

Break The Rule, Not The Client

The Cybernetic Mechanism Behind A Real Reframe

THE IDEA

W. Ross Ashby's Homeostat (1948) gave cybernetics its cleanest working model of two very different kinds of stability. Nudge the machine gently and it corrects around its existing wiring — the same rule, applied again, restoring balance. Push it past what that wiring can absorb, and it does something else entirely: it triggers a step-mechanism, randomly reconfiguring its own internal connections until a new stable arrangement emerges. Ashby called the first behaviour simple stability. He called the second ultrastability — survival that comes from being willing to destroy and rebuild the rule itself, not just apply it harder.

The family therapist and communications theorist Paul Watzlawick later built this exact distinction into a clinical model: first-order change (more of the same solution, applied within an unchanged frame) versus second-order change (a change to the frame itself). First-order change is a client coping — running the identical strategy, harder, against a problem that strategy was never going to solve. Second-order change is the rule itself breaking and being rebuilt. Only one of these is a reframe.

Source: W. Ross Ashby — the Homeostat's step-mechanism, 1948; Paul Watzlawick — first- and second-order change

OPEN WITH

“Simple stability survives normal weather. Ultrastability survives when the whole climate changes.”

THE NLP CONNECTION

It's easy to mistake a client feeling better for a client having changed. Installing a more comfortable belief on top of an unexamined rule is still first-order change — it

will hold until the same underlying rule gets triggered again. A genuine reframe requires the step-mechanism itself to fire: the old rule has to actually break, not just get out-argued.

This is also a useful diagnostic on your own practice. If you find yourself using the same technique, harder, on a client who isn't shifting, that's a strong signal you're reinforcing simple stability rather than triggering ultrastability.

A PRACTICE TO WORK THROUGH

Use this to check, in your own work, whether a change that just happened was first-order or second-order.

1. LOCATE THE RULE, NOT THE SYMPTOM

- ☐ Write down the actual rule that was producing the problem — not the feeling it produced, the rule itself.

2. ASK WHAT ACTUALLY MOVED

- ☐ Did the rule change, or did the client just find a more bearable way to keep obeying it?

3. LOOK FOR THE STEP, NOT THE SMILE

- ☐ A real second-order shift often looks less comfortable in the moment than a first-order relief does — genuine rule-breaking rarely feels tidy while it's happening.

4. NAME YOUR OWN AVOIDED RULE

- ☐ Identify one rule in your own practice you've never once questioned, and consider what would have to happen for its step-mechanism to fire.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

- What's the actual difference between a client coping — same strategy, applied harder — and a client rewriting the rule that produced the problem?
- Where in your own practice do you have a fixed rule you've never once questioned — your own avoided step-mechanism?
- Technically, what triggers a client's step-mechanism in-session, versus just installing a new belief on top of the old rule?

LINEAGE

This distinction traces directly back through the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics (1946–1953) — Ashby's own work, and the Palo Alto group's later clinical application of it — into the systemic thinking NLP itself draws on.