

The Real Reason “Try Harder” Never Works

Requisite Variety — The Flexibility Skill NLP Borrowed From Cybernetics

THE IDEA

In 1956, W. Ross Ashby put a number on something practitioners already sensed intuitively. His Law of Requisite Variety states that for any controller to regulate a system, the controller must have at least as much variety — as much range of possible response — as the disturbances it needs to handle. In Ashby's own compact phrase: only variety can destroy variety.

A thermostat with one response (turn the heat on or off) can regulate a room's temperature within a narrow band, because the room only ever throws a narrow band of disturbance at it. Put that same thermostat in charge of a genuinely chaotic system — one with many more possible states than the thermostat has responses — and it will fail, not because it isn't trying, but because it structurally cannot match the variety it's up against. More effort inside the same one or two responses does not create the variety that's missing.

Source: W. Ross Ashby — the Law of Requisite Variety, 1956

OPEN WITH

| ***“Rapport isn't a technique. It's inventory.”***

THE NLP CONNECTION

NLP's own founding presupposition — “the person with the most flexibility in a system will have the most influence on the system” — is Ashby's law, restated for a training room. A practitioner with one way of pacing a resistant client is a thermostat

facing a hurricane: no amount of extra effort inside that one move creates the variety the situation actually calls for.

This reframes what “trying harder” actually means in practice. It rarely means insufficient effort. It usually means insufficient inventory — too few genuinely different responses, deployed with increasing intensity instead of increasing range.

A PRACTICE TO WORK THROUGH

Use this on any situation — with a client, or in your own life — where effort keeps increasing but the result won't move.

1. NAME THE STUCK SITUATION

- ☐ State plainly what isn't shifting, no matter how much effort goes in.

2. COUNT YOUR REAL REPERTOIRE

- ☐ List every genuinely different response you've actually tried — not variations in intensity of the same move, but structurally different moves.

3. BE HONEST ABOUT THE COUNT

- ☐ If the honest number is one or two, that's the actual problem — not motivation, not effort.

4. GENERATE THREE NEW MOVES BEFORE YOU NEED THEM

- ☐ Before the next attempt, deliberately invent three responses that are different in kind, not just in degree, from what you've already tried.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

- Count your real repertoire for a stuck client — how many genuinely different moves, versus one move repeated louder?
- Where do you mistake intensity (trying harder) for variety (trying different)?
- What's one move you'd add to your repertoire this month, because a recent client out-varied you?

LINEAGE



Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety comes out of the same cybernetics tradition established at the Macy Conferences (1946–1953), and stands behind much of NLP's own language of flexibility, choice, and behavioral range.