying behaviour fails, look at the strategy or belief driving it
Alignment = congruence	Excellent performers are typically aligned across levels for that skill

NOTE

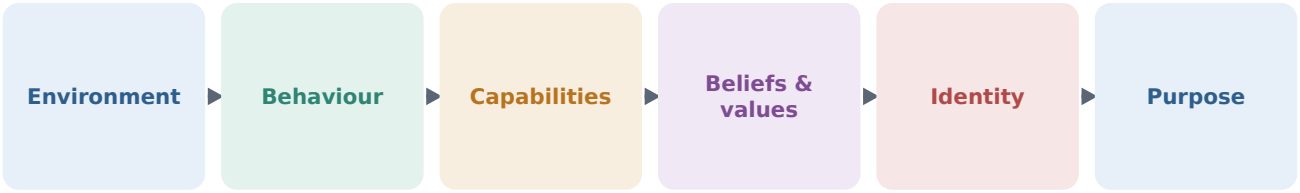
The levels are a practical heuristic for organising questions, not an established neurological hierarchy. Use them as a checklist to be sure no level of the expert's experience is missing.

Applying logical levels: a modeling interview

A level-by-level interview gives a fast first draft of a model. The example below shows questions for modeling an exceptional workshop facilitator.

Level	Elicitation question	Sample answer from exemplar	Model element
Environment	Where and when do you do this best? What do you set up first?	“I walk the room an hour early and move chairs into a U.”	Pre-session room check
Behaviour	What exactly do you do in the first five minutes?	“I make eye contact with each person before speaking.”	Individual contact before group address
Capabilities	How do you know when the group is losing energy?	“I notice people's feet; when they point at the door I switch format.”	Cue detection + format switch
Beliefs & values	What do you believe about participants? What matters most?	“The answers are already in the room.”	Facilitator as catalyst, not expert
Identity	Who are you when you facilitate?	“A host. They are my guests.”	Host identity metaphor
Purpose	What larger purpose does this serve?	“Teams that can think together without me.”	Group independence as goal

Alignment check



Ask: does each level support the next? Gaps or contradictions show where the expert's results are fragile or where a learner's attempt will fail.

KEY POINT

Lower-level answers tend to come easily; higher-level answers often need time, examples and a relaxed state. Do not rush identity and purpose questions.

3 · FRAMEWORKS THE MODELER USES

Representational systems (VAKOG)

NLP describes thinking as the use of the senses internally. An expert's strategy is a sequence of **internal representations** — seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting and self-talk — together with external sensory input. Modelers track which system is used at each step.

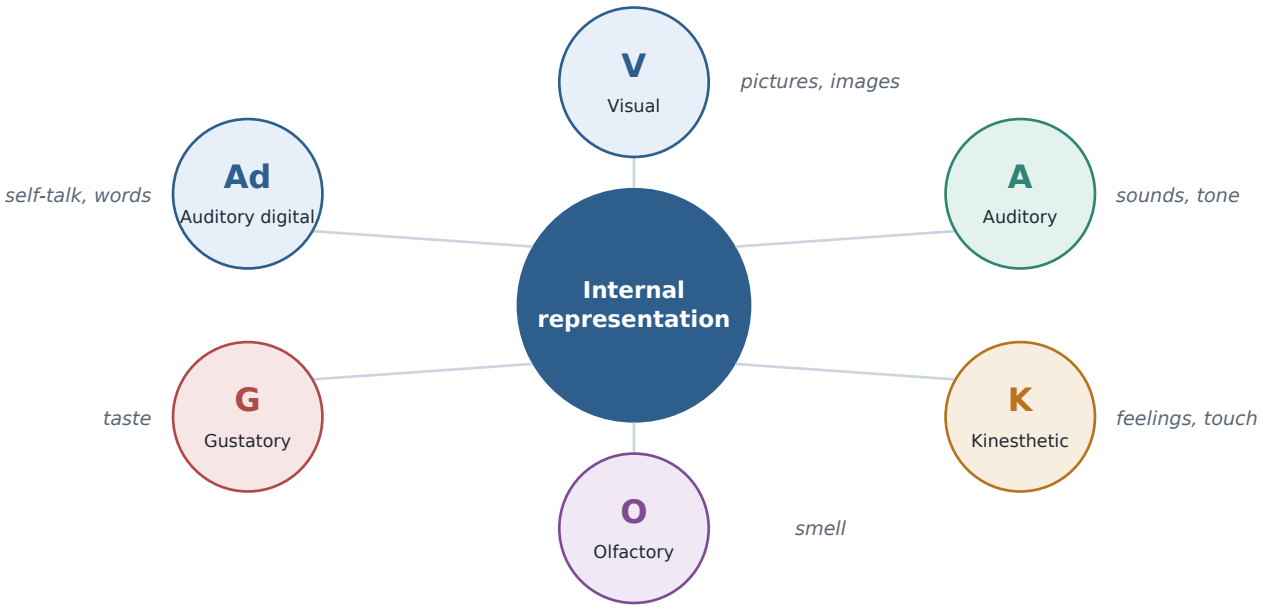


Figure: the representational systems; 'Ad' (auditory digital) is the system of words and self-talk.

System	Typical predicates	Clue in the exemplar's language
Visual	see, clear, picture, focus, bright	“I can see where the deal is heading.”
Auditory	hear, sounds, resonate, tune in	“The pitch just didn't sound right.”
Kinesthetic	feel, grasp, solid, pressure, flow	“I get a heavy feeling when a client hesitates.”
Auditory digital	think, understand, logical, make sense	“I run through the checklist in my head.”

CAUTION

Use predicates as **clues to investigate**, not as fixed personality types. Research has not supported the idea that people have a stable 'preferred representational system' that should be matched (see Section 7).

3 · FRAMEWORKS THE MODELER USES

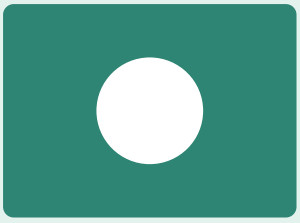
Submodalities: the fine detail

Submodalities are the qualities *within* each sense: the brightness of an image, the volume of a voice, the location of a feeling. Experts often encode crucial distinctions here — such as how they represent a goal they are certain to reach versus one they doubt.

Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic
Colour vs black & white	Volume (loud / soft)	Location in the body
Brightness	Pitch and tone	Temperature
Size and distance	Tempo / rhythm	Pressure and weight
Location in visual field	Location (inside / outside head)	Intensity
Moving vs still	Mono vs stereo	Movement / direction
Associated vs dissociated	Whose voice	Texture
Framed vs panoramic	Continuous vs intermittent	Duration

Contrastive analysis example: 'certain' vs 'doubtful' goals

Goal they are CERTAIN of



large · bright · close · associated

- Straight ahead, at eye level
- Life-size, panoramic, in colour
- Moving, they are in the picture
- Confident inner voice

Goal they DOUBT

small · dim · far · dissociated

- Down and to the left
- Small, framed, washed-out
- Still image, seen from outside
- Questioning inner voice

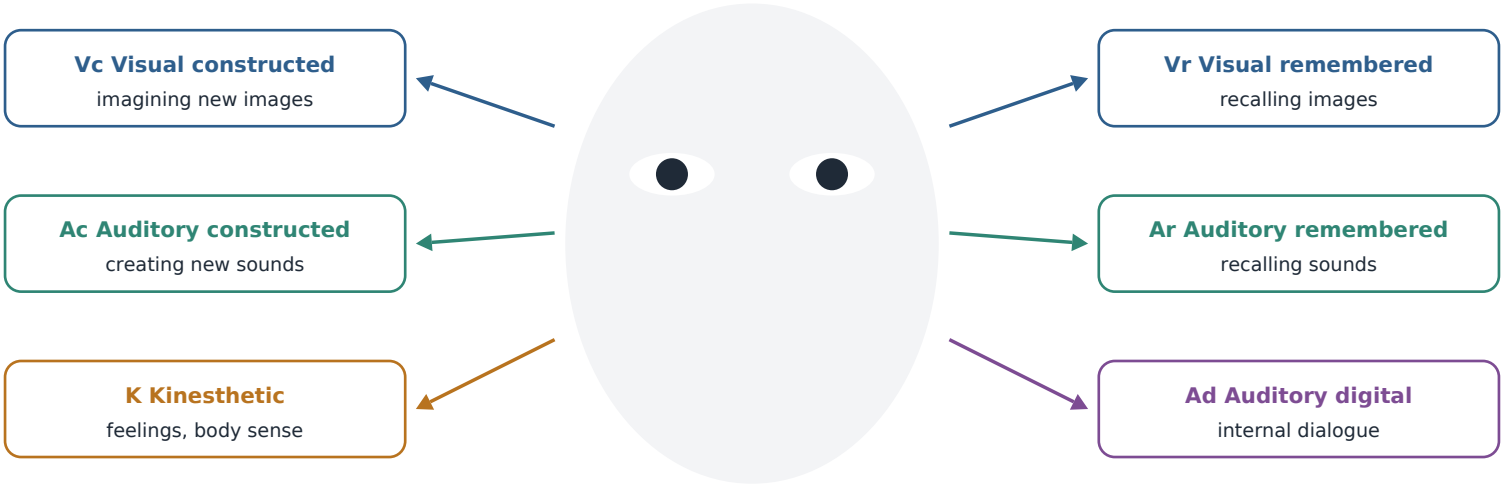
KEY POINT

The modeling question is always the same: **which of these qualities, when changed, changes the result?** Only those belong in the model.

3 · FRAMEWORKS THE MODELER USES

Eye-accessing cues

Early NLP proposed that the direction of a person's eye movements indicates which representational system they are using. Modelers used these cues to track the sequence of an exemplar's strategy in real time.



Directions as seen when LOOKING AT the person (typical right-handed pattern as originally proposed)

Figure: the eye-accessing chart as proposed in early NLP literature.

How it was used in modeling	Practical stance today
Track the order of steps in a strategy (e.g. Vr → K → Ad)	Use only as a prompt for questions: “What were you just picturing?”
Distinguish recall from construction	Never treat as a lie detector; studies do not support this
Calibrate to one individual	Individual calibration over time is more defensible than a universal chart

EVIDENCE CHECK

Controlled studies have **not** found that eye-movement direction reliably indicates sensory processing or deception. Treat the chart as a historical hypothesis and a conversation prompt, and always verify by asking.

3 · FRAMEWORKS THE MODELER USES

Strategies and the TOTE model

In NLP a **strategy** is the sequence of internal and external representations that leads to a specific outcome. Its structure comes from the TOTE unit (Test–Operate–Test–Exit), proposed by Miller, Galanter and Pribram in 1960 as a basic unit of goal-directed behaviour.

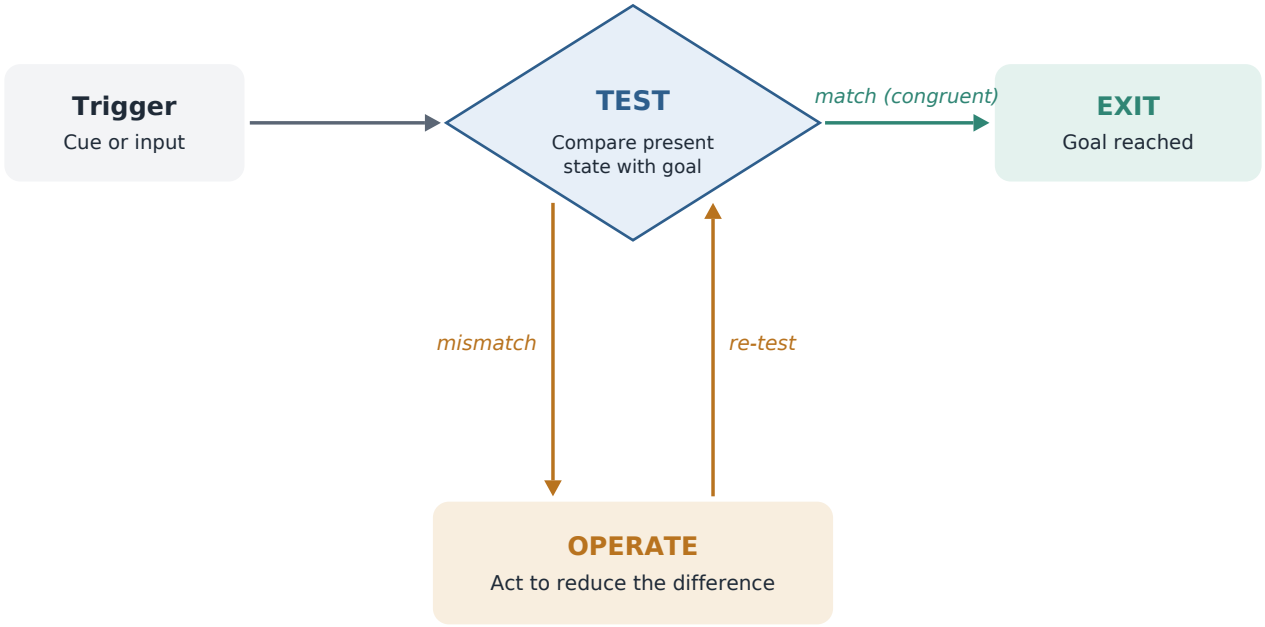


Figure: the TOTE loop — a strategy keeps operating until its test is satisfied.

TOTE element	Modeling question	Sample expert answer (chef tasting a sauce)
Trigger	What tells you it is time to start?	“When the reduction coats the back of a spoon.”
Test	How do you know whether it's right? What are you comparing against?	“I taste and compare it to a remembered flavour — the one at its best.”
Operate	What do you do when it's not right yet?	“A pinch of salt or acid, then stir and wait.”
Exit	How do you know you're done?	“The taste matches the memory and I feel a little 'click'.”
Fallback	What if it never matches?	“After three tries I start a fresh base.”

KEY POINT

Most skills are **nested** TOTEs: each 'operate' step contains its own smaller test-operate loops. A good model names the tests explicitly, because experts usually describe only their operations.

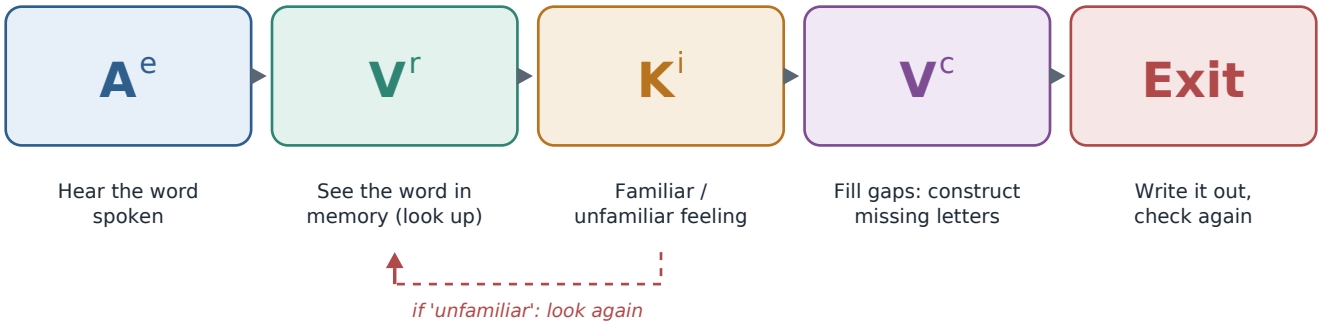
3 · FRAMEWORKS THE MODELER USES

Strategy notation

NLP Volume I (Dilts, Grinder, Bandler, Bandler & DeLozier, 1980) introduced a shorthand for writing strategies. Letters show the sense used; superscripts show whether it is external, internal, remembered or constructed.

Symbol	Meaning	Symbol	Meaning
V / A / K	Visual / auditory / kinesthetic	e	External (input from the world)
O / G	Olfactory / gustatory	i	Internal
Ad	Auditory digital (words, self-talk)	r / c	Remembered / constructed
→	Leads to (next step)	t / d	Tonal / digital (auditory sub-types)
/	Simultaneous comparison	+ / –	Pleasant / unpleasant response

Example: the classic 'good speller' strategy



Comparing good and poor spellers led NLP practitioners to propose that good spellers rely on remembered visual images of words checked by a feeling of familiarity, while poor spellers often try to 'sound out' words. This strategy became one of the best-known products of strategy modeling.

> **KEY POINT**
> Notation forces precision: if you cannot write a step down, you do not yet know it. Each arrow is a question: “What happens between this and the next step?”

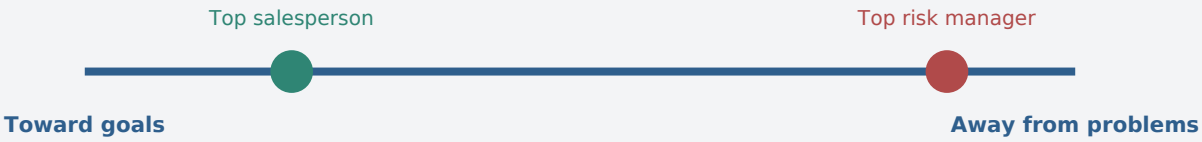
3 · FRAMEWORKS THE MODELER USES

Meta-programs: the filters behind decisions

Meta-programs are habitual patterns of attention and sorting — the filters an expert uses to decide what matters. Work by Leslie Cameron-Bandler, Rodger Bailey (the LAB Profile) and Shelle Rose Charvet made them practical.

Meta-program	Poles	Eliciting question	Example difference in an expert
Direction	Toward ↔ Away from	What do you want in a ___? Why is that important?	A safety officer sorts strongly for 'away from' risks
Reference	Internal ↔ External	How do you know you've done a good job?	A designer trusts an internal standard; a service rep watches customer reaction
Options / Procedures	Options ↔ Procedures	Why did you choose your current job?	A surgeon follows procedure strictly; an inventor seeks options
Chunk size	General ↔ Specific	(Listen to level of detail used)	A strategist starts big-picture; an auditor starts with detail
Sameness / Difference	Sameness ↔ Difference	What is the relationship between this year and last?	Innovators notice differences; quality controllers notice sameness
Convincer	See / hear / read / do × times or time	How do you know someone is good at their job?	A recruiter needs to see work three times

Same task, different filters



Both are excellent — the 'right' pole is context-specific

KEY POINT

Meta-programs are **context-dependent**, not fixed traits. Always ask: in *this* context, which filter does the exemplar use?

3 · FRAMEWORKS THE MODELER USES

The Meta Model as a modeling instrument

The Meta Model, the first formal NLP model, is a set of questions that recover information lost when experience is turned into words. In modeling it prevents the modeler from filling gaps with their own assumptions.

Pattern	Exemplar says…	Meta Model question	Information recovered
Unspecified verb	“I just engage them.”	How, specifically, do you engage them?	The actual behaviour sequence
Unspecified noun	“I read the room.”	What, specifically, do you notice?	The sensory cues used
Nominalisation	“It's about confidence.”	How are you being confident? How do you know?	The process behind the label
Comparative deletion	“This approach is better.”	Better than what? By what measure?	Criteria and comparison
Universal quantifier	“I always prepare.”	Always? Has there been a time you didn't?	Counter-examples, boundaries
Modal operator	“You have to listen first.”	What would happen if you didn't?	The underlying rule and its reason
Cause–effect	“The silence makes them talk.”	How does silence cause that?	The believed mechanism
Complex equivalence	“Leaning back means they're bored.”	How does leaning back mean boredom?	Their decision rule
Lost performative	“That's the wrong way to do it.”	Wrong according to whom?	Source of the standard

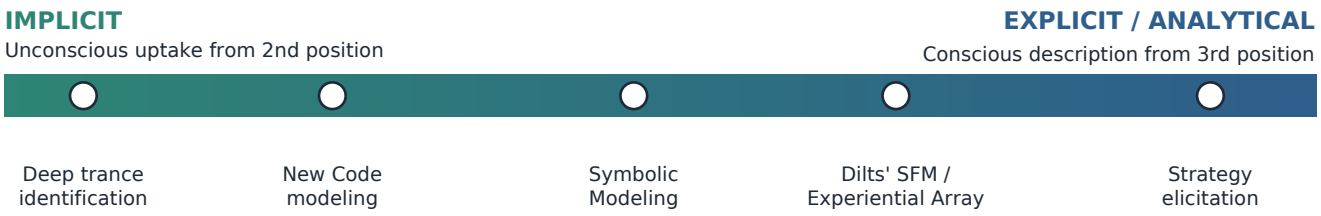


KEY POINT

Use the Meta Model gently. A barrage of 'how specifically?' breaks rapport; a well-timed one unlocks the model.

Implicit vs. explicit modeling

All modeling methods sit on a spectrum. At one end the modeler absorbs the skill unconsciously by 'becoming' the exemplar; at the other, the modeler questions and describes the skill consciously. Dilts frames this as **implicit** (first and second position) vs. **explicit** (third position) modeling.



Dimension	Implicit modeling	Explicit / analytical modeling
Core activity	Mimic, shadow, 'become' the exemplar	Interview, observe, analyse, chart
Perceptual position	Second position (as the exemplar)	Third position (observer)
Modeler's state	Not-knowing; suspend judgement	Curious, systematic, analytical
When coding happens	Only after the modeler can reproduce results	Throughout the project
Strengths	Captures what the exemplar cannot articulate	Fast, explicit, easy to document and teach
Risks	Slow; hard to verify; hard to transfer	Captures the expert's theory, not their practice
Best for	Highly intuitive, physical or interpersonal skills	Procedural, decision-based, well-bounded skills

KEY POINT

Most real projects **combine both**: uptake first to get the 'feel', then explicit questioning to surface and code the structure.

4 · APPROACHES TO MODELING

New Code modeling: unconscious uptake

John Grinder and Carmen Bostic St Clair, in *Whispering in the Wind* (2001), argued that true NLP modeling begins with the modeler **acquiring the skill unconsciously** before any attempt to describe it. Analysing too early filters the exemplar's behaviour through the modeler's own map.

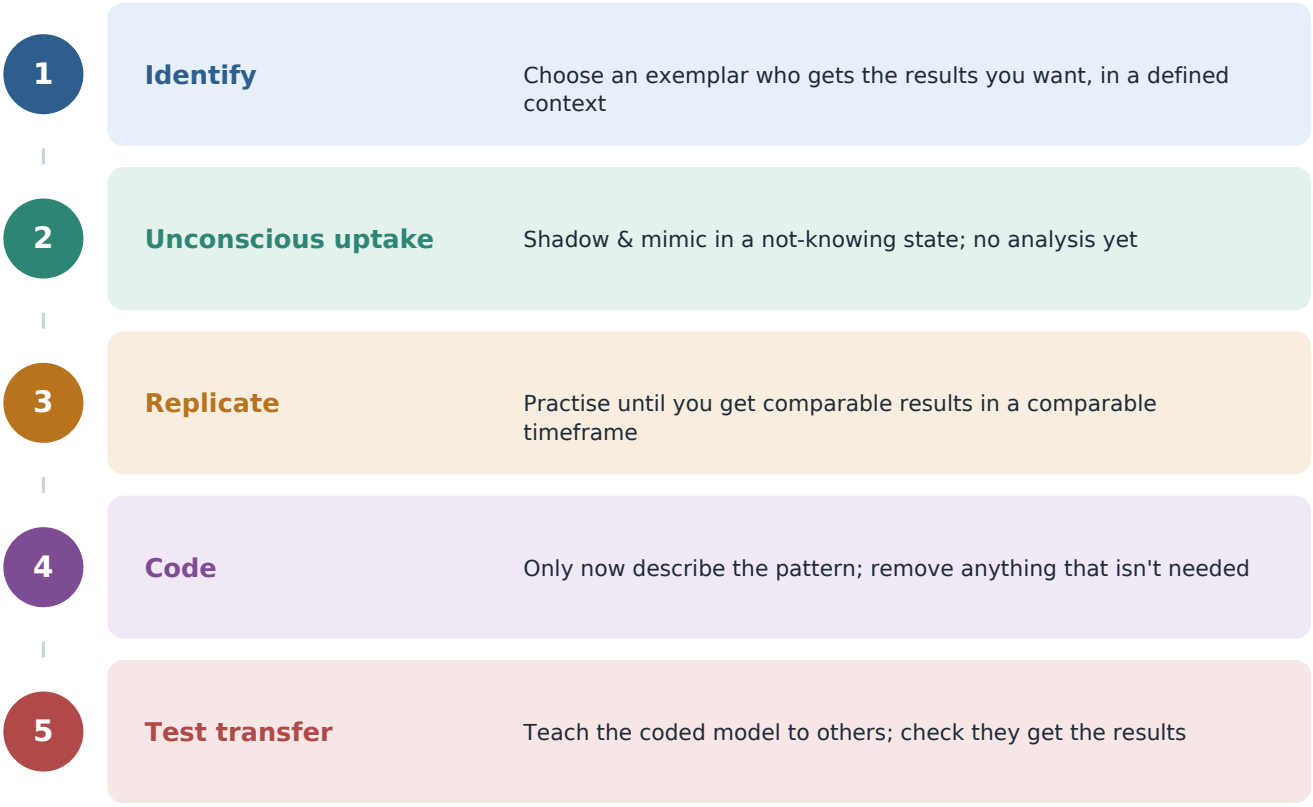


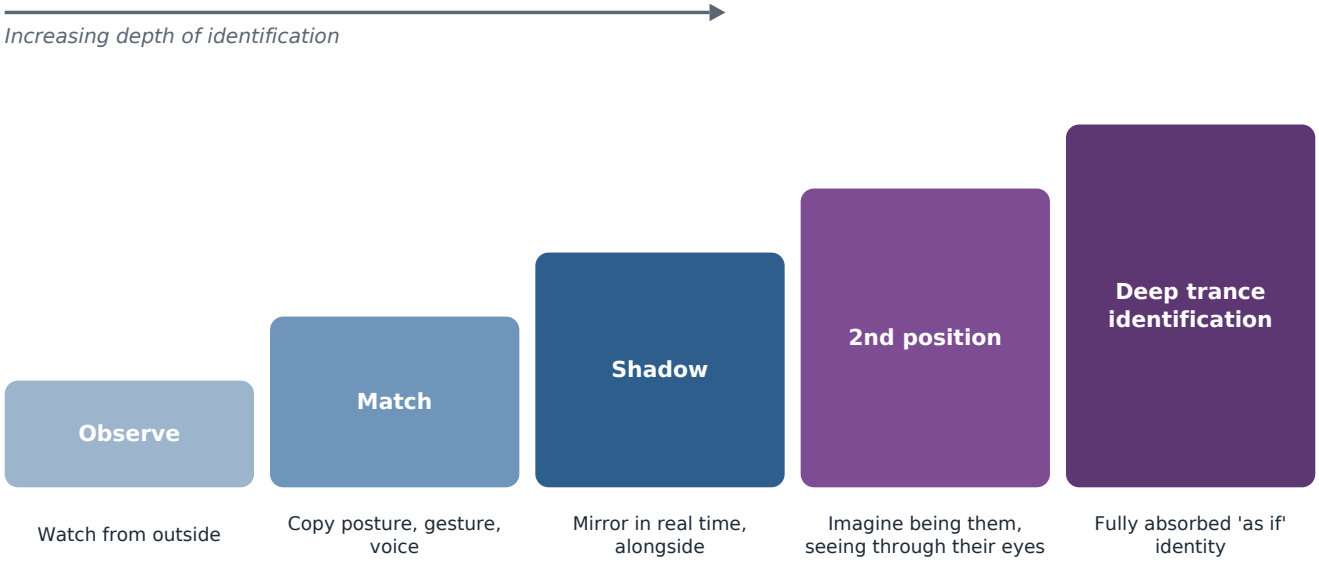
Figure: the sequence of NLP modeling as described by Grinder and Bostic St Clair.

Key ideas

Concept	Meaning
Not-knowing state	A high-performance learning state with wide peripheral attention and a quiet inner dialogue
Suspension of filters	Withholding judgement about what is and isn't important until the skill is acquired
Success criterion	The modeler must get results comparable to the exemplar's in a similar timeframe
Coding by subtraction	Systematically leave out elements; keep only those whose absence degrades performance

Taking on the exemplar

Implicit modeling relies on the modeler temporarily adopting the exemplar's physiology, rhythm and perspective. The deeper the identification, the more tacit material is picked up — and the more care is needed to step back out.



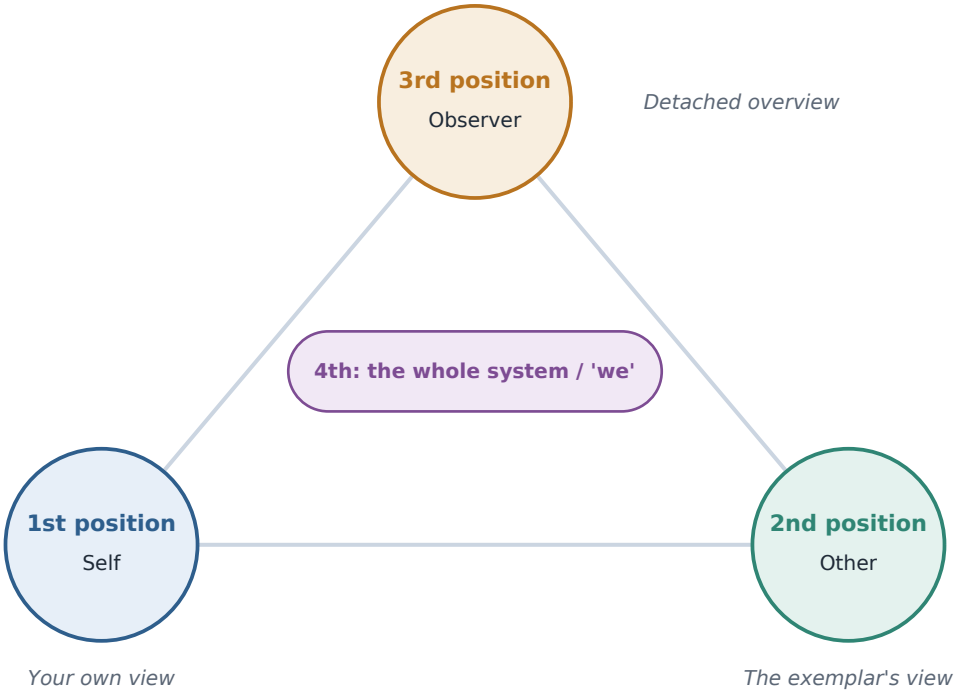
Method	How it's done	What it tends to capture
Matching / mirroring	Adopt the exemplar's posture, breathing, gestures and vocal tempo	Physiology and state that support the skill
Shadowing	Perform alongside the exemplar in real time, a fraction behind	Timing, rhythm, micro-decisions
Second position	Imagine stepping into their body and seeing the task from there	Perceptual focus and priorities
Deep trance identification (DTI)	In a guided trance state, imagine fully being the exemplar	Beliefs, identity, felt sense of the skill
'As if' frame	Act as if you were the exemplar for a period	Spontaneous behaviours you didn't know you knew

GOOD PRACTICE

Always **break state** and return to your own first position after deep identification work, and keep a notebook — what you noticed while 'being' the exemplar fades quickly.

Perceptual positions

Perceptual positions describe the viewpoints from which experience can be perceived. A skilled modeler moves deliberately between them during a project.



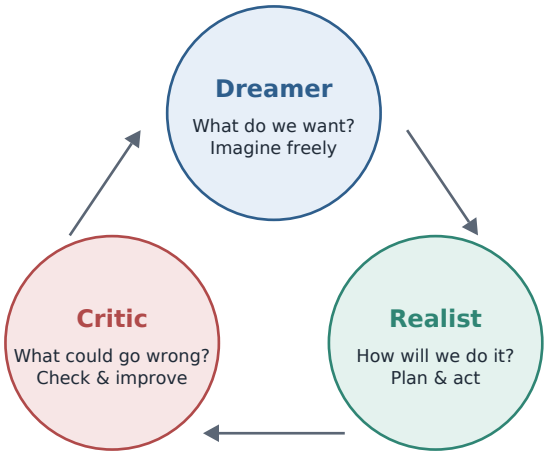
Position	Role in modeling	Typical activity
1st — Self	Notice your own reactions and what the model feels like when you run it	Practising the model; noting what works for you
2nd — Exemplar	Unconscious uptake of the exemplar's perceptions, rhythms and priorities	Shadowing, matching, imagining being them
3rd — Observer	Detached description of patterns and sequences	Charting strategies, comparing exemplars, coding
4th — System	Seeing the exemplar within team, culture and environment	Mapping context and stakeholders that support the skill

KEY POINT

Implicit modeling lives mainly in 2nd position; **explicit** modeling mainly in 3rd. Good models are built by cycling 2nd → 3rd → 1st (test it yourself) repeatedly.

Dilts: from genius to Success Factor Modeling

Robert Dilts extended modeling beyond therapy to creativity, leadership and entrepreneurship, combining logical levels, strategies and perceptual positions into a structured, explicit methodology.



Strategies of Genius (1994–95)

Dilts modeled historical figures from writings and records, including Aristotle, Walt Disney, Mozart, Einstein, Freud, Tesla, Leonardo da Vinci and the fictional Sherlock Holmes.

The Disney strategy (left) separates creative roles that are usually mixed, so each can do its job fully.

Success Factor Modeling (SFM)

Developed by Robert and John Dilts and published from 2015 in a book series, SFM studies successful entrepreneurs and teams to identify the mindsets, actions and practices that distinguish them.

SFM element	Focus	Example question
Mindset	Inner game: passion, vision, mission, ambition, role	What do you want to create in the world?
Actions	Outer game: key behaviours with customers, team, investors, partners	What do you do every week that others don't?
Outcomes	Results across a balanced set of stakeholders	How do you know you're growing a sustainable venture?
Circle of Success	Self, customers, team, stakeholders, partners	Which relationship is strongest? weakest?

KEY POINT

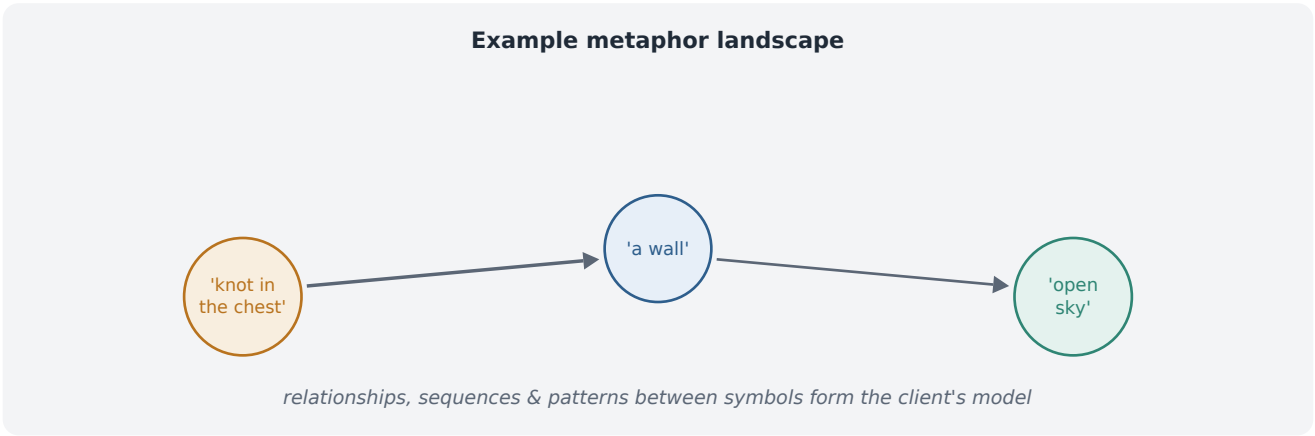
Dilts' approach is **explicit** and multi-exemplar: patterns that appear across many successful people are treated as candidate success factors, then tested with new learners.

4 · APPROACHES TO MODELING

Symbolic Modeling and Clean Language

Penny Tompkins and James Lawley developed Symbolic Modeling (*Metaphors in Mind*, 2000) from therapist David Grove's Clean Language. The facilitator models a person's own metaphors, using questions that add as little of the facilitator's map as possible.





Basic Clean Language questions

Purpose	Question pattern (X = the person's exact words)
Develop attributes	And what kind of X is that X? · And is there anything else about X?
Locate	And where is X? · And whereabouts?
Invite metaphor	And that's X like what?
Sequence (forward)	And then what happens? · And what happens next?
Sequence (back)	And what happens just before X?
Source	And where could X come from?
Outcome	And what would you like to have happen?

KEY POINT

Clean Language is a powerful tool for any modeler: it elicits the exemplar's structure **in their own terms**, reducing the risk of the modeler's assumptions leaking into the model.

The Experiential Array

David Gordon and Graham Dawes (*Expanding Your World*, 2005) offer a compact framework for capturing the structure of an ability. Their Experiential Array shows how beliefs, strategies, emotions and behaviour interact to produce a result in a given context.

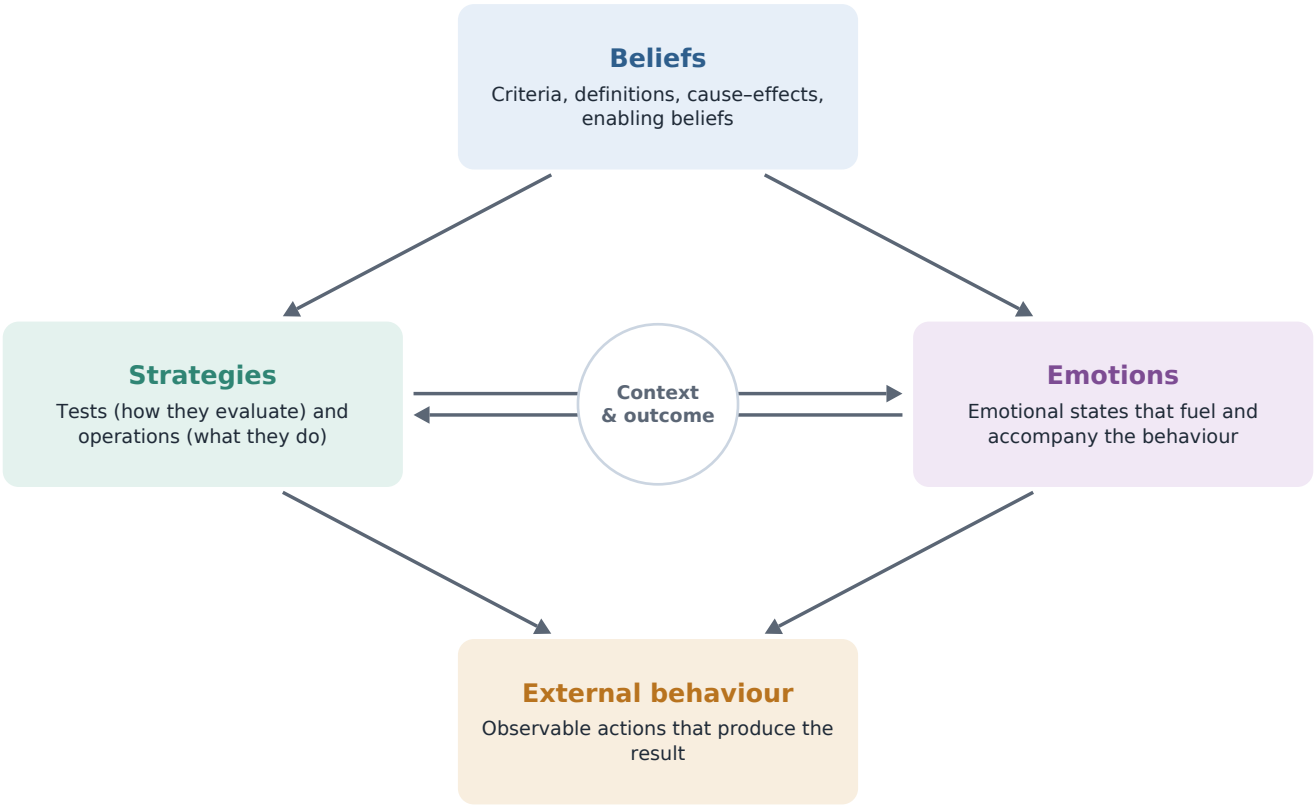


Figure: a simplified view of the Experiential Array's main elements and their influence.

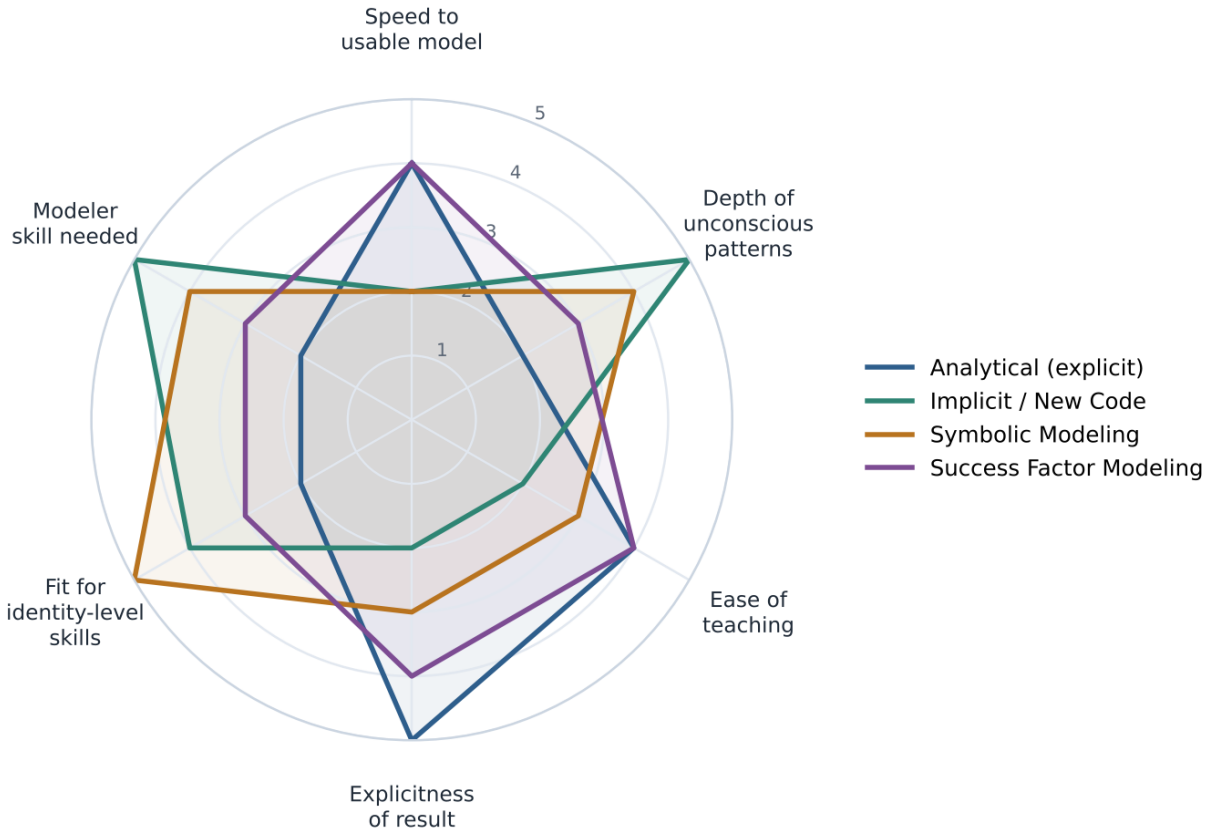
Element	Questions to elicit it
Criteria	What is most important to you when you're doing X?
Definitions & evidence	What does [criterion] mean to you? How do you know when it's met?
Cause–effects	What leads to [criterion] being met? What gets in the way?
Strategy: test	How do you evaluate whether you're on track?
Strategy: operation	What do you do to meet the criterion?
Emotions	What do you feel while doing X? What feeling tells you to keep going?

KEY POINT

Beliefs are usually the **most stable** part of the array; changing a criterion or cause–effect belief tends to reorganise strategies, emotions and behaviour downstream.

Comparing modeling approaches

Each methodology emphasises different aspects of the modeling task. The radar chart offers a qualitative comparison to help choose an approach for a given project.



Qualitative ratings (1 = low, 5 = high) based on how each approach is described in its core texts; this is an interpretive summary, not measured data.

Approach	Key source	Choose it when…
Analytical / strategy elicitation	NLP Volume I (1980)	The skill is procedural and you need a documented model quickly
New Code / implicit	Whispering in the Wind (2001)	The skill is intuitive and the exemplar can't explain it
Symbolic Modeling	Metaphors in Mind (2000)	You're modeling a person's inner world or facilitating self-modeling
Success Factor Modeling	SFM series (2015–)	You're studying leadership or entrepreneurial success across many people
Experiential Array	Expanding Your World (2005)	You want a compact, teachable template for any ability

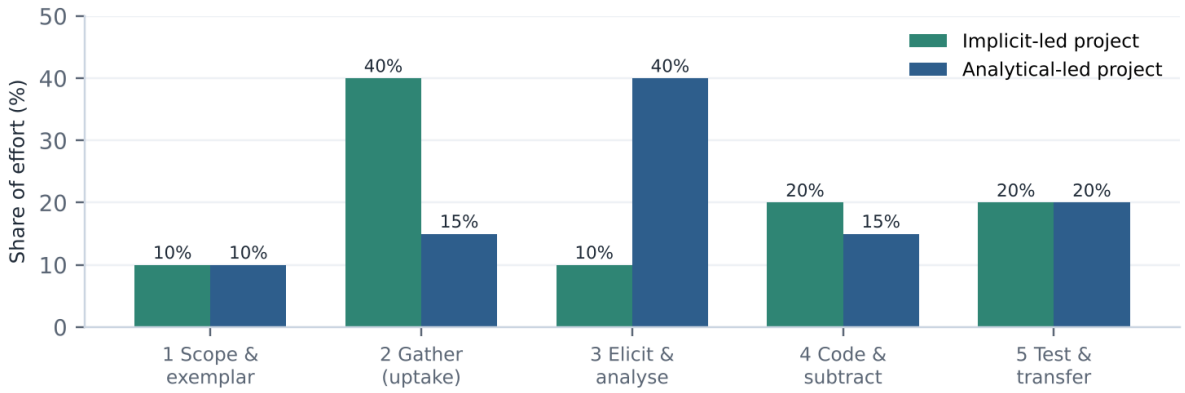
5 · THE MODELING PROCESS STEP BY STEP

The modeling process at a glance

Methodologies differ in emphasis, but most modeling projects pass through five recognisable phases. The balance of effort shifts depending on whether the project is implicit-led or analytical-led.



1 Scope & exemplar	2 Gather / uptake	3 Elicit & analyse	4 Code & subtract	5 Test & transfer
Define skill, context, outcome; choose exemplars	Observe, shadow, record, match	Interview, contrast, map strategies & beliefs	Write the minimum model that works	Teach it; measure learners' results; refine



Illustrative effort allocation (not measured data): implicit projects invest heavily in uptake; analytical projects in elicitation.

Phase	Key output
1 Scope	A one-sentence model goal: “How does [exemplar] achieve [result] in [context]?”
2 Gather	Recordings, notes, the modeler's own embodied sense of the skill
3 Elicit	Strategy maps, belief statements, submodality and meta-program profiles
4 Code	A concise model: sequence, key distinctions, supporting beliefs and states
5 Test	Evidence of learners' results; a refined model and training design

Phase 1 — Scope the skill and choose exemplars

A modeling project succeeds or fails on its scope. Model a **specific capability in a specific context**, not a whole person. 'How Maria closes renewals with hesitant clients by phone' is modelable; 'Maria's success' is not.

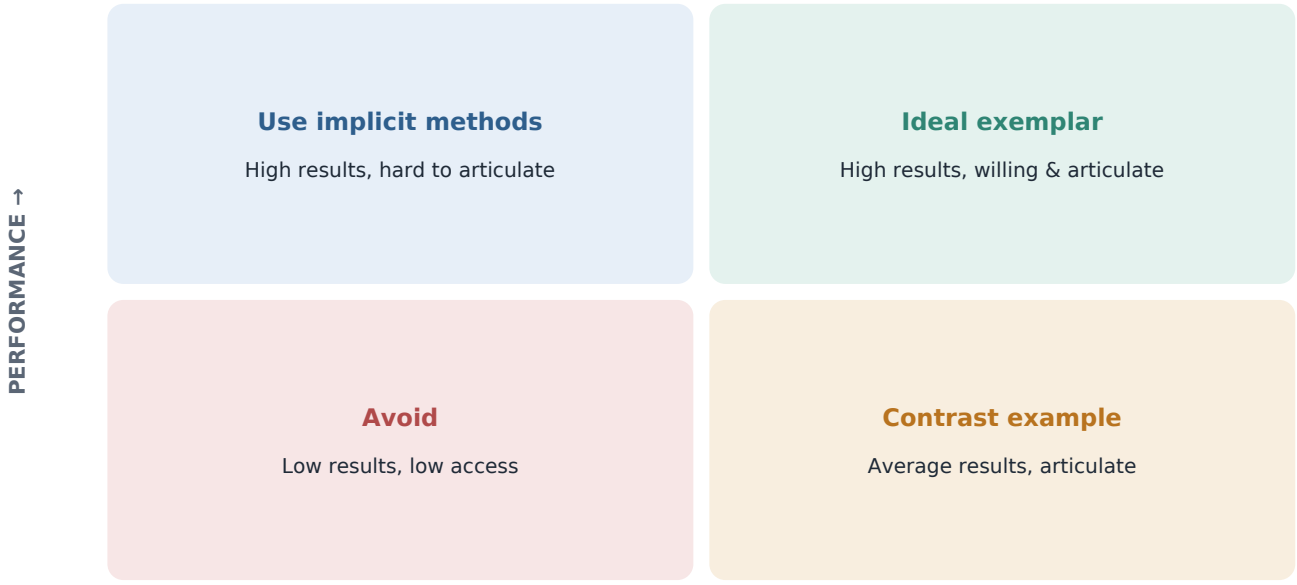


Figure: exemplar selection matrix.

Selection criterion	Why it matters
Consistent, measurable results	Separates genuine skill from luck; gives you a benchmark for testing
Recognised by peers	Reduces bias from a single manager's opinion
Available and willing	Modeling needs time: observation, interviews, follow-ups
Comparable context to learners	A model built in one culture or setting may not transfer
More than one exemplar if possible	Shared patterns are more likely to be essential
A contrast performer	Average performers reveal what the exemplar does differently

SCOPING TIP

Write the outcome as a test: *"A learner using this model will achieve __ in __ weeks, measured by __."* If you can't fill the blanks, the scope isn't ready.

Phase 2 — Gather information

Gather data in context, while the exemplar is actually performing. Combine methods: each captures different aspects of the skill.

	Behaviour	Physiology	Sequence	Beliefs	Submodalities	Tacit cues
Live observation	high	high	med	–	–	low
Video review	high	high	high	–	–	med
Shadowing	high	high	high	low	low	high
Interview	low	–	med	high	med	low
Think-aloud	low	–	high	med	low	med
Clean Language	–	–	med	high	high	med
Contrast with average	high	med	med	med	low	high

Figure: how well each data-gathering method captures each aspect of a skill (practitioner guideline, not measured data).

Practical guidelines

- **Observe before asking.** Note what the exemplar does that they never mention.
- **Use specific, recent examples.** “Take me through yesterday's call, moment by moment.”
- **Capture the context:** time, place, people, tools and what happened just before.
- **Record when permitted.** Video lets you study timing, posture and micro-sequences later.
- **Collect counter-examples:** times when the skill did not work and what was different.
- **Keep raw notes separate from interpretation**, so later coding isn't biased.

> **ETHICS**
> Ask consent clearly, explain how recordings and notes will be used and stored, and let the exemplar review the final model. Trust is part of the data quality.

Phase 3 — Elicitation question bank

Good elicitation questions are process-focused ('how'), specific, and anchored in a real example. The bank below is organised by the model element each question uncovers.

Model element	Questions
Outcome	What are you aiming for when you do X? How do you know when you've achieved it?
Trigger	What tells you it's time to start? What do you notice first?
Sequence	What do you do first? And then? What happens just before that?
Sensory tests	What do you see, hear or feel that tells you it's working? Not working?
Decision points	At what moment do you choose between options? What decides it?
Submodalities	When you picture the goal, where is it? How big? How bright? Moving or still?
Beliefs	What must be true for this to work? What do you believe about the people involved?
Values / criteria	What is most important to you here? What would you never do?
State	What state are you in when you're at your best? How do you get into it?
Identity	Who are you when you're doing this well? What metaphor fits?
Counter-examples	When does this not work? What's different then?
Learning history	How did you learn this? What would you tell your younger self?

Avoid 'why'
It invites justification and theory rather than description of process

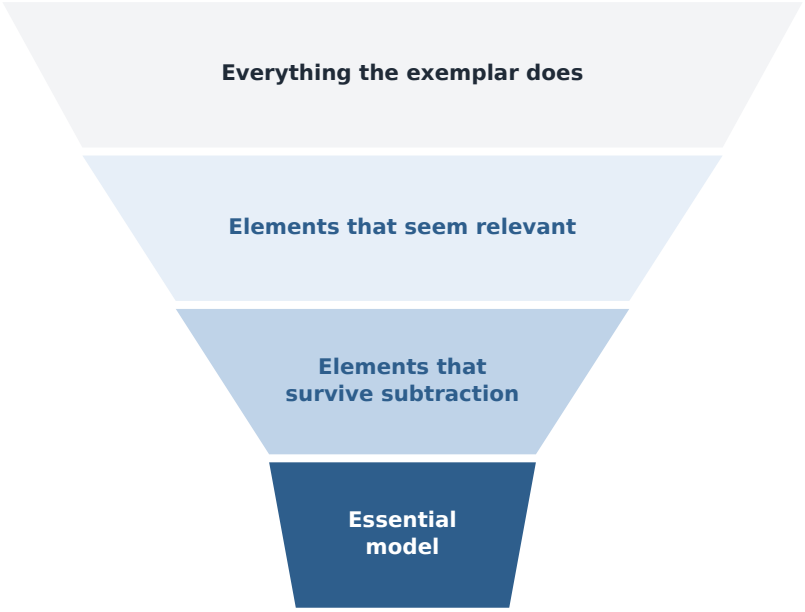
Prefer 'how' & 'what'
They pull for sequence, sensory detail and specifics

Use their words
Repeat exact phrases back; don't paraphrase into your terms

5 · THE MODELING PROCESS STEP BY STEP

Phase 4 — Code the model by subtraction

Exemplars do many things that are personal style rather than causes of their success. Coding means **reducing** the raw description to the smallest set of elements that still produces the result.



The subtraction test

1. Remove or change one element.
2. Perform (or have a learner perform) the skill.
3. Did the result degrade?
→ Yes: element is essential, keep it.
→ No: element is style, drop it.
4. Repeat for each element.

Example: coding a top call-centre agent

Observed element	Tested by removing it	Verdict
Stands up during difficult calls	Learners seated vs standing showed no difference	Style — optional
Says the customer's name twice in first minute	No change in resolution or satisfaction	Style — drop
Pauses ~2 seconds before answering a complaint	Without the pause, interruptions increased	Essential — keep
Internally pictures the customer 'after the problem is solved'	Without it, learners reported more irritation, shorter calls	Essential — keep
Belief: 'their anger is about the situation, not me'	Learners without it escalated more often	Essential — keep

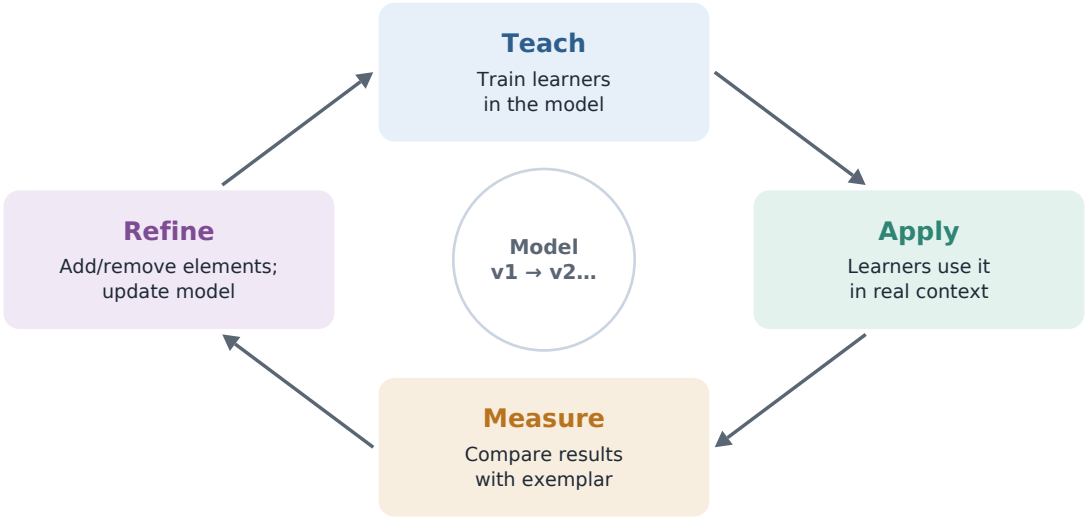
Illustrative example constructed for teaching purposes.

KEY POINT

A good model has an elegance criterion: **the fewest distinctions needed to get the result**. Everything else is optional decoration the learner may adopt or not.

Phase 5 — Test and transfer

A model is complete only when **someone other than the exemplar** can use it to get similar results. Testing turns a description into a validated, teachable model.



Test level	Question	Evidence
Modeler test	Can I, the modeler, now get the result?	Own performance against benchmark
Learner test	Can learners get comparable results in a comparable time?	Before/after measures; comparison group if possible
Context test	Does it work in other settings, teams, cultures?	Results across varied contexts
Durability test	Do results last after training ends?	Follow-up measurement after weeks or months

Turning the model into training

- Teach the **essential elements first**, optional style elements later.
- Use **demonstration + practice + feedback**; models transfer by doing, not by reading.
- Include the **state and beliefs**, not just the steps — these are often what learners lack.

6 · APPLICATIONS & WORKED EXAMPLES

Where modeling is applied

Because modeling studies *how* results are produced, it can be applied wherever skilled performance varies between people.

Coaching & therapy

Modeling how clients 'do' a problem and how they do resourceful states

Education

Learning strategies such as spelling, reading, memorising and exam calm

Sales & negotiation

Rapport, questioning and objection-handling of top performers

Leadership

Decision-making, vision-building and feedback strategies

Sport & performance

Pre-performance routines, focus and recovery from errors

Health & safety

How experts notice early warning signs and stay calm under pressure

Creativity & design

Generative strategies, such as the Disney strategy

Entrepreneurship

Success factors across founders and teams (SFM)

Domain	Typical exemplar	Typical modeling target	Typical output
Coaching	The client on a good day	Their own resourceful strategy	A personal strategy they can re-run
Education	Strong learners	Learning and recall strategies	Classroom learning techniques
Business	Top performers in a role	Decision and interaction strategies	Competency model and training
Sport	Elite athletes	Mental routines and state control	Pre-performance routine
Organisations	High-performing teams	Shared beliefs, rituals, communication	Team practices playbook

KEY POINT

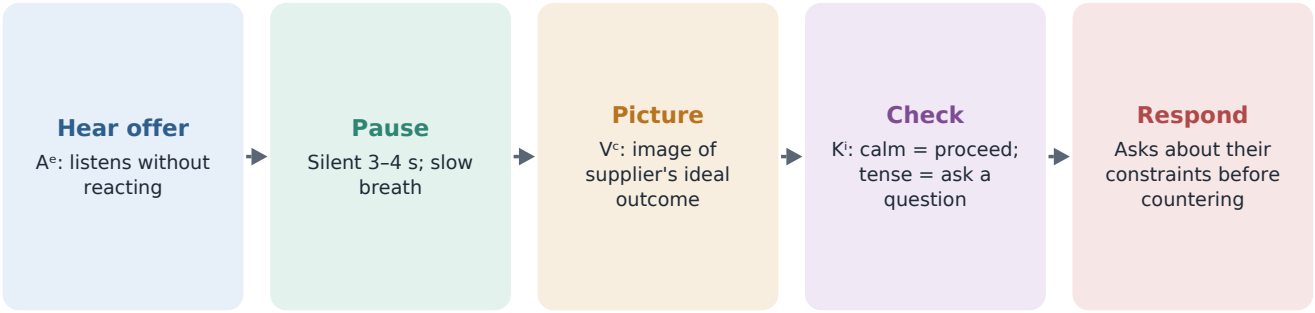
Modeling the client's **problem** is as useful as modeling excellence: knowing exactly how someone creates anxiety reveals precisely where the sequence can be changed.

6 · APPLICATIONS & WORKED EXAMPLES

Worked example: a top negotiator

Illustrative composite. A procurement team wanted to understand why one negotiator consistently achieved better terms while preserving supplier relationships.

Strategy for the critical moment: the supplier's first offer



Logical level	What was found	Included in model?
Environment	Prefers face-to-face; sits at the corner, not across the table	Optional
Behaviour	Long pause after first offer; asks two questions before any counter-offer	Yes
Capability	Builds a picture of the other side's ideal outcome before deciding	Yes — core
Beliefs	“The first offer is information, not a position.”	Yes — core
Values	Long-term relationship over single-deal win	Yes
Identity	“I'm a problem-solver for both companies.”	Yes (framing)

Contrast with an average negotiator

Moment	Exemplar	Average negotiator
Hears first offer	Pauses; stays curious	Reacts immediately with a counter-figure
Internal focus	The supplier's constraints and goals	Own target price and feeling of 'losing'
Next move	Questions to expand options	Haggling on a single variable (price)

KEY POINT

The difference that made the difference was not a tactic but a **belief + internal picture** that changed how the first offer was perceived. Training focused there.

6 · APPLICATIONS & WORKED EXAMPLES

Worked example: a confident speaker

Illustrative composite. Modeling the minutes before a talk revealed that the exemplar and an anxious speaker felt the **same physical sensation** but represented the situation very differently.

Exemplar before a talk

- **See** — Faces of a few friendly people, life-size, in colour
- **Hear** — Own voice, warm and slow, saying the opening line
- **Feel** — Energy in the chest; labels it 'excitement'
- **Say** — “This is a conversation with interested people.”

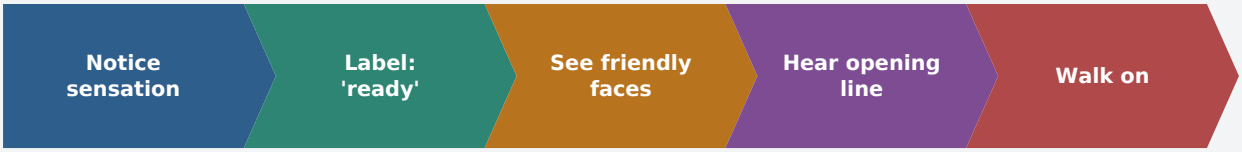
Anxious speaker before a talk

- **See** — A large blur of judging faces, close and dim
- **Hear** — Imagined silence after a mistake
- **Feel** — Same chest energy; labels it 'fear'
- **Say** — “Don't mess this up.”

Figure: contrastive analysis of the pre-talk strategy.

Model element	Description	How it was taught
Reframe the sensation	Chest energy = readiness/excitement	Label practice + breathing pace
Select friendly faces	Picture 3 specific friendly people, life-size	Visualisation rehearsal before each talk
Rehearse opening aloud	Hear the opening line in a warm, slow voice	Record and replay opening line
Conversation frame	Talk is a conversation, not a performance	Belief statement + audience questions early

The sequence the learners practised



KEY POINT

This is a classic modeling insight: **the same feeling, a different meaning**. The skill lay in the interpretation and internal imagery, not in the absence of nerves.

A one-page model template

Use this template to document any modeling project. Each box corresponds to an element discussed earlier.

Skill & context
How does ___ achieve ___ in ___?

Outcome & evidence
Measurable result and how it's recognised

Trigger
What starts the strategy

Strategy sequence
Steps with senses and tests (TOTE)

Key distinctions
Submodalities, cues, meta-programs that matter

Beliefs & values
What must be true; what's important

State & physiology
Optimal state and how to access it

Identity / purpose
Role, metaphor, larger 'why'

Essential vs optional
Results of subtraction tests

Training design
How learners will acquire it

Well-formedness checklist

✓	Criterion
☐	The skill and context are specific enough to test
☐	The model includes at least one explicit **test** (how the exemplar knows), not only actions
☐	Beliefs and state are included where they affect results
☐	Each element has survived a subtraction test or is marked 'optional'
☐	At least one learner other than the modeler has achieved comparable results

Common pitfalls and how to avoid them

Most modeling errors come from the modeler's own map leaking into the model, or from stopping before the model has been tested.

Pitfall	Symptom	Remedy
Modeling the theory	Model sounds plausible but learners don't improve	Observe performance in context, not just interviews
Scope too broad	Endless data, no clear model	Narrow to one capability in one context
Projecting your own map	Model reflects how *you* would do it	Clean questions; use exemplar's exact words
Ignoring the test step	Model describes actions but not decision cues	Ask “How do you know when…?” for every step
Copying style as substance	Learners imitate mannerisms without results	Subtraction testing of each element
Single exemplar bias	Model works for one personality only	Compare multiple exemplars; mark optional elements
Leaving out state/beliefs	Learners know steps but freeze under pressure	Elicit and train the state and supporting beliefs
No outcome measure	Can't tell whether the model works	Define measurable results before you start
Over-claiming	Presenting the model as how the brain 'really' works	Present it as a useful description, then test

Where each phase typically breaks



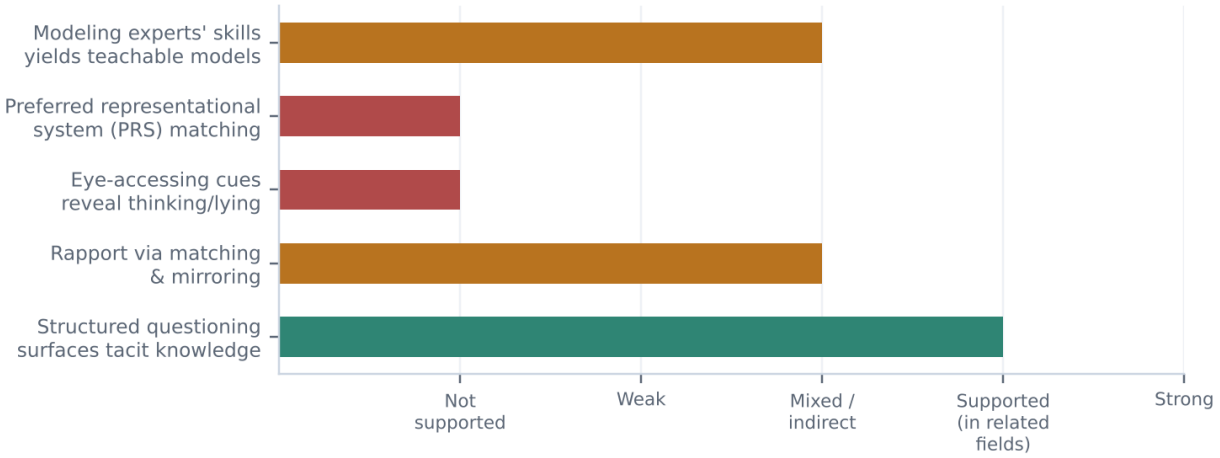
KEY POINT

If learners don't get results, the model is incomplete — not the learners. Go back to the exemplar with the specific point where learners got stuck.

7 · EVIDENCE, CRITIQUE & CONTEXT

What does the evidence say?

NLP as a whole has a weak research base. Reviews such as Sharpley's (1984, 1987) and Witkowski's (2010) found little empirical support for several core NLP claims, and NLP is widely regarded in academic psychology as lacking scientific validation. Modeling, however, overlaps with methods that are well studied elsewhere.



Interpretive summary of the published research landscape, not a meta-analysis. 'Supported in related fields' means similar methods have support outside NLP research.

Claim	Status	Note
Preferred representational system (PRS) should be matched	Not supported	Multiple reviews found no reliable effect
Eye movements reveal sensory processing or lying	Not supported	Controlled studies found no reliable link
Experts' skills can be studied and taught to others	Supported in related fields	Expertise research and cognitive task analysis show this is feasible
Structured questioning surfaces tacit knowledge	Strong in related fields	Core premise of knowledge elicitation methods
NLP modeling outcomes specifically	Limited	Mostly case reports and practitioner accounts

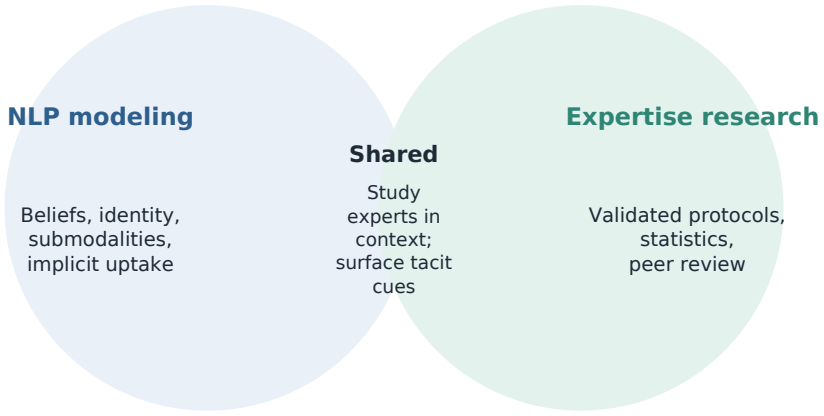
BALANCED VIEW

A defensible stance: use NLP modeling as a **structured heuristic** for studying expertise, keep the parts that are testable, and measure your own results rather than relying on claims.

Modeling alongside related methods

NLP modeling shares goals with established approaches to studying expertise. Knowing them strengthens a modeling project and provides a shared language with researchers and L&D professionals.

Method	Origin	Shared ground with NLP modeling	Main difference
Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA)	Cognitive psychology, human factors	Elicits experts' decisions, cues and strategies	More formal protocols; validated in research
Critical Decision Method	Naturalistic decision-making (Klein et al.)	Probes specific incidents for cues and choices	Focus on decisions, less on state or identity
Think-aloud protocols	Ericsson & Simon	Captures sequence of thinking as it happens	Avoids interpretation; NLP adds senses & beliefs
Deliberate practice	Expertise research (Ericsson)	Excellence is learnable with the right practice	Emphasises long practice; NLP seeks shortcuts
Apprenticeship / observation	Craft traditions	Learning by watching and copying a master	Unstructured; NLP aims to code and speed it up
Behavioural task analysis	Behaviourism, training design	Breaks skills into observable steps	Excludes internal processes NLP includes



KEY POINT

Combining NLP's rich vocabulary for subjective experience with research methods' rigour gives the strongest models.

Key takeaways

Modeling is the generative core of NLP: it is how the field's techniques were created and how new ones can be built.

1 **Structure over content**

Model how a result is produced, not what the expert knows.

2 **Below the waterline**

The key elements are usually tacit: tests, beliefs, submodalities, state.

3 **Use multiple lenses**

Logical levels, VAK, TOTE and perceptual positions are complementary checklists.

4 **Uptake then analysis**

Feel the skill first; describe it second, so your map doesn't distort it.

5 **Subtract to the essentials**

Keep only elements whose removal hurts results.

6 **Results are the test**

A model works only when others get comparable results.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Exemplar	The person whose skill is being modeled
Strategy	A sequence of internal and external representations leading to an outcome
TOTE	Test–Operate–Test–Exit; the basic loop of goal-directed behaviour
Submodality	A quality within a sense (brightness, volume, location…)
Meta-program	A habitual filter for attention and decisions
Unconscious uptake	Acquiring a skill by immersion before describing it
Subtraction	Removing elements to find which are essential
Clean Language	Questions that minimise the questioner's assumptions

Further reading

Key primary sources on NLP modeling, followed by related and critical literature.

NLP modeling — primary sources

Author(s)	Title	Year
Bandler, R. & Grinder, J.	The Structure of Magic, Vols I & II	1975 / 1976
Bandler, R. & Grinder, J.	Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, Vol. I	1975
Dilts, R., Grinder, J., Bandler, R., Bandler, L. C. & DeLozier, J.	Neuro-Linguistic Programming: Volume I	1980
DeLozier, J. & Grinder, J.	Turtles All the Way Down	1987
Dilts, R.	Strategies of Genius, Vols I–III	1994–95
Dilts, R.	Modeling with NLP	1998
Lawley, J. & Tompkins, P.	Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling	2000
Grinder, J. & Bostic St Clair, C.	Whispering in the Wind	2001
Gordon, D. & Dawes, G.	Expanding Your World: Modeling the Structure of Experience	2005
Dilts, R.	Success Factor Modeling, Vol. I: Next Generation Entrepreneurs	2015

Related and critical literature

Author(s)	Title	Year
Korzybski, A.	Science and Sanity	1933
Miller, G., Galanter, E. & Pribram, K.	Plans and the Structure of Behavior	1960
Polanyi, M.	The Tacit Dimension	1966
Bateson, G.	Steps to an Ecology of Mind	1972
Charvet, S. R.	Words That Change Minds	1995
Sharpley, C. F.	Research findings on NLP (reviews in J. Counseling Psychology)	1984 / 1987
Witkowski, T.	Thirty-five years of research on Neuro-Linguistic Programming	2010
Crandall, B., Klein, G. & Hoffman, R.	Working Minds: A Practitioner's Guide to Cognitive Task Analysis	2006