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TOTES, TOTS and TOES

Introduction

The TOTE model first appeared in NLP literature in the book *Roots of Neuro-Linguistic Programming* by Robert Dilts in 1983. The section in which it occurs, “EEG and Representational Systems,” was written in 1977, so the NLP incarnation of the TOTE is twenty years old. It has been a useful model. However, cybernetics and neurology have moved on in the last twenty years and the TOTE, virtually unchanged from its inception, also needs some refining before it officially enters adulthood. This article will briefly outline the structure of the TOTE, where it came from, how it has been used in NLP, and how we can apply systems thinking to refine and expand it, as well as appreciate the systemic basis of all our actions.

A brief history of the TOTE

TOTE stands for Test–Operate–Test–Exit. It was originally proposed by Karl Pribram, George Miller, and Eugene Gallanter in their book, *Plans and the Structure of Behaviour* (1960), and developed as a model for neurological processing. As they explain, “The test represents the conditions which have to be met before the response will occur.” They go on, “The general pattern of reflex action, therefore, is to test the input energies against some criteria established in the organism, to respond if the result of the test is to show an incongruity, and to continue to respond until the incongruity vanishes, at which time the reflex is terminated.” In NLP terms, the test is a comparison between present state and desired state. If there is a difference, then the result is an action, (the operation), that seeks to move from present state to desired state. Then there is another test. If the difference continues, action is repeated until the difference is removed. Then the system exits to the next step.

The model was originally applied in neurology. It is a simple cybernetic model, the results of one test being fed back into the system