

Chapter 17

Neurolinguistic Programming for Leaders and Managers

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Introduction

This chapter offers an introduction to neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and its relevance for managers and leaders.

NLP is a practice that is used widely in management and leadership development. NLP training providers exist around the globe; the UK Association for NLP estimates that in the region of 30,000 participants have attended practitioner training courses in the UK over the past 25 years.¹ In 2008, more than 50 NLP training schools were operating in the UK alone.² As evidenced by literature from NLP associations, websites, magazines and conferences, it is used by professionals not only in business but also in education,³ health,⁴ law, the arts and more. It became a recognised mode of psychotherapy in the UK in the 1990s.⁵ There are many popular publications that introduce NLP and its applications to business, such as Sue Knight's *NLP at Work*.⁶ The UK's leading association for human resource professionals, the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, has a factsheet on its website about NLP and offers related training courses.⁷

Examples of practitioners' accounts of using NLP in business can be found in NLP magazines and websites. For example, *Rapport*, the magazine of the Association for NLP (ANLP), has reported on a communications skills training programme for the insurance company, Towergate,⁸ and sales training in Coutts Retail.⁹ In recent years NLP has been marketed as a method of coaching, literature on which includes Grimley,¹⁰ Linder-Pelz and Hall,¹¹ McDermott and Jago,¹² McLeod¹³ and O'Connor and Lages.¹⁴ As indicative data, nearly 400 of the practitioners listed on the ANLP website offer coaching as a service.¹⁵ There is also much interest in NLP for leadership development;¹⁶ in England, NLP has figured in the Fast Track development programme for teachers.¹⁷

Because NLP is about human communication in general, it can be applied to virtually any

¹ Personal communication, Karen Moxom, ANLP Director, July 2008.

² As listed at http://www.nlpconference.co.uk/training_schools.php, in September 2008.

³ See Churches, R. and Terry, R. (2007) *NLP for Teachers*. Carmarthen: Crown House.

⁴ See Henwood, S. and Lister, J. (2007) *NLP and Coaching for Healthcare Professionals*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

⁵ See Wake, L. (2008) *Neurolinguistic Psychotherapy: A Postmodern Perspective*. London: Routledge and The UK Council for Psychotherapy; <http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/index.html>, accessed 16 September 2009.

⁶ See Knight, S. (2002) *NLP at Work: The Difference that Makes a Difference in Business*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

⁷ <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/maneco/general/nlp>, accessed 16 September 2009.

⁸ See Coote, A. (2007) Walking in the shoes of the client: Towergate professional risks, *Rapport*, 10(Winter): 35–36.

⁹ Goodman, J. (2006) Team building, *Rapport*, 5(Autumn): 22–23.

¹⁰ Grimley, B. (2007) NLP coaching. In S. Palmer and A. Whybrow (eds), *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: a guide for practitioners*, pp. 193–210. London: Routledge.

¹¹ Linder-Pelz, S. and Hall, L. M. (2007) The theoretical roots of NLP-based coaching. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 3(1): 12–17.

¹² McDermott, I. and Jago, W. (2001) *Brief NLP Therapy*. London: Sage.

¹³ McLeod, A. (2003) *Performance Coaching: The Handbook for Managers, HR Professionals and Coaches*. Carmarthen: Crown House.

¹⁴ O'Connor, J. and Lages, A. (2004) *Coaching with NLP*. London: Element Books.

¹⁵ <http://www.anlp.org/>, accessed 16 September 2009. The ANLP is a membership organisation which practitioners join by choice, not a professional association, therefore its listings do not represent total numbers of practitioners.

¹⁶ For example see Deering, A., Dilts, R. and Russell, J. (2002) *Alpha Leadership: Tools for Business Leaders who want More from Life*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

¹⁷ See Hutchinson, G., Churches, R. and Vitae, D. (2007) *NCSL London Leadership Strategy, Consultant Leaders to Support Leadership Capacity in London's PRUs and EBD Schools*. Reading: Impact Report, CfBT Education Trust and the National College for School Leadership.

aspect of management and leadership, including self-management, presentation skills, managing meetings, setting targets, enhancing confidence, negotiation and so on. Sue Knight, who is well-known for her excellent work in applying NLP in business, gives this example:

*When Unipart managed a turnaround of its business against all market predictions, it did a number of things. One was to change the way that it ran meetings. Managers recognized that the emphasis in their meetings previously had been on problems, even though they were nominally called progress meetings. They acknowledged that they did not consider or imagine what they really wanted from their meetings or their projects prior to considering how to get there. So they began every meeting with a discussion of what they did really want – an outcome.*¹⁸

This illustrates that NLP is outcome-focused; typically it suggests that people attend to what they do want, not to what they do not want. To build on this it encourages people to make their outcomes specific and 'well-formed', which has some similarity to the idea of making objectives SMART specific; measurable; achievable; realistic; timely. NLP refines this, however, by facilitating people to create an image or 'representation' of their outcome as it will be when it has been achieved. A similar principle is used in sports psychology to promote positive attitudes and effective performance. For example:

Genie Laborde (1983: 14–18) describes coaching an engineer in a computer manufacturing company. The engineer, Jim, asks that she teach him to 'get out of his own way'. For a while he is only able to state what he wants to stop, such as feeling frustrated and upset. Laborde encourages him to identify what he wants instead. Eventually he identifies an outcome, saying that he wants to feel satisfied with his ability. By tapping into one of Jim's past experiences, Laborde finds that Jim has felt satisfied when he looks at the product of his work, then says to himself, 'that's a pretty good project'. The look of satisfaction on Jim's face as he recalls this experience provides behavioural evidence to support this. Laborde therefore helps Jim to identify the strategy he naturally uses to be satisfied with his ability. It involves Jim being able to see a representation of his work, then hear himself say 'that's a pretty good project', after which he feels the feeling of satisfaction.

This, of course, is just one small part of NLP, and more examples of applications follow below. What it illustrates is that NLP typically attends to the way people create their outer experience through their inner world. In the above examples, both the Unipart managers and Jim were, in effect, assisted to use their creative imagination to help them focus on their goals.

Its pragmatic emphasis can make NLP attractive within business settings. Yet it remains poorly understood, and prominent among the questions that managers, leaders and others raise are:

- What exactly is NLP?
- Is there research behind it?
- Does it have any theory?
- Is it safe to use?
- What can I use it for?

This chapter offers some comment on and, hopefully, some insights into, these questions. It

¹⁸ Knight (2002) op. cit. p. 80.

reviews the origins of NLP, describes its working methods, and gives examples of how it can be applied. It then identifies key issues that are of concern to practitioners, users and researchers.

What is NLP?

NLP is an emergent, contested approach to communication and personal development, created in the 1970s, that has proved difficult to define.

The title 'NLP' reflects the principles that a person is a whole mind–body system, with consistent, patterned connections between neurological processes ('neuro'), language ('linguistic') and learned behavioural strategies ('programming'). It has been suggested that the founders, Bandler and Grinder, created this as a deliberately quasi-academic, tongue-in-cheek title.

In promotional literature NLP has been described as 'the art and science of human excellence in ... communicating'.¹⁹ It can be understood as an innovative form of practical knowledge, comprising a wide range of frameworks, tools and techniques, which are presented in a copious popular literature and taught in training programmes.

A different type of definition is offered by NLP author Robert Dilts,²⁰ which is 'the study of the structure of subjective experience'. In highlighting the notion of 'study', this definition acknowledges that originally NLP was presented as a methodology, called modelling,²¹ the purpose of which was to investigate exemplary communication. I will describe the way NLP evolved shortly.

Early NLP publications espouse the autonomy of the individual and emphasise the potential for self-determination through overcoming learnt limitations.²² Its motives were described, on the book jacket of *The Structure of Magic*,²³ as 'sharing the resources of all those who are involved in finding ways to help people have better, fuller and richer lives'. It embodies a discourse of self-improvement and, like the more recent field of positive psychology, emphasises well-being.

NLP attends to what works in practice, and values usefulness above theory. For example, the founders said – perhaps provocatively and a little disingenuously – 'We have *no* idea about the "real" nature of things, and we're not particularly interested in what's "true"'.²⁴

NLP is also defined sometimes with reference to a number of working principles called 'presuppositions'. This is a collection of propositions and aphorisms espoused by, or derived from, the key figures who influenced NLP (Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls, Gregory Bateson and Milton Erickson, whose roles are described in the following section). For example:

Mind and body are part of the same cybernetic system.

The map is not the territory.

There is no failure, only feedback.

The meaning of your communication is the response that it gets.

Every behaviour has a positive intention.

People have all the resources they need to make changes.

People make the best choices that present themselves to them.

For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of these principles see Robert Dilts' website

¹⁹ <http://www.john-seymour-associates.co.uk/whatisnlp.htm> accessed 19 September 2008.

²⁰ Dilts, R., Grinder, J., Bandler, R. and DeLozier, J. (1980) *Neuro-linguistic Programming: Volume 1, The Study of the Structure of Subjective Experience*, p. 2. Capitola, CA: Meta Publications.

²¹ See Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1975a) *Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D., Vol. 1*, p. 6. Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications.

²² For example Bandler, R. (1985) *Using your Brain for a Change*. Moab, UT: Real People Press.

²³ Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1975b) *The Structure of Magic: a Book about Language and Therapy*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

²⁴ Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1979) *Frogs into Princes*, p. 7. Moab, UT: Real People Press.

(listed in the resources section) or Tosey and Mathison.²⁵

It should be clear, therefore, that NLP does not boil down to a neatly packaged, logically consistent theory. Among other things, NLP was created in order to be used and has been developed through practice. The direction of this development has been emergent, not pre-planned, and was certainly not theory-led.

Where did NLP come from?

NLP was developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler, then a student, and John Grinder, an associate professor of linguistics, at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The founders went their separate ways several years ago.²⁶

The story of the development of NLP appears to be one of a chance meeting of several creative minds. The gist of the story is that Robert Spitzer, publisher of Science and Behaviour Books, met the young Richard Bandler (then aged 17) in the early 1970s. Impressed by his skills, Spitzer invited Bandler to transcribe tapes of Fritz Perls, the founder of gestalt therapy, for a book that Spitzer wanted to publish.²⁷ Perls, who had died in 1970, was a key figure in the emergence of Esalen in California the 1960s as a centre of the growth movement. Spitzer also knew Virginia Satir, the renowned family therapist and wanted to produce a book about her work too,²⁸ so he asked Bandler to record her workshops on video. Bandler became so deeply interested in Perls and Satir that, apparently, he began to behave in similar ways, not just adopting their mannerisms but also demonstrating the same skills.

Bandler went on to attend Kresge College, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1972. Kresge was a new, experimental college²⁹ that offered credits for students to run their own courses. Bandler began to offer experiential group sessions, and invited along John Grinder, an associate professor. Grinder, some eleven years older than Bandler, had a Ph.D. in linguistics³⁰ and a background in US intelligence work.³¹

Grinder joined with Bandler and others in various groups that experimented with personal development over the next two or three years. Some of those who became involved, such as Judith DeLozier, Steve Gilligan and David Gordon, remain key figures in NLP or related practices today.³² Several of these people came to live in properties on land owned by Robert Spitzer.

Significantly, another person who later became resident there (in 1974) was Gregory Bateson, who had taken a part-time appointment at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1972.³³ He had met Bandler and Grinder at Kresge and commented on the manuscript of their first book, *The Structure of Magic*.³⁴ Bateson was an English academic whose writing has influenced diverse fields including family therapy and communications studies. He was a prominent member of the Macy conferences, which began in 1946 and laid the foundations for the science of cybernetics.³⁵ In the 1950s, human communication became the main focus of his work,

²⁵ Tosey, P. and Mathison, J. (2009) *NLP: a Critical Appreciation for Managers and Developers*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

²⁶ See McLendon, T. L. (1989) *The Wild Days: NLP 1972–1981*, p.117. Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications.

²⁷ Perls, F. (1973) *The Gestalt Approach and Eyewitness to Therapy*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

²⁸ Bandler, R., Grinder, J. and Satir, V. (1976) *Changing with Families: A Book about Further Education for being Human*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

²⁹ See Grant, G. and Riesman, D. (1978) *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

³⁰ Grinder, J. T. (1971) On Deletion Phenomena, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego.

³¹ Dilts, R. and DeLozier, J. (2000) *Encyclopedia of Systemic NLP and NLP New Coding*, p. 460. Scotts Valley, CA: NLP University Press.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lipsset, D. (1980) *Gregory Bateson: The Legacy of a Scientist*, p.279. London: Prentice-Hall.

³⁴ Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1975b) op. cit.

³⁵ <http://www.asc-cybernetics.org/foundations/history/MacySummary.htm>, accessed 16 September 2009.

when he developed the 'double-bind' theory of schizophrenia.³⁶ Bateson is probably the most important single intellectual influence on NLP, according to NLP literature such as *Turtles all the Way Down*,³⁷ Dilts and DeLozier's *Encyclopedia*,³⁸ and *Whispering in the Wind*.³⁹ Bateson also introduced Bandler and Grinder to Milton Erickson, one of the world's best known hypnotherapists. As a result, Erickson's distinctive use of language patterns became another key ingredient in the mix that became known as NLP.

This story of the origins of NLP emphasises that while there are clearly identifiable influences and antecedents, both practical and theoretical, NLP emerged through the creative interaction of people, and not through premeditated theoretical work. If we liken this to an alchemical process, we might say that Robert Spitzer provided the crucible in which Bandler, Grinder and others interacted, and from which NLP was formed.

The Meta-model

The Structure of Magic introduced the core language model of NLP, called the 'meta-model', which remains central to the field. If the appearance of the word 'magic' in the title prompts scepticism, we must remember that Bandler and Grinder were not claiming to be magicians. Their explicit project⁴⁰ was to show that the abilities of charismatic practitioners like Satir and Perls, whom many *perceived to be* magical, had structure and could be learnt by others. Their intent was actually to demystify practices, challenge the accounts of practice espoused by professionals, identify aspects that worked and enable these aspects to be learnt by others.

Based on Chomsky's ideas about language at the time, the meta-model categorises certain transformations, or ways in which the 'surface structure' of verbal communication can differ from the 'deep structure', which is effectively a fuller description of experience. These transformations, which are described in detail in *The Structure of Magic*,⁴¹ arise through processes of deletion, distortion and generalisation, which sound undesirable but in fact help to make our communication more concise.

A good illustration of this, according to McDermott and Jago,⁴² is Harry Beck's classic London Underground map (also known as the Tube map).⁴³ As a representation of London this *deletes* a huge amount of detail. For example it shows no streets or parks – the only geographical feature is the schematic representation of the River Thames. In terms of ease of use, for the purpose of travelling by Tube, you only have to compare Beck's map with a street map of London. On the latter it is difficult enough to identify stations, let alone track the lines.

Second, Beck's map *distorts* in several ways. Thus the orientations of the Tube lines are stylised; they are either vertical, horizontal, or at 45° angles. Distances between stops are not to scale, so do not correspond to geographical distances. Nor are distances consistent on the map relative to each other (for example, from Piccadilly Circus to Oxford Circus is longer on the map than from, say, Baker Street to St John's Wood; in geographical distance the reverse is true).

The third feature is *generalisation*. An example is the way that all stations are shown as one of two symbols; either a small notch of the same size adjacent to the line, or a small circle if it is

³⁶ Bateson, G., Jackons, D. D., Haley, J. and Weakland, J. *et al.* (1956) Toward a theory of schizophrenia, *Behavioral Science*, 1(4): 251–264.

³⁷ DeLozier, J. and Grinder, J. (1987) *Turtles All the Way Down: Prerequisites to Personal Genius*. Bonny Doon, CA: Grindler, DeLozier and Associates.

³⁸ Dilts, R. and DeLozier, J. (2000) *op. cit.*

³⁹ Bostic St. Clair, C. and Grinder, J. (2001) *Whispering in the Wind*. Scotts Valley, CA: J and C Enterprises.

⁴⁰ Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1975b) *op. cit.* p.6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² McDermott, I. and Jago, W. (2001) *op. cit.*

⁴³ See the Transport for London website, <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/>, accessed 16 September 2009.

an interchange. Stations are treated as quite uniform, despite large differences in size, layout and facilities.

By virtue of its judicious use of deletion, distortion and generalisation, the Tube map is both functional and aesthetic. If it were more 'accurate', in terms of maintaining proportions and features we find in physical reality, it would probably be far less effective. Thus for travelling on the London Underground, Beck's map is excellent, while for finding one's way around the streets of London it is virtually useless.

The Tube map serves as a handy reminder of a central tenet of NLP, taken from Alfred Korzybski via Gregory Bateson,⁴⁴ which is the idea that 'the map is not the territory'. The same principle applies to verbal communication; it is like a map. Typically when someone else speaks, instead of seeking to understand more about the 'deep structure', the listener quickly, and largely subconsciously, searches their own experience and constructs to make sense of the other person's words. In NLP this process is called a 'transderivational search',⁴⁵ which means that our brains make sense of other people's communication by searching across (trans) a variety of possible meanings and related contexts (derivations) until they find a reasonable fit. People don't always stop to check the validity of this sense-making.

To find out what another person is thinking or experiencing in more detail in any specific instance, we would need a way to elicit further information. The meta-model provides this, with forms of question that enable these more specific, and perhaps uniquely situational, meanings to be revealed. For example:

A coaching client complains about the need for 'better communication'. Using the meta-model, the coach can discover more by asking questions such as the following – remembering of course that the tone of voice used to ask these questions is also highly important:

Who, specifically, is communicating with whom in an unsatisfactory way, and how specifically are they doing this?

Better than what, specifically?

What would happen if there wasn't 'better communication'?

What stops person X communicating better with person Y?

And so on ...

The responses might reveal any of a wide range of issues; for example, the client could be feeling left out because they heard some important news second-hand; they could be experiencing conflict with a colleague; or they could be advocating expenditure on training to improve the level of interpersonal skills in the company.

Bandler and Grinder also put forward the claim that matching the sensory predicates of another person's communication will influence the effectiveness of that interaction. For example:

Sally's boss, Edith, uses visual terms in her everyday language (e.g. 'things look bleak to me'; 'I need clarity on this'). Sally's own natural responses were either auditory ('I hear what you're saying') or kinaesthetic ('I grasp your meaning'). This meant that Sally was mismatching Edith's preferred sensory mode; Edith felt misunderstood and Sally was frustrated that her genuine attempts to empathise with Edith were unsuccessful. Sally then learnt to respond by matching Edith's visual terms ('I see what you mean'), and found that

⁴⁴ Bateson, G. (2000) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology*, revised edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

⁴⁵ Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1979) op. cit. p.15.

this helped to build rapport. Now she was in sympathy with Edith's way of processing information.

Thus NLP argues that forms or patterns in communication, such as the sensory mode of words in the above example, are often more significant than the content. Bandler and Grinder observed that effective communicators used these patterns skilfully, whether or not they were conscious of doing so. Less effective communicators tended to use their own preferred sensory mode regardless of that used by the other person.

NLP Applications in Business

While its origins lay in the study of psychotherapists, and its early books were addressed mainly to people in helping professions, the late 1970s saw something of a shift towards a more commercial market. NLP began to be offered as a public training in personal development and communication, with certificates denoting levels of expertise.

Business applications also began to appear at this time. The first published example was probably Grinder's adaptation of the NLP 'meta model', renamed for the business market as 'The precision model'.⁴⁶ The book refers to its contents as the 'technology of management' and carries a foreword by Dr Paul Hersey (of Hersey and Blanchard fame). Nowhere in this volume do the authors use the title 'Neurolinguistic Programming'; the book jacket simply suggests that there is a need for management development theories to keep pace with breakthroughs in fields including neuropsychology. The categories of the core NLP language model, which were labelled with terms taken from academic linguistics, are re-named as 'blockbusters'. There is no reference to Bandler and Grinder's previous publications, or to the work from which the precision model was derived.

Internal Representations

NLP's insights into the structure and operations of people's internal imagery are also highly significant in its approach to people development. The role of internal representations in NLP was noted earlier, in the example of Genie Laborde working with Jim's outcome. Our internal representations are a whole world of experience, yet some people can go through life blissfully unaware that this dimension exists. Those who discover this realm are often able to use it productively and creatively. For example:

Anne worked with a client, Felicity, who was extremely nervous about a forthcoming meeting. In particular Felicity was anxious about how to deal with a colleague, June, who had been something of a thorn in her side. Anne asked Felicity to notice how June looked 'in her mind's eye'. She replied that June was very large and close up, 'in her face'. In other words, Felicity's internal visual representation of June was a picture in which June was large – in fact larger than life-size, and larger than Felicity – and very close. Felicity said she felt hemmed in and panicky. Anne asked Felicity to explore what would happen if she were to move the image of June and change its size. As a result, Felicity discovered that she could make June smaller (in her mind's eye of course) and move her further away, far enough to give Felicity some breathing space and help her calm down. As it turned out, this was all Felicity needed to feel able to handle the meeting. She did not need to be coached in any other skills or strategies; the way she was representing June internally was

⁴⁶ McMaster, M. and Grinder, J. (1980) *Precision: a New Approach to Communication*. Bonny Doon, CA: Precision Models

the difference that made the difference.

NLP has many ways of exploring the nuances of, and the dynamics of, internal representations. It is common to find, as in this example, that when a person can notice and start to experiment or play with these representations, the changes they were seeking begin to happen. This introduces another central plank of NLP, that it is first and foremost about enquiring into people's experience of the world, or the way they construct and create experience; it is not about trying to change the outer world. NLP is concerned with the meaning people make of events, which it sees as flexible and variable. Thus in the above example, it would have been contrary to NLP, and probably futile or worse, for Felicity to attempt to change June. The focus of the work was Felicity's construction of June as a scary prospect to handle.

State, Calibration and Rapport

NLP also works with bodily experience. In NLP, a person's physiological and neurological configuration is called their 'state'. If you are in a resourceful state then you are probably in a balanced posture, with freedom of movement, breathing regularly, feeling positive and generally sensing that you are capable. This would contrast with a state in which someone is anxious, breathing in a very shallow way, feeling physically frozen or rigid, and perhaps telling themselves that they are not good enough.

Generally NLP suggests that it is preferable to be in a positive state. It does not follow, however, that 'negative' emotions should be avoided, as some people appear to believe. More precisely, NLP suggests that one's state needs to be appropriate for the purpose (or outcome) at hand. A manager might want a very different state for a prominent business presentation compared with that for playing with their family on the beach, or compared with that for supermarket shopping.

Some NLP techniques, such as one known as the 'circle of excellence',⁴⁷ are designed to improve one's 'state management' – the ability to change state intentionally. Thus:

The client accesses a number of highly positive experiences from their past, each time stepping into a vivid, imaginary circle in front of them. The combination of the positive experiences becomes linked or 'anchored' to the imagined circle. Then, whenever the person wants to access feelings of confidence and resourcefulness in future, they can imagine themselves stepping into that circle.

NLP emphasises that we have a degree of choice about our state. How much choice is possible is an issue for debate, as sometimes the degree to which control is possible or desirable seems to be exaggerated. The advantage of the NLP way of thinking about state is that instead of waiting until we get what we want before we feel good, we could choose to feel good first, which might in turn help us get what we want. In case that sounds odd or inauthentic, something like this has been shown by psychologist Richard Wiseman⁴⁸ to be a characteristic of people who experience good luck.

'Calibration' refers to observation of someone's state and their non-verbal behaviour. Sometimes, for example, we sense it is just not the right time to ask the boss for a day off, or we know as soon as we pick up the phone that the caller has good news. According to NLP these apparent intuitions are thought to result from sensory observation that is happening outside

⁴⁷ See Laborde, G. Z. (1988) *Fine Tune Your Brain: Next Steps to Influencing with Integrity*, p. 172. Palo Alto, CA: Syntony Publishing.

⁴⁸ See Wiseman, R. (2004) *The Luck Factor: The Scientific Study of the Lucky Mind*. London: Arrow Books.

conscious awareness. A similar view is put forward by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Blink*.⁴⁹

In NLP it is deemed especially useful to be able to calibrate *changes* in another person's state, as this provides evidence of whether one is on track towards the relevant outcome. Earlier, the example of Genie Laborde coaching Jim mentioned her observation of non-verbal evidence that he was accessing feelings of satisfaction. Good sales people are excellent at calibrating whether a prospective buyer has any remaining objections. They will therefore deal with those objections rather than trying to bulldoze through the sale.

Skills of observation and calibration have played a part in NLP from the beginning. The first part of the *The Structure of Magic 2*.⁵⁰ is in one respect about the ability of effective psychotherapists to calibrate auditorily to whether a client's predicates are primarily visual, auditory or kinaesthetic. Most significantly, Bandler and Grinder learnt new possibilities of calibration from Milton Erickson, who exhibited an exceptional capacity for fine sensory discrimination.⁵¹ Accordingly, NLP takes the view that people generally underuse the potential of their sensory apparatus, and NLP training is in part an endeavour to make fuller use of capacities people already possess.

Finally in this section, much emphasis is placed on the principle of rapport in NLP. This was discussed originally in NLP using the term 'trust' rather than 'rapport'.⁵² In principle it should be easier to achieve a purpose with someone after rapport is established. As a result, NLP is sometimes stereotyped as being about manipulating other people by mimicking their non-verbal behaviour in order to generate rapport artificially, and accused of encouraging inauthentic behaviour. Such instrumental use of non-verbal behaviour seems more likely to be counterproductive. We might also bear in mind that many social rituals – such as asking 'how are you', complimenting someone on their appearance, or showing sympathy for a misfortune – are regarded as natural and 'authentic' because they are socially and culturally familiar. Most of the time people create rapport in such ways without thinking, and people who are reckoned to be exquisite at these skills, for example Bill Clinton, are widely admired for this. If attending to this dimension of interaction consciously in order to improve one's social ability is seen as inauthentic, it could create a bind for someone who wants to improve in this area.

Modelling

As noted above, NLP began as a methodology called modelling,⁵³ which was the process used to identify the effective communication patterns used by Satir, Perls and Erickson. Bandler and Grinder both still emphasise modelling as the core process that generates NLP applications, for example through investigating exemplars of a chosen capability.⁵⁴

Modelling is therefore more than a technique in NLP, it is a method for making human capabilities available for others to learn:

The objective of the NLP modeling process is not to end up with the one 'right' or 'true' description of a particular person's thinking process, but rather to make an instrumental

⁴⁹ Gladwell, M. (2006) *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

⁵⁰ Grinder, J. and Bandler, R. (1976) *The Structure of Magic 2: A Book about Communication and Change*, p. 14. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

⁵¹ See for example Erickson's foreword to Grinder, J. and Bandler, R. (1976) op. cit. p. vii.

⁵² Grinder, J. and Bandler, R. (1976) op. cit. p. 14.

⁵³ Grinder, J., DeLozier, J. and Bandler, R. (1977) *Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D., Vol II*, p.4. Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications.

⁵⁴ The nature of modelling is contested within NLP. Dilts emphasises a more conscious, analytical approach that employs conceptual frameworks, whilst Grinder (Bostic St. Clair and Grinder 2001, op. cit.) argues that modelling is essentially an unconscious assimilation of the exemplar's capability. In practice these two modes are often used in combination.

map that allows us to apply the strategies that we have modelled in some useful way.⁵⁵

NLP can explore how human skills are constructed through sequences of representations. It can also identify the difference between the sequences used in excellent performance of that skill, and those used in less effective performance.

Modelling has been used to identify cognitive strategies that lie behind capabilities such as motivating oneself, negotiating and so on. A good practical guide is that by Gordon and Dawes.⁵⁶ For example, it has been suggested that people who are good at telephone communication will make an internal visual image of a successful outcome to their call before they pick up the phone – a simple strategy with which anyone can experiment to gauge its impact. Charles Faulkner, an internationally known NLP trainer and author, has modelled the intuitive judgements of leading traders, using the results of his modelling to become a successful trader himself. An interview with Faulkner about this work appears in Robert Koppel's *The intuitive trader*.⁵⁷ Robert Dilts⁵⁸ even claims to have modelled a number of 'strategies of genius'. These include a creative process that can be used in business, based on Walt Disney's description of how he created stories, comprising three functions that Dilts termed 'dreamer', 'realist' and 'critic'.

Evaluating NLP

IS THERE RESEARCH BEHIND IT?

The specific nature of the studies that led to the NLP meta-model, including the form the data took and the analysis procedures used, is not set out in detail in published sources. It is therefore difficult to assess the research for this work. In an interesting development for the field, Bostic St. Clair and Grinder (2001)⁵⁹ have provided a more explicit retrospective account – albeit one that is hard to obtain – which describes how the meta-model emerged through both empirical work and the application of theory from linguistics.

Academic research into NLP is thin, with virtually no published investigation into how it is used in practice. Empirical research consists largely of laboratory-based studies from the 1980s and early 1990s,⁶⁰ most of which investigated two main features of NLP. These were the notion of the 'primary representational system', according to which individuals have a preferred sensory mode of internal imagery indicated by their linguistic predicates,⁶¹ and a model concerned with eye movements.⁶² Both models hypothesise correspondences between external behaviour and internal processing.

Heap⁶³ conducted a meta-analysis of such studies and argued that these particular claims of NLP cannot be accepted. He appears justified in criticising the way claims are made in unequivocal terms in NLP literature. However, Heap appears only to summarise the reported outcomes of these studies, making no attempt to appraise their validity, and others⁶⁴ have argued that some studies reviewed by Heap have problems affecting their reliability. Heap did conclude

⁵⁵ Dilts, R. B. (1998) *Modeling with NLP*, p. 30. Capitola, CA: Meta Publications.

⁵⁶ Gordon, D. and Dawes, G. (2005) *Expanding Your World: Modelling the Structure of Experience*. Tucson, AZ: Desert Rain.

⁵⁷ Koppel, R. (1996) *The Intuitive Trader: Developing Your Inner Trading Wisdom*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

⁵⁸ Dilts, R. B. (1994) *Strategies of Genius*. Capitola, CA: Meta Publications.

⁵⁹ Bostic St. Clair, C. and Grinder, J. (2001) op. cit.

⁶⁰ This body of work is catalogued on a site hosted by the University of Bielefeld, <http://www.nlp.de/cgi-bin/research/nlp-rdb.cgi>, accessed 16 September 2009.

⁶¹ Grinder, J. and Bandler, R. (1976) op. cit.

⁶² See Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1979) op. cit.

⁶³ Heap, M. (1988) Neurolinguistic programming – an interim verdict. In M. Heap, ed., *Hypnosis: Current Clinical, Experimental and Forensic Practices*, pp. 268–280. London: Croom Helm.

⁶⁴ For example, Beck, C. E. and Beck, E. A. (1984) Test of the eye movement hypothesis of neurolinguistic programming: a rebuttal of conclusions, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 58(1): 175–176.

that 'the effectiveness of NLP therapy undertaken in authentic clinical contexts of trained practitioners has not yet been properly investigated'.⁶⁵

While the existing body of empirical research certainly offers no support to NLP, it is also doubtful whether it can be regarded as conclusive. Contemporary research that seeks direct evidence for the efficacy or otherwise of NLP in clinical settings is being pursued today by the NLP Research and Recognition Project, based in the USA, which was established in 2006, and by the European Association for Neuro-Linguistic Psychotherapy.

There is, on the other hand, considerable support for many models and ideas that NLP has borrowed, adapted or developed. Explicit linkage to psychology has been made by NLP authors such as Bolstad⁶⁶ and Linder-Pelz and Hall,⁶⁷ the field of cognitive linguistics, which is acknowledged for example by Andreas,⁶⁸ could also provide some badly needed updating of Chomsky's ideas, on which the meta-model was initially based. There is excitement too within NLP about contemporary findings in the field of neuroscience, for example through its discovery of mirror neurons,⁶⁹ which may provide support for NLP's view that one can sample another person's experience by adopting the same posture and movements.

The fact that it is in widespread use provides a case for conducting further research into NLP. It appears especially important to elucidate the experiences of users and clients, and there is also a need for evaluative case studies of NLP applications in business – as distinct from practitioner's anecdotal success stories. Outside the field of psychotherapy, the practitioner community has done little to date to sponsor or promote research. Trainers often espouse an evidence-based, sceptical approach, exhorting participants to test NLP's claims for themselves, but (in my experience) with insufficient awareness of likely constraints on such testing, such as the role of peer pressure, the propensity to believe in something for which one has paid substantial amounts of money, and the risks (whether perceived or actual) for participants of expressing dissent.

As a final thought on this issue, though, managers and leaders who worry about the lack of research evidence might also wish to reflect on whether they apply the same criterion as strictly to other business practices. If we take, for example, organisational change strategies, respected commentators Beer and Nohria, writing in the *Harvard Business Review*,⁷⁰ say 'the brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail'. There appears to be no strategy for organisational change that would meet the criterion of being 'evidence-based', yet businesses continue to spend large amounts on change programmes and the consultants who are hired to help implement them – rather more, I would speculate, than has ever been spent by businesses on NLP.

Does it have any Theory?

It seems sensible to regard NLP primarily as a practice that innovates by working across traditional academic disciplines. Although its founders originally identified NLP broadly with psychology,⁷¹ NLP's contents and practices are eclectic and show diverse influences, including cybernetics,⁷² cognitive psychology⁷³ and the work of the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute.⁷⁴

⁶⁵ Heap, M. (1988) Neurolinguistic programming – an interim verdict. In M. Heap, ed., *Hypnosis: Current Clinical, Experimental and Forensic Practices*, p. 276. London: Croom Helm.

⁶⁶ Bolstad, R. (2002) *Resolve: A New Model of Therapy*. Carmarthen: Crown House.

⁶⁷ Linder-Pelz, S. and Hall, L. M. (2007) op. cit.

⁶⁸ Andreas, S. (2006) *Six Blind Elephants: Understanding Ourselves and Each Other, Vol. 1, Fundamental Principles of Scope and Category*. Moab, UT: Real People Press.

⁶⁹ Rizzolatti, G., Fogassi, L. and Gallese, V. (2006) Mirrors in the mind, *Scientific American*, November: 30–37.

⁷⁰ Beer, M. and Nohria, N. (2000) Cracking the code of change, *Harvard Business Review*, May–June: 133–141.

⁷¹ Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1975a) op. cit. p.1.

⁷² Ashby, W. (1965) *An Introduction to Cybernetics*. London: Methuen.

⁷³ Miller, G. A., Galanter, E. and Pribram, K. (1960) *Plans and the Structure of Behaviour*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.

⁷⁴ Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H. and Jackson, D. D. (1967) *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

The idea that all knowledge systems must have a unifying theoretical framework is not borne out by the history of ideas. Even so, no-one in the field of NLP has yet sat down and worked out how, if at all, these diverse strands might cohere theoretically. One author, Peter Young (Young 2004), has attempted a 'unified field' theory of NLP but I would argue that he has succeeded mainly in producing an alternative classification of NLP.

One of the resistances within NLP to academic theorising is founded on an understandable reluctance to impose a retrospective intellectual logic on a practice that today, drawing from theories of complexity, we might well describe as emergent. Such resistance may also reflect some of the influence of Fritz Perls, who scorned intellectualising. Yet this can also be seen as a resistance to critical evaluation, and carries the risk that the views of perceived authorities in the field become an unquestioned orthodoxy.

Attempts to theorise NLP are in one respect post hoc efforts to make sense of the trail it has left. Yet it is also important to acknowledge the intellectual traditions that prepared the ground for, and influenced, NLP. Conversely, a lack of dialogue about its conceptual basis is likely to hamper the further development of NLP as a field of practice. The potential to engage with this conceptual basis exists; as several authors have identified, NLP largely reflects the world view articulated in Gregory Bateson's ideas.

Is NLP Safe to Use?

There is little doubt that NLP has a reputation to live down in some quarters. I frequently hear the perception that NLP can be manipulative, a prospect noted in the early days of NLP.⁷⁵ What aspects of this issue are most relevant to leaders and managers?

I would certainly question any suggestion that there is anything in NLP that makes it inherently unsafe; it seems unlikely that NLP would have gained accreditation as psychotherapy if this were the case. Also, using NLP instrumentally for the practitioner's gain is clearly at odds not only with NLP's philosophy but also with its codes of ethics.⁷⁶

Some concerns involve a significant misconception about NLP's insights into the nature of human communication. Through their study of Erickson,⁷⁷ the founders of NLP became convinced that 'all communication is hypnosis'.⁷⁸ This means that every one of us uses 'hypnotic' language patterns, often unwittingly, as part of our everyday communication. For example, Bateson wrote, long before NLP was created, that the unconscious does not recognise negatives in language, such as 'not'.⁷⁹ Thus saying 'do not touch that' can be regarded as a hypnotic command that conveys the opposite message (i.e. 'do touch that'), which is why it is reckoned to be counterproductive to use the injunction 'don't' when trying to deter children from certain actions. This means that saying 'don't forget to deliver that report' is potentially quite different from 'remember to deliver that report on time'.

NLP has not invented these tools; they occur naturally in language. What NLP has done is to codify them, and make them available to the public at large. One could argue that NLP benefits people by making transparent some of the strategies of salespeople, just as much as it benefits sales professionals by applying its tools to the task of selling. For better or for worse, NLP challenges the idea that knowledge like this should only be in professional hands.

⁷⁵ Bandler, R. and Grinder, J. (1979) op. cit. p.7.

⁷⁶ For example, the ANLP general code of ethics (<http://www.anlp.org/index.asp?pageID=79>, accessed 16 September 2009); the NLPtCA code of ethics for psychotherapists (<http://www.nlptca.com/ethics.php>, accessed 16 September 2009).

⁷⁷ Bandler and Grinder (1975a) op. cit.; Grinder, DeLozier and Bandler (1977) op. cit.

⁷⁸ Grinder, J. and Bandler, R. (1981) *Trance-formations: Neuro-Linguistic Programming and the Structure of Hypnosis*, p. 1. Moab, UT: Real People Press. The same quote points out that they would, at the same time, purposely state the counterintuitive that 'nothing is hypnosis, hypnosis doesn't exist'.

⁷⁹ Bateson, G. (2000) op. cit. Bateson wrote this paper in 1967.

Clearly, an important issue is that of how ethics are addressed within a field in which it is possible for a layperson to acquire techniques and to practise after relatively brief training (e.g. typically in the region of 20 days to become a certificated practitioner). Bodies such as the ANLP, which has a clear code of ethics for practitioners, and the Professional Guild of NLP, a membership body for NLP training organisations, are active in promoting ethical practice.

NLP began by extracting techniques and processes from holistic practices, such as those of Virginia Satir. Because of this, it maybe that NLP tends to be used best by people for whom it is complementary to, or an adjunct to, another mode of working. People trained in another mode can use NLP to enhance their existing skills and effectiveness. As probably happens with any mode of people development, potential purchasers and users of NLP seem more likely to assess the trustworthiness and effectiveness of individual practitioners than to accept or reject NLP wholesale as a method.

What is NLP Good for, and What is it Not so Good for?

As indicated, NLP can be applied in so many ways that it is difficult to define what it can and cannot do. If one treats NLP as a methodology, then what it is good for primarily is learning skills of virtually any kind from exemplars.

In addition:

NLP practice is very client-centred. It is guided by the client's desired outcome, generally avoids labelling or diagnosing the client's problem, is non-intepretive, and has no list of pathologies.

The strength of this is that it is focused on the client's needs and goals, similar to solution-focused approaches.⁸⁰ A potential weakness is that it could downplay the importance of a client's past history.

NLP can be applied at multiple levels in business, so can be suitable for individual development, as in coaching; work with teams or groups, for example through assisting with meetings or with problem-solving; and training and management development programmes.

In NLP, emotion is seldom in the foreground. While it is not purely cognitive, since it works with the whole body–mind, it probably would not be the method of choice for someone who likes attending to emotions first and foremost.

NLP practitioners tend not to work directly with social or group dynamics, or with issues of power and politics (even though there is potential for its tools and frameworks to be applied in this way). That most NLP in practice seems to emphasise the development of the individual person, from a largely psychological perspective, may say more about the direction in which the field has developed than about its potential scope.

Finally, much NLP can be used in self-help mode. Any manager or leader who picks up a book of NLP tools and techniques can put them into practice. At best this makes NLP accessible, democratic and empowering.

Conclusion

The practice of NLP, which is now more than 30 years old, offers an innovative, pragmatic approach to communication and personal development that appears to be widespread in business. This chapter has described some of its core content, including outcomes, language models, the idea of internal representations and the process of modelling.

⁸⁰ For example Jackson, P. Z. and McKergow, M. (2007) *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change Simple*, 2nd edn. London: Nicholas Brealey.

The fact that NLP is in widespread use in business justifies the need to understand its principles and practices, and to investigate its claims. While it seems appropriate to retain a healthy scepticism about many of those claims, NLP deserves to be recognised and valued for its innovations, especially the way it can provide people with a means to achieve their goals and create their own solutions. The practice draws on many ideas and theories that are well established; attention in the field is turning increasingly to the need for dedicated NLP research, and to issues of ethics and professional accreditation.

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Glossary of Key Terms

<i>Anchoring</i>	The use of a behavioural stimulus (e.g. a word, gesture, touch etc.) to trigger a response (such as a particular physiological and emotional state, or a remembered experience).
<i>Meta-model</i>	A typology of patterns in the 'surface structure' of language that result from deletions, distortions and generalisations in the 'deep structure' (i.e. experience), with corresponding questions. The first NLP framework, and still considered the core of the practice.
<i>Modelling</i>	A process by which a skill can be learnt from one or more people who are excellent exponents of that skill.
<i>Predicate</i>	A word (verb, adjective or adverb) that is assumed to indicate the sensory mode of corresponding internal processing. For example, in 'I see what you mean', 'see' is a predicate and corresponds to the visual representational system.
<i>Presupposition</i>	An axiom or underlying principle of NLP.
<i>Rapport</i>	A sense of trust between people. NLP suggests that a subtle, intentional mirroring of posture, gestures, breathing, and/or predicates (for example) can help to enhance rapport.
<i>Representational system</i>	The sensory mode of internal imagery and processing. For example, imagined pictures are in the visual representational system; sounds are in the auditory representational system.
<i>State</i>	A person's physiological and neurological configuration.

Web Links

The Association for NLP: <http://www.anlp.org/>

The European Association for Neuro-Linguistic Psychotherapy: <http://www.eanlpt.org/>

NLP Conference website: <http://www.nlpconference.co.uk/>

The NLP Research and Recognition Project: <http://www.nlprandr.org/>

The Professional Guild of NLP: <http://www.professionalguildofnlp.com/>

Robert Dilts' website: <http://www.nlpu.com>

University of Surrey NLP research project: <http://www.NLPresearch.org>

Recommended Books

Frogs into Princes (Bandler and Grinder, Moab, UT: Real People Press, 1979): a workshop transcription that conveys well the spirit of early NLP.

NLP at Work The Difference that Makes a Difference in Business (Knight, London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2002): an accessible and practical introduction to NLP in business.

NLP for Teachers (Churches and Terry, Carmarthen: Crown House, 2007): whilst written for teachers, this provides an excellent practical introduction to NLP and has much that is directly relevant to HRD professionals and managers.

Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology, revised edn (Bateson, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000): Bateson's work represents the philosophy behind NLP.