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that appeared in volume 2 of*

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You Don't Have to, but You Can: observing our verbing

This article explores our reactions to modal operators and seeks to use them more consciously for specific outcomes. You probably remember “modal operators of necessity” from your practitioner training. Here we would like to examine modals (e.g. You *may* enjoy this) and other “introductory verb phrases expressing modality” (*Perhaps* you'll enjoy this) more closely and notice how different ones affect us differently. For simplicity's sake, we will refer to both of these ways of expressing modality as “modals”.

Modals indicate the attitudes of a speaker towards the state or event expressed by the main verb. A modal operator is usually associated in our minds with a full VAK state; it operates upon specific content to make us see, hear and feel that content in a particular way. Compare, for example, “I have to succeed” with “I can succeed.” By way of experiment, put them into your internal dialog, repeat them a few times, and notice your reactions.

Modal operators express the meta-meaning of an activity, what we think and feel *about* the activity. Through them we express our beliefs, values, attitudes and personal meanings. They are one logical level away from the activity itself and that gives them enormous power in any kind of change-work.

Let's suppose that someone responds to “I have to succeed” with “but it is such a lot of work that I falter and lose all my strength.” We can work with the modal operator part of “I have to”, or with the activity part of “succeed”. Working with the former often produces faster, deeper and more lasting results. Learning the impact of stem verb phrases on our thinking and behavior can also allow us to

use them with more choice for achieving certain goals. Modals of necessity tend to delete other possibilities, taking away choice, and thus they may make us feel trapped and stressed. Using proactive modals can lead to generalizations that stimulate a wider constellation of positive behaviors.