

Neuro Linguistic Programming

Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) is the rather intimidating title for an alternative and effective way of ordering your thoughts, feelings, behaviour and language. Some of the basic concepts of NLP have been around for decades, and fairly recently, in the 1970s, John Grinder and Richard Bandler coined the name of Neuro Linguistic Programming for this form of self-development which has applications in the fields of business, communication and education as well as psychotherapy. It has developed and matured over the years, gaining in reputation in the USA and Europe, and is currently enjoying favour in Britain. Some claim that NLP represents the shape of things to come in human resource management and development.

NLP is an evolving study and you will find many books on library shelves on its principles; also many books on management and communication skills which expound its theories without once mentioning the words Neuro Linguistic Programming or the initials NLP, such is its growing popularity. This chapter will give you a brief insight into NLP origins and theories, but I would suggest you look at an excellent book *NLP at Work* by Sue Knight for a more in-depth, self-development guide and for a practical application of NLP in the business world. However, although the models of NLP can be presented in written form, it is a complex theory involving an awareness of your own and others' thought processes, so attending training sessions in the practice of NLP is recommended.

The background: personal development

NLP is about responding effectively to other people and understanding and respecting their views, opinions and needs. The goal of NLP training is to give individuals more choice in their repertoire of response by reprogramming thoughts, feelings and attitudes.

Belief systems that are unhelpful and entrenched can be changed so that they become more in line with the kind of reality you want to experience. NLP teaching is based on the fact that the unconscious mind is far more powerful than the conscious mind, and that everyone already has, within them, the resources to achieve excellence.

What you say and do influences the other person, and what they do influences you. NLP involves an examination of the entire system of feedback and response - both behaviourally and biologically - occurring in the interactions between a human being and himself, a human being and other human beings, and a human being and his environment. In business training, NLP can help with the following:

- the ability to learn; to be open to new ideas; to think laterally; to initiate as well as manage change
- to copy excellence - to understand what it is about successful, inspiring leaders that makes them 'tick', and to replicate this success for yourself
- to turn negative self-fulfilling prophecy into positive outcomes through the power of thought
- 'reading' others through subtle shifts in their behaviour, body language, eye movements, breathing rates, skin tone changes etc.
- influencing outcomes, by understanding and responding to the other person's value systems, time orientation and preferred communication style
- using language to create rapport
- encouraging understanding by recognizing slippages between perceptions, thoughts and language, and questioning for clarification
- 'matching' and 'pacing' so that you are on the same wavelength with the other person
- 'leading' - modelling good practice
- creating quality relationships
- developing flexibility in your life, and control over your thoughts, feelings and emotions
- learning how to best manage yourself in order to influence - not manipulate - and generate commitment in others
- recognizing the talents within - of self and others
- realizing that you already have within you all the resources that you will ever need to succeed
- beginning a process of continuous learning and improvement.

As humans we receive and transmit information through the five senses. We also have internal 'feelings'. Each sensory system is responsible for processing a set of characteristics about our immediate environment, and these characteristics will be unique to every individual. In NLP it is understood that these unique distinctions control our behaviour. However, nothing is 'fixed' for ever. With NLP, you can, as it were, extract from within an experience or feeling, have a good look at it, replace it with a more appropriate response, or one with which you are more comfortable, and return this new response to your own personal system of values and beliefs (see Anchoring below). This can be done alone with practice. However, as stated above, I would suggest that many of the techniques used in NLP need professional support and training.

In NLP 'behaviour' is not just external, observable behaviour like walking, but activity in any sphere - from eye movement to hearing, or internal visualization. Behaviour can be initiated either externally by the individual's immediate sensory environment, or internally by memory or imagination. It is an interesting phenomenon that your mind can be deceived time and time again - it cannot distinguish between what is imagined and what is real. If you were to step out into the road in front of a speeding car just managing to jump out of its way seconds before it might have mowed you down, you would probably experience the symptoms of mild clinical shock: you would go pale, possibly come out in a cold sweat; feel trembly and shaken; your stomach would chum at the thought of what might have been.

Recounting the tale later, similar symptoms may recur. Your mind triggers off a physical reaction; it cannot differentiate between real and imagined events. The way you react to imagined or remembered events can be altered from a negative to a positive experience through NLP. This is useful where you have had a bad experience with, say, giving a presentation. If you dwell on all the things that went wrong, the self-fulfilling prophecy syndrome will come into action. You'll be waiting for the same bad things to happen next time - and they probably will. However, if you can replace these 'bad' memories, with positive thought patterns, self-fulfilling prophecy will work for instead of against you. The presentation will be all the things you wanted it to be.

'Outcome' is a word you will find used a lot in NLP training. An outcome is a specific and positive result. An outcome is more finely honed than a goal. An outcome is stated in words that describe what you see, hear and feel. To continue with the example above, if you can recall a time when a presentation - or similar event - went well for you, NLP encourages you to recall the positive event; the successful outcome. What did it feel like? What did you see? What did you hear? Recalling these things makes you relive your success. With training and practice you can bring these positive vibes to bear any time you need to replicate the experience, turning potential failure into repeatable success.

Why the title, Neuro Linguistic Programming?

The 'Neuro' part of the title refers to the concept that all behaviour results from sensory stimuli - sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch and feeling. Among other things, NLP requires the ability to get in touch with the senses and to be able to 'read' thought processes in others through eye movement, subtle changes in breathing and skin tone and through preferred language choice. It involves changing internal conflict, negative thought and behaviour patterns, to more positive states.

The word 'linguistic' recognizes that as humans we use language to formulate our thoughts, and to communicate to others our opinions, emotions and needs.

The 'programming' in the title explains how we organize our behaviour to produce results.

NLP is a complex theory based on the fact that every one of us is unique, yet composed of similar physiological, biological, emotional and spiritual parts which are intrinsically linked. Body and mind, conscious and subconscious, form a wholeness distinct to each individual. When the rules of interaction between the parts of the system are understood, the *effects* of different parts of the system on one another can be patterned, predicted and changed. A change in one aspect of our being necessitates change in other areas. The resulting behaviour change in ourselves brings about behaviour change in others with whom we communicate. In a very crude nutshell, this is why NLP is useful in therapy, counselling, business, education, communication and training in self-development.

You will already see, from this simplistic and inadequate explanation of a complex system, that NLP requires a substantial amount of knowledge, skill and application. As a form of self-development, or pursuit of 'personal excellence', it would be difficult to achieve without the help of an experienced tutor. I strongly suggest that if you wish to pursue NLP as an entire discipline, you attend seminars run by experienced exponents of this alternative approach to psychotherapy and self-development.

Some models developed through NLP

NLP is complex. It is based on scientific knowledge of thought processes and the chemical reactions which take place in the brain. It applies this knowledge in a practical way to aid self-development, to improve relationships and to enrich communication. It enables individuals to manage their thinking processes. It addresses beliefs and values as well as behaviour. In fact, it would take a full textbook, plus, to do the theories justice. This section can only touch on some of the concepts; it is up to you whether you feel that NLP is a study worth pursuing as a self-development programme. However, some of the techniques can be 'lifted' and are useful people skills.

Matching, mirroring, pacing and leading

You can assist the process of rapport and empathetic communication by altering the tone and tempo of your voice to be more in line with the other person. If he speaks quickly, up your pace slightly. If he has a soft voice, soften your own voice to match. Do not mimic tempo or tone, or copy accents, as this will quickly be perceived and taken as an insult by the other person. Aim to subtly emulate their style. On a subconscious level, this will flatter the other person, who will perceive you as 'on their wavelength'. Another technique of NLP is to recognize breathing patterns in yourself and others, and to match the other person's breathing rate to create rapport.

People in harmony with each other tend to mirror each other's posture, body weight distribution and body language. This happens unconsciously. In fact, it is a phenomenon that even inanimate objects prefer to match each other's movements. Presumably, the following has something to do with physics, gravity or whatever, but it is a fact that if you start up several pendulum clocks in the same room, at different times, ultimately they will synchronize their movements and all swing their pendulums in time. To build rapport, make a conscious slight adjustment in how you stand or sit, or how you hold your arms and hands so that you match the other person. Your change in demeanour has to be subtle - barely noticeable - if it is to be effective.

Crossover mirroring is an interesting variation on this theme. If you notice that the other person repeatedly uses a gesture or body movement, mirror the movement with a *different* repeated movement of your own. If he taps his foot a lot, every time he begins a sequence of tapping, rub your jaw or pull at your ear. Your movements, again, have to be minimal if they are to be effective. Believe it or not, this, too, will help establish rapport.

Pacing is about recognizing, acknowledging and respecting the state or feelings of others. If the other person is anxious, you do not match their anxiety, but pace them to show you understand and care about their position. If they are sad, use a sympathetic tone and manner. Mirror and match posture and tone of voice. Once you have paced them, you can then lead - gradually adjust your behaviour to a more positive and resourceful state. If you have built rapport, the other person will begin to pace you - follow your lead. They will have subconsciously accepted the fact that you have respected their position, and will follow your influence if that's the way they want to go.

Eye-accessing cues

Below, under Representational systems we look at how we all perceive through our five senses, and how each of us favours one (possibly two) representational systems. We think via internalized pictures, sounds or feelings. Whether we are primarily visuals, auditories or kinesthetics will influence the language we use, the pace at which we speak, tonal quality, how we breath (visuals high in the chest; kinesthetics deep in the stomach) etc. People skilled in people-watching and trained in NLP techniques will be able to tell how the other person is thinking by the movements of his eyes while he is communicating. It should be pointed out that there are exceptions to the rule; you will need to observe each individual carefully and match his eye movements with other clues, such as choice of vocabulary, but generally, right-handed visual people will:

- look up and to their right for imagined images
- look up and to their left for remembered images
- look straight ahead in a defocused way for visual images, created or remembered. (Stand too close in front of a visual when they are defocused and you will have invaded their space; they will be unable to think clearly.)

Right-handed auditory people will keep their eyes level:

- to their right for constructed sounds
- to their left for remembered sounds.

Right-handed kinesthetic people will:

- look down and to their right for feelings and internal emotions
- look down and to their left for internal dialogue.

Calibration

Calibration is claimed to be the key to successful communication. It is the term used for 'reading' other people - putting together the evidence from their eye movements, rate and type of breathing, changes in breathing rate, in skin tone and in facial musculature. Calibration is the ability to recognize how a person is feeling and responding to your communication by assessing his non-verbal signals. It will tell you when you have rapport, when you are on the right track to achieve your outcome, and alternatively when you are going off course and need to change tack to succeed with this individual. There are no hard and fast rules as every person is unique, so calibration is very much an observation skill which has to be practised with each individual and with each interaction.

NLP and the use of language

Representational systems

One of the tenets of NLP is that we are all the sum of our conditioning. In the biological sense, this means that as our brain cells developed, they sought sensory stimulation. At a crucial point in our development, if we were given objects to play with which were primarily made to stimulate our ears - rattles for instance - we would tend to prefer auditory information for learning and to develop language and behaviour patterns. Given picture-books we may well favour visual information.

In adulthood, individuals may still rely heavily either on auditory, kinesthetic (the feeling sense: tactile - external, or emotional - internal) or visual information. A primarily 'auditory' person may be able to 'See', but may not be able to 'observe'; a visual person may 'hear' but find it hard to 'listen'.

Of course, nothing is as cut and dried as this, and trying to fit individuals into neat boxes is always counter-productive. Everyone will react to the complete range of sensory stimuli, and will at times pay attention to one sense more than another, but according to NLP theory, everyone favours one perhaps two 'senses' regardless of what we are thinking about. You may prefer to trust pictures, sounds or feelings when considering information. This will be reflected in the language you use. For example, a visual person is likely to prefer using terms such as 'I see what you mean' whereas an auditory person would probably use a phrase similar to 'I hear what you say'.

Experiments have shown that people who favour the same sense find it far easier to communicate together. They 'see eye to eye', are 'in harmony' or 'feel comfortable in each others' company', depending on whether they are visuals, auditories or kinesthetics. It is easy to see the application to communication skills training. If you wish to create rapport with a person who doesn't share your preferred sense - for example if you are primarily an auditory person but can recognize that the person with whom you are communicating is a visual person - you can consciously alter the language you choose to match his preferred style. The skill comes in having a) the skill and experience to pick up the cues from the other's language and, then, b) having sufficient vocabulary to emulate his preferred style of communication. Here is another instance where appropriate training with a skilled NLP practitioner is so helpful.

Powerful communicators use language that is rich in its use of all the senses. Practitioners of NLP develop a very astute sense of language, the meaning of words and word clusters. Because each of us brings our own unique experience of the world to every situation, it is logical that the communicator's intention and the receiver's interpretation of the communication, can often differ. NLP advocates a precise use of language to aid mutual rapport and understanding.

In order to convey meaning we need to use words to express our thoughts. We gather information through the five senses and this information is processed by the brain. What we decide to do with this information constitutes the thinking process. Thinking turns our perceptions into words. As we think far faster than we can speak, there is a lot of complexity to our thought patterns - complexity which can be lost in translation into words and phrases. It's rather like doing copious research for an article or book, then having to reduce 50,000 words of notes to a maximum of 20,000. Something has to be left out, and it's all too easy to believe that the finished work is still as understandable to the reader as it is to the writer. Inevitably detail will be lost, but also thought processes might be lost which are crucial to understanding. Rather than taking the reader from A to Z, it is possible to make assumptions about prior knowledge and start at C or D, and leave out H, P and T - crucial to your argument. So it is with speech. You know what is going on in your head, and feel that you have accurately and precisely conveyed your meaning. It is very possible that the receiver of your communication has given different interpretation to your words; both of you may leave the conversation feeling that you understand and have been understood, but in fact neither may be the case.

The Meta Model

John Grinder and Richard Bandler created the Meta Model to explain how language works. I am indebted to the work of Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour for their book *Introducing NLP* for explaining so succinctly the linguistic categories precised below.

We have seen that during communication, the best we can hope for is an approximation of understanding. However, using as precise a system of vocabulary and grammar as possible lessens the gap between thought processes and the spoken word. In NLP, what is known as the Meta Model is used to aid this process. When we think, we do so in pictures, with feelings and other sensations as well as with language. To articulate our thoughts we need to internally summarize, deleting much detail, before voicing a simplified version. This inevitably requires some distortion and generalization of our thought processes. The Meta Model is a system of questions to help the speaker clearly articulate thoughts and feelings and to enable the listener to fill in the gaps,

thus clarifying and minimizing disparity between hearing and understanding. The Meta Model does not ask 'why' questions; rather it asks questions which clarify meaning, and offers choices through opening the possibility of alternative outcomes. People using the Meta Model to elicit more information or clarify another's thoughts must constantly ask themselves 'What is the most useful question I can ask now?' and constantly must keep in mind the need for rapport, support and sensitivity.

Unspecified nouns

When an individual habitually chooses to use passive statements such as 'a decision was reached' rather than specifying *who* made the decision and *what* decision specifically, or 'they should put a stop to it' rather than spelling out *who* should put a stop to *what*, this can be indicative of the speaker's state of mind. He may view the world as a place where things just happen; where no one wishes to take responsibility for events. To get a clear picture of this person's thought processes, the questions 'who, which or what specifically ...?' need to be asked.

Unspecified verbs

This is where adverbs, which we need to hear if we are to understand fully, have been deleted from statements. For example

'You'll need first to preserve the timber' or 'He's injured himself'. To get the full picture requires you asking 'How' or 'What kind of ...?' or 'In what way ...?'

Comparisons

Often people make statements using the words 'better', 'best' or 'worse' without giving a comparison - what exactly is it better than, for example. On a more subtle level, you may have internal dialogues with yourself on a 'I really made a pig's breakfast of that interview' type. To what or whom are you comparing your performance? Is this a realistic comparison?

Judgements

If someone says 'I'm useless with machines' or 'I'm clumsy', you need to clarify 'In whose opinion?'; against whose criteria are you judging yourself? Conditioning and self-fulfilling prophecy often go hand in hand. Another type of judgement is the 'As you realize, amalgamation is the only option' type statement, or 'It's obviously the only choice'. You may not realize anything of the kind; and to whom is it obvious? Speakers who make sweeping judgement statements shouldn't be allowed to get away with them! Judgement statements need to be clarified.

Nominalizations

Nominalizations are what I choose to call verbal nouns; active concepts which are made static by making them nouns. There is nothing ambiguous about words which describe nouns such as a 'flower-pot' or a 'sandwich', but verbal nouns such as 'sensitivity' or 'intelligence' are open to a vast array of interpretations. There can be an ocean of difference between your understanding of 'aggression', 'respect', 'confidence' or 'reputation', and mine. Nominalizations are probably the biggest area of misunderstandings within communication. To clarify, return the noun to its verbal form and ask questions such as 'How is he being aggressive' or 'Reputed to do what, specifically?'

Modal operators of necessity and possibility

These are explicit or implicit rules of conduct. Modal operators of necessity are the 'shoulds', 'ought to's' and 'musts' of our internal dialogue and need to be challenged by 'what would happen if you did?' type questions. When possible outcomes of what might happen if you *did* do something you feel you shouldn't, or reasons you *can't* do something, are honestly evaluated, more accurate decisions about behaviour choice can be reached.

Modal operators of possibility describe to the individual what he considers possible by words such as 'can' and 'cannot', 'possible' and 'impossible'. Of course, some statements of possibility are based in fact, such as 'I can't swim'. However, often an individual's limits are dictated by beliefs which may or may not be true, such as 'I just couldn't stand up and give a speech' or 'How can I refuse when she's been so good to me'. Questioning along the lines of 'What is it about giving a speech that makes it impossible for you?', 'What stops you refusing, or 'What would happen if you refused?' help define how amenable the individual is to changing or modifying behaviour.

Generalizations

Generalizations are not always wrong. In the Julian calendar, April always follows March; all reptiles are cold-blooded. These are factual statements. However, many generalizations are unhelpful in that they seemingly allow for no exceptions, e.g. 'the youth of today have no respect for property' or 'you are a bunch of hypocrites'. Statements containing the words 'always', 'never', 'everyone', 'all' etc. indicate generalizations. Sometimes the generalization is implied. However, in all instances the speaker needs to be invited

to tighten up his statement, giving specific examples. This can be done most simply by reflecting the key word back as a question, 'Always?' 'Nothing?' or by challenging the detail behind the statement.

Presuppositions

These are statements like 'Will you type this before you go out for my sandwiches' presupposing that the other person will be doing your lunch shopping. An astute response would be 'What makes you believe that ... ?' Another example would be the accusatory 'Why don't you confide in me?' which presupposes that you do not share confidences. Again, an appropriate response would be 'What leads you to believe that I don't confide in you?'

Cause and effect

While we are responsible for our language, behaviour and actions, we are *not* responsible for the effect these have on others. Statements such as 'You make me really angry when...' make the other person responsible for your emotional state. Their behaviour may have caused anger in you, but they were not responsible *per se* for how you react and feel. By looking at cause and effect, possibilities of how to cope with the situation may become more apparent. Another way of looking at it is to ask how and why, specifically, you become angry when certain behaviour is displayed. After all, you have no control over another's behaviour, but you do over how you react to that behaviour.

Intuition

This can be a two-way communication block - assuming that you can mind-read, or expecting others to know, by instinct, how you feel or what you need. 'I could tell how he felt' is a typical example of the first phenomenon. How could you 'tell' without asking him? 'She should have realized that I would be annoyed' is an example of expecting others to intuitively know how you would react to a situation. In a counselling situation you might question the other person as to how, specifically, you know that ... or how should she have realized that ... to ascertain whether there is clear evidence to support the claim, or whether it is a questionable assumption on their part.

Pointers

John Grinder has since refined the Meta Model to just five pointers:

1. Nouns. In the English language many, if not most nouns have diverse meanings depending on context, and the experience and perceptions of the transmitter and receiver. Consider the noun 'produce'. I know what I mean when I say the word, but what 'product' means to me, and what it means to you, the receiver, could be entirely different. To be as sure as possible that you and I share the same meaning, you should question accordingly: 'What product, specifically?'
2. Verbs too have meanings which are idiosyncratic to the individual using them. You could say to me 'I'll edit Rashid's report'. I may think that you will proofread, check for grammar, accuracy and so on. You may mean that you will reduce it from 3,000 to 1,500 words. This does not imply that some people have a sloppy command of language (although some do!) but illustrates that meaning can differ from one person to the other, so needs to be checked. 'How' type questions need to be used to check for accurate understanding of verbs; 'How, exactly will you edit Rashid's report?'
3. Rules. These are the 'should' or 'shouldn't', 'ought to' and 'cannot' type limitations that might or might not be reasonable, so need to be questioned. The sort of question to ask to verify or refute words and phrases that limit are 'What would happen if you didn't or 'I'm curious; what might happen if you did . . . ?'
4. Generalizations, too, can be limiting. We generalize when we take the sum of one or two similar experiences, and wrongly conclude that any future comparable experience will produce the same results. Words such as 'never', 'every' and 'always' flag up generalizations. Seldom do these words give a true picture; there are usually more exceptions to the rule than generalizations would suggest. One way to question generalizations is to repeat the limiting word back to the other person with a rising inflection: 'Always?'

Another typical generalization is the use of the pronoun 'they'. Who 'they' are is seldom specified, but 'they' are responsible for things that go wrong, things that have been omitted, for making the rules or for breaking them. 'They' are scapegoats, and in fairness to 'them' you should help identify who these people are! If you allow the other person to lay the blame on 'them' you are denying him the opportunity to take responsibility for his own life, his own solutions and decisions, and changing for the better.

5. Comparators are words such as 'faster', 'cheaper', 'more effective', 'better'. It is easy to accept blanket statements such as 'We have higher standards', yet you need to establish 'higher than whom?' before any credibility can be given to such a claim. Through questioning, individuals will learn to specify antecedents to give weight to, and provide evidence for, their claim.

Anchoring

Techniques distinctive of NLP are anchoring and syntonics learning. I will not attempt to go into detail on this. Suffice to say that they are techniques which engage the senses of sight, hearing and touch to secure positive experiences in the consciousness. With apologies to exponents of NLP for this simplistic definition, you anchor a positive feeling, such as confidence, by mentally 'living' your desired state. When you are totally associated with this state - can see, hear and feel it most strongly 'anchor' the feeling by, for example, touching forefinger and thumb together, touching your thigh or some other simple tactile expression, maintaining the touch while the feeling is at its most intense. This touch has now become the anchor for that feeling, so whenever you need to experience that feeling of confidence or whatever again, 'fire the anchor': press finger and thumb together, and the feeling of confidence will recur.

For another example of how syntonics learning and anchoring occur, let's consider the five pointers above. Associate the fingers and thumb of your left hand with the words 'noun' (forefinger), 'verb' (middle finger), 'should' (ring finger), 'all' (little finger), and 'comparison' (thumb); and the fingers and thumb of your right hand with the questions or pointers 'What specifically?' (forefinger), 'How specifically?' (middle finger), 'What would happen if?' (ring finger), 'All?' (little finger), and 'Than what, specifically?' (thumb). The technique involves lifting your left forefinger as you imagine the word 'noun' printed on it. Say the word 'noun' aloud. Repeat this three times. Now raise your right forefinger, imagining the question 'What?' printed on it and asking 'What, specifically?' out loud. Do this three times. Now repeat the process, lifting the left forefinger, thinking and saying the word 'noun' followed immediately this time by the right forefinger sequence. This should have fixed the sequence in your consciousness so that when you hear another person using a vague or unspecified noun, your forefingers will twitch prompting you to ask questions of clarification about that noun: e.g. 'What programme specifically?'.

You would need to repeat the process of fixing the pointer sequences in your consciousness by going through similar routines with the other fingers and thumbs of both hands. Once the sequences are secured in your neurology you will automatically recognize and react to unspecified verbs, limiting generalizations and so on.

You can learn to anchor positive experiences, recalling how you felt, what you saw and what you heard, then transferring these constructive feelings to a present or future situation. Through anchoring, you can even replace negative thoughts, doubts and worries or previous negative outcomes with how you would *like* to respond. These new anchored, positive feelings become reality for you. As stated several times above, it would benefit anyone considering using NLP for self-development or to improve managerial and communication skills to seek professional and expert guidance in NLP.