

You're Not A Machine. You're An Ecosystem.

Why Your Last Change Didn't Stick

THE IDEA

Gregory Bateson — anthropologist, and one of the constant presences at the Macy Conferences — spent much of his career arguing against a single, deeply-held assumption: that the mind lives inside the skull, sealed off, a machine with isolated parts you can fix one at a time. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), he made the opposite case. Mind, for Bateson, is a pattern of relationship — distributed across a person, their relationships, and their environment, the way a pattern is distributed across a whole ecosystem rather than sitting inside any single organism in it.

The practical consequence is what Bateson called systemic causation: pull one thread in a web, and the whole web moves — not just the thread you pulled. A change that only touches one isolated part of a person's life, while everything connected to the old pattern stays exactly the same, is not actually a stable change. It's a local adjustment inside a system that will quietly pull it back.

Source: Gregory Bateson — Steps to an Ecology of Mind, 1972

OPEN WITH

“Pull one thread in a spider's web and the whole web moves. You're not a machine with isolated parts — you're an ecosystem, and every “fix” ripples.”

THE NLP CONNECTION

NLP's own ecology check — does this change create problems anywhere else? — is a direct, practical descendant of Bateson's thinking. It's the recognition that a belief, a habit, or an identity is never isolated. It's load-bearing for other things: a

relationship that depends on the old pattern, a role at work built around it, a version of yourself other people have learned to expect.

Changes that don't survive are rarely undone by weak willpower. More often, they're pulled back by everything else in the system that was never invited to change alongside them.

A PRACTICE TO WORK THROUGH

Use this before you commit to a change you actually want to hold.

1. NAME THE CHANGE

- ☐ State clearly the habit, boundary, or belief you're trying to shift.

2. MAP WHAT'S CONNECTED TO IT

- ☐ List the relationships, routines, and roles that currently depend on the old pattern being in place.

3. ASK WHAT WOULD HAVE TO SHIFT TOO

- ☐ For each connection, name what would need to change alongside you for the new pattern to actually hold.

4. PICK ONE CONNECTION TO ADDRESS FIRST

- ☐ Choose the single most load-bearing connection and decide, concretely, how you'll address it — before the old pattern gets pulled back into place.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

- Think of a change you tried to make — a habit, a boundary, a belief — that didn't stick. What else in your life would have had to shift for it to hold?
- Name one relationship, routine or role that would wobble if you actually changed the belief you're proudest of holding.
- If you're not a lone operator but part of a bigger web — your relationships, your environment — whose ecosystem are you quietly holding together right now?

LINEAGE

Bateson's ecological view of mind grew directly out of his role at the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics (1946–1953), where anthropology, engineering and psychiatry were, for the first time, made to share a single vocabulary of systems and feedback.