The Structure of Unconscious Excuses

When "Excuses" Go So Far Into the Ozone of our Meta-Levels that We Lose Consciousness that We're just "Making Excuses"
L. Michael Hall, Ph.D.

I came upon *The Excuse Blow-Out Pattern* after encountering three people in a row who complained, "But I just can't apply NLP to myself." Talk about an excuse!

"Yeah, this is great stuff. And I'm a wizard at *NLP-ing* people. I can run the patterns like a charm. But I just can't do it on myself."

The payoff of that excuse is pretty obvious: the person doesn't have to be congruent, walk the talk, invest the time, trouble, and energy to change, be held accountable, and get to be really special. "Maybe I'm just more intelligent, quick, sharp, etc. I see what you're trying to do to me when I play the subject."

Yeah!

You can read about the Excuse Blow-Out Pattern in the Neuro-Semantic report. We have it also in the E-journal of Neuro-Semantics.

The Nature of "Excuses"

Excuses can be seductive. And when someone loads up an excuse with sophisticated sounding reasons, they seem so legitimate. And for anyone working with others (i.e., all of us), whether we manage, sell, do therapy, teach, parent, relate to loved ones, practice law, etc., dealing with excuses (our own and others) is an important part of being successful in life.

Since developing the Excuse Blow Out Pattern, I've had lots of opportunities to get even more acquainted with the realm of "excuses" than ever before. It has surprised me at the range of kinds, forms, and qualities of "excuses." And given the sparse amount of research and study on "excuses" in NLP, this has become a fascinating are of interest and exploration.

It has also made me more conscious of my own skills in "Excuse Making." (Well, I didn't want to fall into the trap of making excuses for why I don't make excuses!) Like any area of endeavor, our very interest makes us more conscious of its presence. It has alerted me to some of the really sneaking ways I excuse-make that I had not even recognized. And it's funny catching myself looking around, as it were, for something that I can use to excuse me from some task, obligation, requirement, request, etc. The strange thing about excuse-making, the greater and more sophisticated our skills at reasoning, explaining, and intellectualizing, more *subtle and invisible* (to us) our powers of *rationalization*. We can come up with more and more sophisticated B.S. for getting away with things. It reinforces the old line that Ph.D. means "Piled Higher and Deeper."

Excuse-making in our lives becomes political intrigue, courtroom analysis of strategies, and even high comedy (if we don't take ourselves too seriously). Most of us got a kick out of President Clinton inventing reasons, explanations, and justifications for why he did not and could not have had "sex with that woman," and

then more to explain why he did but really didn't mean it. My favorite was his retort, "It depends on what the meaning of is is."

Level One of Excuse Making

The first level of excuse making involves simply finding or inventing a reason that explains why something is out of the question, inappropriate, not useful or binding, etc.

> "But I'm too tired to exercise."
> "But I'm not the kind of person who goes to those kinds of events."
> "But I don't know enough."
> "But I'm afraid."
> "But I've never done it that way before."
> "But the traffic was too heavy."
> "But I lost my watch."
> "But my wife would never let me..."
> "But I'd get dirty and sweaty."

Structurally, all of these "reasons" occur at a meta-level to the Primary State of some activity. To the primary experience and all the thoughts, feelings, physiologies that would be involved if we engaged in it, we have *other thoughts and feelings,* usually negative thoughts and feelings. We don't want to be bothered. We dislike the experience. So excuses generally involve an unpleasant meta-state about some primary experience.

By way of contrast, consider times when you took on the activity. Or consider someone else is always seems turned on by that activity. In both instances, there was a different frame of mind about the activity. We or they did *not* see it as a bother, trouble, boring, challenging, or whatever. We or they had take a positive mental attitude (e.g., a meta-state) about the activity. This made "excuse-making" irrelevant. We just got right to it; took effective action and moved ourselves a little closer to fulfilling our goals.

An excuse is a frame about the proposed experience that induces us to feel put off or bothered in some way. We don't feel up to it. We don't see the value of it. So we attempt to excuse ourselves from the engagement by making up some "reason" that seems to allow us or another person to grant us excuse. For this reason, *excuses* generally operate as a form of persuasion. We essentially say (to ourselves or another),

> "Please have me excused from X activity because of this or that reason..."

Excuses that occur in an inter-personal context involve relationships, expectations, hopes, agreements, and the like. The excuses we use with ourselves involve our intra-personal relationship to ourselves, and to our goals, outcomes, hopes, dreams, etc. We want to be fit and thin, but then (here comes the excuses) we're tired, it takes time and trouble, it takes a lot of effort, is it really all that profitable, etc.

The Cognitive Content of an Excuse

As goes the quality of thinking and reasoning, so goes the quality of our excuses. This means that we can have legitimate and illegitimate excuses. In fact, we can

analyze excuses as we do thinking, cognition, reasoning, etc. When we do, we can discern the quality and sophistication of an excuse in terms of:

- Legitimate and Illegitimate excuses
- Logical and illogical excuses
- Good and bad excuses
- Intelligent and stupid excuses
- Rational and irrational excuses

In the literature on *persuasion*, we know that to use the linguistic term, "because..." helps to sell an excuse and to positively influence others in our favor. Experimental research has played with people attempting to cut in line. Those who do try to so without an explanation are much less likely to get a positive response than those who provide a reason. Those who only made the simple request, "Would you let me cut in line?" were denied more often than not. But when they add the word *because*, it becomes nearly magical. And what's even more surprisingly magical about it was that it really didn't matter too much what the persons said after the word "because..." You'd think that only legitimate, intelligent, rational, meaningful, and acceptable would work. Not so. Just about any excuse tends to work regardless of the quality of the excuse.

> "Would you let me cut in line because I'm late for an appointment?"
> Because I'm pregnant...
> Because my wife will be mad at me.
> Because my kid is sick.
> Because I can't stand this heat.

The Positive Intentions & Payoffs in Inventing Reasons "Why"

Many people, perhaps most people, do not like to think that they are "just making excuses." How does that phrase strike you? Do you experience it as a positive thing or as a negative thing? "Just making excuses." Do you do that?

Nay! Not you. Not me.

We don't "make excuses," we only asked to be excused from a task or obligation if we have a legitimate reason. Ah, the beauty and music of that word-- "reason."

> "I had my *reasons* for doing (or not doing) X."
> "If you only understood *why* I did that (or failed to do that), then you'd appreciate..."
> "They don't understand, I had to do X because of ..."

Notice how soothing, comforting, securing, and "right" these phrases feel. What is there about us that we need and want "reasons," "whys," and "becauses?" Come up with some reasons to explain that! Ah, it's everywhere. It's built into our need to *make sense* of things and to live in an intelligent world that we can figure out.

> And this need or drive seems to begin very early.
> "Why did you make that mess?"
> "Because..."

"Because why?"
"Just because. That's why!"

Our need for structure, order, an intelligent world-- *meaning and meaningful structures* moves us to become very skilled at finding, inventing, and creating explanations, understandings, reasons, etc. And from this drive, we create models of the world, theories, postulates, etc. This gives birth to science. With an "explanation" about how something works, what leads to solution, what causes something else, etc., we develop scientific theories and hypothesis, test them, refine them, and so develop our knowledge base.

I knew there was a positive intention and payoff for the use of human reason!

Then We Become Devious

Of course, when you have such an incredible power as human reason that can invent new things, expand knowledge, create civilizations, etc., you know it is liable to abuse.

Enter, "The Excuse."

This has been known for a long time. Socrates was the philosopher who quipped that "man is not a rational creature, he is a rationalizing creature."

All you need is a little motivation. Add a little dislike, unpleasant task, frustration, sense of being bothered, etc., and you have the perfect context wherein "excuses" will be generated. It's predictable. Most people (well, most Americans in the late 20th century and beginning 21stcentury) seem to operate from frames of comfort and ease ("Is it easy? Will it be fun?), the path of least resistance ("But this is hard?), and overload ("I have enough to do"). In the context of *those frames*, it easy to grow a whole crop of excuses in no time!

We get devious about the way we try to excuse ourselves from doing the things necessary, essential, and even critical to achieving our goals. The gestalt that emerges from this mixture is "self-sabotage." We sabotage our own best interests. Talk about irrational. Why would we do that? What would get us to undermine our own success, fitness, health, relationships, etc.?

There must be something else going on here.
And yes, there is.

Meta-stating the Meta-State of "Excuse Making"

If "excuses" do not exist at the primary level, but as the meta-state level of a "reason" that we feed our minds, and try to feed the minds of others, about why we should be excused from doing something, then what's your meta-level thought or feeling about that? How have you *meta-stated* the experience of excuse making?

Do you like the awareness that you're "just making an excuse?"
Does that awareness make you feel anxious, uncomfortable?
Do you fear it?
Do you reject it and refuse to know that about any particular "reason?"

These questions begin the exploration of how have you *framed* the subjective experience of excuse making. To turn "negative" thoughts and feelings against our own selves and our own experiences banishes awareness and so reduces the level of our own interpersonal mindfulness. And that makes us more unconscious about what we're doing and how we're living, which reduces our freedom of actual choices, which reduces our power to run our own brain. And, if continued, it can create a *Dragon State*.

Not a pretty picture.

The solution? Accepting that we are excuse makers and develop an open willingness to not only recognize our propensity for excuse-making, but to reality test the excuses, and hold ourselves to a higher standard.

Our Default Meta-Stating of our Responsibilities and Tasks

In making excuses, there's lots of things going on, but not only at the same level of the *primary event* or the first meta-level of our excuse making. The more crucial things are happening at even higher levels. To discover what's really going on we have to go higher to the frames about our excuse-making. We have to move up to yet another level, and usually several other levels. Only then can we flush out and discover the higher frames that are actually driving the show.

Discover these higher levels for yourself.

1) Identify a desired outcome.
Think about some activity that, at some level, you *want* to do, *know* that you should do, and know that it would *benefit* you if you did do it. For example, perhaps you think these kinds of thoughts about eating right and exercising, or devoting more quality time to family and loved ones. Think about doing those things that awaken the best in you: reading, listening, dialoguing, investing yourself in new discoveries, etc.

Got it? Good. Vividly represent and then step into that representation so that you can sense that goal, outcome, desire... And just feel it.

2) Let your excuses emerge.
Now think about the range of ways that you *excuse yourself* from taking effective action in fulfilling your goals.

What stops you?
What do you let get in your way?
What ideas, reasons, explanations do you give to let yourself off the hook?

3) Observe your excuse system.
Now step back, in your mind, from the desired activity and the excuses so that you can observe the whole dynamic structure of your thoughts-and-feelings and just notice what comes to mind and heart as you do.

How do you feel about your skills in excuse making?
How do you feel about yourself excusing yourself from being more

fully engaged in life?
What thoughts bounce around the edge of your consciousness as you
think about this?

You may get things like:

"I don't know..." is the most common answer I get from these
questions.
"I don't know... I know I don't like it."
"I feel bad that I don't push myself."

The Meta-State Frame of Disliking Excuse-Making

These responses indicate some of the first *default responses* that you generate to
your excuses. And this is common to all of us. Welcome to the club! We commonly
do *not even want to look at or face the fact* that we let ourselves down, don't go for
the gusto, excuse ourselves, etc. All of this is part of the human experience.

Yet because we have a default awareness that we *should not* "make excuses" and
because we feel bad about doing so, we *do not seek awareness* of doing so. We try
to not know this about ourselves. Why? Typically because "making excuses" has
been anchored with negative feelings (shame, guilt, being bad, being a slacker,
etc.), so now we are well trained and conditioned to *avoid that awareness.*

And??

And so this leads us to do something that just makes the problem even worse,
although on the surface, we think it will make the problem go away. What do we do?
We *set non-awareness* (unawareness) as our basic frame about this facet of our
journey through life. By not wanting to know our weakness, fallibility, etc. in excuse
making, we frame things so that we become mindless. Then, we begin to fall into
habits (unthinking ways of acting) so that we don't maintain awareness of what
we're doing.

And why not? Because it's too painful. As we have tabooed and rejected awareness
of our excuse making (did you notice that there are three meta-levels of frames in
that statement?), we now operate from that frame as our map. It creates the Frame
Game of "Hey, don't ask me; I don't know. It's just my Mind!" Frame Game.

Of course, this creates psychic danger in our person.

When Un-Awareness Becomes our Meta-Frame Game

When we taboo *awareness of excuse making* and refuse to know it, because we
judge it and hate it (the level above the unawareness), we set up an Executive
Frame that values "not knowing." Then, out of that comes the gestalt commonly
known as "Denial." This isn't conscious denial, but unconscious denial. We're denying
and don't even know that we're denying. We deny that we're denying! In fact, the
whole structure of these dynamic frames embedded in frames generates a general
sense of being unconscious of our higher motivations and desires.

This leaves us living at the lower frames *only aware* of what we conscious know that
we want-- our goals and outcomes.

I want to be fit and thin.
I want to make lots of money and become financially successful.
I want to expand my career.
I want to have a loving and close family.

Yet, *above* these immediate and conscious goals, we have another set of goals that we have lost awareness of:

I want the easy path.
I want a hassle free life.
I don't ant to have to work too hard or struggle too much.
I don't want to do unpleasant and boring things.
I want to do only stimulating and exciting things. Etc.

At the conscious level, I really do think that I want the goals that I talk about, plan for, etc., and yet at another level (a higher level), I have programmed in another whole set of goals. And because these goals are "higher" in terms of logical levels, they operate as what we might call my *real goals*. After all, the higher frames govern and determine our actual reality.

These higher (or more operational) goals are not only different from, but opposed to and contradictory to my conscious goals. These higher unconscious goals arise from my higher frames. Yet because I have forbidden awareness of them, I can't own them. I can't accept them.

Welcome to the meta-muddles that occur when we do not handle the higher levels of our mind well.

To complicate matters at this point, every little clue of insight that I might experience about my higher "real" frames, only sends me into anxiety, fear, and stress. This is the self-organizing nature of the "not willing to know" frame. Result? I push awareness away even further and harder. Of course, due to the paradoxical nature of logical levels, this increases the strength of the higher frames.

From the Meta-States perceptive, "refusing to know..." locks me more into a position of blindness about my own thinking and feeling. And that operates from a "fear of discovering my true thoughts." Eventually this leads to a self-alienation, a lack of psychological awareness of oneself, and a self-hatred or contempt. And so the problem gets worse and worse with this "attempted solution.'

How can we solve this?

The solution lies in the opposite direction. The solution lies in a direction that at first seems paradoxical. Namely, full acceptance of our "excuse making," stupid explanations, skill at being devious, etc. Solution lies in the direction of refusing to identify myself with my thoughts and feelings, and realizing that this is just the way mind operates and welcome my excuses into awareness. When I do that, then I can discern between valid and invalid excuses and refuse the stupid ones.

4) Welcome your awareness of your skill in Excuse-Making.

Access the state of acceptance and even appreciation and set these thoughts and feelings about your excuse making. It's just the use of your powers of "reason." That's all. Just notice the tremendous skill you have at lying to yourself, trying to get out of things, inventing preposterous excuses, misusing your rational mind, etc. No judgment.

5) Honestly evaluate the quality and sophistication of your Excuse-Making. From acceptance and appreciation, you can now honestly evaluate, run an ecology check, reality test, and quality control the frames that you're setting via your "reasons." This higher level honesty is your friend and your power.

Summary: How you Relate to Your Excuse-Making

If you want to create the personal structuring for self-sabotaging in your children, attach psychic pain to "making excuses" by calling them bad, lazy, selfish, etc. This will motivate your kids to feel bad about making excuses and using their creative imagination for inventing reasons. As they taboo and reject excuses, they will eventually lose awareness of the excuses they event and truly believe that they have true reasons. This will begin the self-alienation.

If you want to allow them to own and accept this power, then play with their "excuses" by validating them as the use of reason and help them reality test them. This will enable them to recognize the difference between good and bad reasoning. It will teach them the beginning of critical thinking. It will also help them to avoid developing fears about themselves, the fallibility of their thinking, etc.

Welcoming our excuses allows us to then sort through the valid and invalid ones. Then we can clearly decide, "No!" I don't need that stupid excuse, and "Yes!" that's an appropriate one that I'll keep.