Dealing with Double Binds
"No Win to No Lose"
Sian Pope with Robert Dilts

You don't need double-sided coins or a magician's sleight of hand to untangle 'Heads I Win, Tails You Lose' scenarios - subtle yet simple language skills have their own magic to unpick knots with elegance and gracefully achieve "Everybody Wins"

With a long list of books and seminars to his name, as well as worldwide training courses and the NLP training centre at the University of Santa Cruz, Robert Dilts is an exemplary leader in the field of NLP. He has modelled and taught the skills of leadership for over twenty years in various application areas - business, teaching, therapy, health and personal development. He has been a pioneer for a very long time, and through his consistent application of himself to NLP produced remarkable resources that can be shared worldwide.

Now anyone with access to the internet can get hold of the online encyclopedia of NLP, and there are interactive CD's forming part of the Practitioner and Master Practitioner trainings at NLPU in Santa Cruz. He has been thorough and persistent and generous with his passion for NLP and his resources; part of his contribution has been in articulating and exploring issues about being a human, making discussable the language of spirit and community, both inside organizations and in his worldwide seminars and trainings.

Inspired by his father's work with patents for inventions, Dilts has become fascinated by creativity and genius and this has been a major thread of his work. He has produced three volumes about Strategies of Genius, from modelling the thinking processes and cognitive strategies of Aristotle Sherlock Holmes, Walt Disney, Mozart Einstein, Freud, Leonardo da Vinci and Nikola Tesla. Dilts has been able to describe the structure of thinking in these men who changed history, and present his findings in creative and understandable techniques for changing behaviour and beliefs.

Some of his more recent work on coaching and sponsorship has been developed with Steve Gilligan, a hypnotherapist who was a student of Milton Erickson. Both Dilts and Gilligan studied with anthropologist Gregory Bateson in the 1970's, some of whose thinking about epistemology lies in the roots of NLP.

Bateson was interested in double binds, which are particular kinds of no-win conflict situations, and he and his colleagues put forward a theory that these formed the basis of both genius and psychosis. Being mentally and emotionally trapped in double binds can lead to mental illness, or if they are dealt with successfully and transcended, genius and creativity. Double binds can sap creative energy, stop individuals expressing who they are and what they do, and can lead to feelings of confusion and helplessness. Dilts is interested in learning and creativity, and has investigated how to transform double-binds practically using the thinking and tools of NLP.

"In my work with people from many walks of life, I have noticed that double-binds can come up in many ways - business related, personal, health-related and emotional. They are challenging, and difficult to address. Yet when you get beyond them it often leads to integration, productivity and creative solutions. Everyone gets into double

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A Double Bind - adapted from Bateson: 'Steps to an Ecology of Mind'

1. **Two individuals are involved in an intense personal relationship in which one of them feels under pressure that it is vitally important to discriminate what sort of message is being communicated so she/he can respond appropriately. These types of relationships are typically complementary, where one person is in a position of power - for example parent/child, teacher/student, boss/subordinate, where the "dependent" individual cannot survive without the others' co-operation. They need to "please" the other to survive.**

2. **The other person, in the "power position", is expressing two messages which conflict, and the second is likely to be expressed non-verbally.**

a) **a primary negative injunction: "do not do 'x' or I will punish you". Or "If you do not do 'x', I will punish you."**
    In our example: if you don't offer the others a cookie you have done something wrong.

b) **a secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, enforced by punishments or consequences which threaten survival. This second message is commonly communicated non-verbally.**
    In our example: if you do offer them a cookie you have done something wrong.

c) **Dilts believes that a third message is key to the structure - whereby the person in the power position (parent, teacher, boss) implies that the dependent person is wrong, that he/she is the cause of the problem situation. This is usually on an identity level. "What is wrong with this relationship resides in you" "You don't care about me" "You are messing with me".**
    In our example: your distress about being in a double bind is a sign of a defect in your character.

3. **There are three other important elements of a double bind including;**

a) **The "dependent" individual cannot comment on the messages being expressed - whether because they are not in a position to understand what is going on, or because they are confused, or because they are not allowed to meta-communicate.**

b) **There is another negative injunction prohibiting escape from the situation - survival, love, punishment etc. Therefore they cannot "leave the field" to reach safety with respect to the situation.**

c) **This is a repeated experience, not a single traumatic event, so the double bind becomes a habitual expectation.**

binds and puts others into them. It's a phenomenon at the basis of people's personal problems and world problems. Finding ways to get out of them is one of the most important things anyone can do, whether for themselves or as coaches, counselors, therapists, parents, teachers, and consultants." says Dilts.

He cites examples from the business world: in a downsizing situation, managers are caught in a no-win situation. If they don't fire people, the company goes downhill. If they keep people they let the company down too. So, the managers feel bad if they do fire employees and bad if they don't. The situation leads to avoiding the negative, rather than seeking the positive. Or the case of too high a workload - when you do one task it takes time away from another; if that second task is needed for the first, either way you are wrong.

An example from a marriage might be - to maintain the relationship the wife mustn't express anger or strong feelings. Yet if those feelings aren't

expressed then there is avoidance of what is happening in the relationship. And there may be a judgment by the husband that when the wife feels angry she is wrong. Dilts quotes a different social example in a couple where the wife complains that husband doesn't care about her; he doesn't ask her what she thinks. The husband feels like he is being made wrong whatever he does with his time. He is out earning money and not able to spend time with her - there is a double bind between the personal and professional.

Gregory Bateson originally defined the double bind as "communication in the context of an emotionally important relationship in which there is unacknowledged contradiction between messages of different logical levels." (Bateson's 'Angels Fear'). There are various examples of double bind situations cited in Robert's article in the NLPU Encyclopaedia.

To more fully illustrate the principle here, a charming but clear example of a

double bind provided by Bateson is from the children's book Mary Poppins. The Banks' children and their nanny, Mary Poppins visit a cookie shop. After entering the shop, they notice a couple of nervous looking children behind the counter. A few moments later, the children's mother comes from the back of the shop and asks them in a reprimanding voice, "Where are your manners? Have you offered our visitors a cookie?" Realising they are about to get into trouble, the children respond "Oh no, mother we will give them a cookie right away." The mother then says in an angry voice "And who said you could give away our cookies?" At this the children behind the counter became visibly distressed. The mother goes on to humiliate them for their distress, saying "Look at you cowering like little mice, what's wrong with you?"

A double bind can be described in detail more technically as shown in the Panel above. (Adapted from Bateson

"Double binds are the opposite of freedom, but it can go from no-win to no-lose. This can get us into a bigger way of thinking, bigger context and bigger frame of life. We break free of old assumptions, frames, identity, constraints" Dilts

'Steps to an Ecology of Mind').

Double binds can create intense psychological stress, and hence their potential for interfering with creativity. Most are at the level of beliefs, beliefs about who we are and judgments at an identity level, which makes them challenging to resolve. However, if you have the appropriate skills, double binds can be transcended. Obviously, Dilts sees NLP tools and technology as a way to provide those skills.

For example, to reduce the intensity of the relationship, we could learn how to establish emotional independence, develop strong internal self referencing, acquire a stronger "first-position", anchor one's own resources and practice emotional honesty. To sort out contradictory messages, we could practice becoming more aware of double messages using NLP tools, and "thought viruses" embedded in other communication; developing multiple perspectives, and listening out for particular language patterns, including different logical levels would help. Sharpening one's ability to discriminate between messages directed to different levels of experience (environment, behaviour, capabilities, beliefs, values and identity) can automatically help to sort out different levels of messages. Paying attention to small observable changes in non-verbal cues helps to identify mixed messages, and being able to track and sort out various types of conflicts is crucial. Being able to respond differently by "Meta-communicating" would also reduce the power of the double bind, and give the other person involved some feedback.

For example in the Mary Poppins story: with maturity, wisdom and many NLP skills the shopkeeper's children might have elegantly said "Mother, we are in a double bind about giving the Banks' children a cookie. If we don't offer them a cookie, and wait to ask you first, we feel we are wrong because your voice tone implies we have been impolite. If we do offer a cookie without waiting to ask, we feel we are wrong because your angry voice implies we have been disobedient."

We could also remember to separate identity from behaviour, and discover positive intention behind the parts of the communication. Or find ways to "leave the field of the double bind" - again taking multiple perspectives and meta-perspectives, and becoming more cognitively and physically flexible. By distinguishing between ongoing life events and discrete events and checking for differences we would keep the situation manageable. Robert Dilts together with Robert MacDonald have put together an exercise tool specifically to help people transcend double-binds, which can be found in the NLP Encyclopaedia.

Just as important as dealing successfully with double binds, we also need to learn how to create win-wins for ourselves and other people, positive or therapeutic double binds to help someone create their desired outcome rather than anxiety. This would make the other person right no matter what they do. Milton Erickson was a master of utilizing therapeutic double binds to overcome resistance or induce trance. Once we have mastered the skills to deal with double binds, that in itself leads to greater confidence.

Says Dilts "Double binds tie up our energy, leaving us nowhere to go and paralyse our communication. Dealing with them is so related to making cognitive leaps, reframing. We can help people to deal with problems that seem unsolvable. This leads to increased productivity, less feeling of being trapped, more feeling of freedom. Double binds are the opposite of freedom, but it can go from no-win to no-lose. This can get us into a bigger way of thinking, bigger context and bigger frame of life. We break free of old assumptions, frames, identity, constraints"

Interestingly one of the first uses he made of NLP back when he was learning with Grinder and Bandler was to apply it to political dialogue. His work now includes invitations to speak to political groups, like the United Nations. So it seems that Robert has come full circle. He states in the preface to Volume III that "Genius comes from a passionate commitment to the integration of multiple perspectives". Long may Dilts' own genius continue to influence people world-wide.

Author:
Sian Pope is a coach with over 15 years experience in developing people. Her path has been inspired by the light of NLP thinking, and she has published various articles about its developers. Contact 01275 399131 sianpope@netgates.co.uk

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