Neuro Linguistic Programming
Topic Gateway Series No. 43
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Neuro Linguistic Programming

Definition and concept

Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) was developed in the 1970s by John Grinder, a linguist, and Richard Bandler, then a mathematics student with an interest in psychotherapy. It originated from research into what made three top therapists successful in their work.

‘Neuro’ relates to the way people absorb and filter information through their senses, namely sight, hearing, taste, smell and kinaesthetics (touch or emotional feeling).

‘Linguistic’ relates to the way people interpret their experiences through language, not only in words but through symbols, including gestures and postures.

‘Programming’ is the way people combine these internally into their own personal programmes that, in turn, influences how they think, speak and feel.

NLP is explained variously by different authors and practitioners.

‘… the study of human excellence and demonstrates how to communicate effectively and influence others.’

Burn, G. 2005

‘NLP is the art and science of personal excellence.’

O’Connor, J. and Seymour, John. 2002

‘A set of tools and techniques to help you deal with unhelpful patterns of thought and behaviour (some you won’t even know you have) and to introduce new, positive and constructive ways to improve your life.’

Hutchinson, Pat and Molden, David. 2006

One definition that is often quoted but not attributed is:

‘A model of communication that focuses on identifying and using patterns of thought that influence a person’s behaviour as a means of improving the quality and effectiveness of their lives.’
Context

CIMA students do not study NLP for their professional examinations. However, it is helpful for them to be able to use the techniques throughout their careers, both for their own development and to understand those with whom they interact.

Overview

The basic ideas of NLP were developed around 1973 by Richard Badler and John Grinder. They studied the communication and influencing patterns of successful people in various fields. By analysing and modelling their behaviours, they hoped to identify behaviour patterns that anyone could copy to achieve similar success.

NLP incorporates models and theories from disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, anthropology, mathematics, cognitive theory, and verbal and non-verbal communication.

NLP is often described as having four pillars.

1. Outcomes.
2. Sensory acuity.

It calls upon psychology and behavioural sciences to create models to help people identify their desired outcomes, challenge their assumptions, reframe their experiences, discover alternative behaviours and experiment with them.

Varied claims are made about NLP, including that it can:

- enhance self-confidence and self-esteem
- enable a greater degree of creativity
- help people to control the way they think, feel and act
- help achieve business excellence and build business relationships
- improve powers of communication and persuasion.

NLP encompasses a wide range of models, tools and techniques. The literature often focuses on its use for a specific purpose such as self development or business. NLP is widely supported but is not without its critics.
In the workplace

There are diverse opinions about whether NLP is useful in the workplace. Its proponents say that NLP is most powerful when used as a tool for understanding yourself and improving your performance.

One of the most often heard criticisms is that NLP is manipulative and a tool used by sales people to overcome sales resistance.

It is also said that there is nothing really new in NLP – it is merely a collection of proven tools and techniques from different disciplines.

Graham Yemm’s article Can NLP help or harm your business? addresses some of the criticisms of NLP and gives examples of where it can be applied in the workplace. (Yemm, 2006).

Stephanie Sparrow asks: ‘A dubious pseudo science or an essential business skill? The jury is still out on the merits of NLP, but moves are afoot to lend a more professional approach to the practice.’ (Sparrow, 2007).

In Practice

Foundations of NLP

There are four aspects of NLP referred to as the four pillars.

Pillar one: outcomes
Defining what you want. It seems obvious, but one needs a clear vision of what one wishes to achieve.

Pillar two: sensory acuity
This concerns using the senses to be more aware of what is going on around you. It provides information about whether your actions are moving you closer to your outcomes.

Pillar three: behavioural flexibility
This pillar is about not doing what you have always done, but taking different actions to get the desired outcome.

Pillar four: rapport
NLP considers rapport as a skill to be enhanced and developed. It includes adapting our communication to suit other people or altering our body language to match others. It is this pillar that is sometimes seen as manipulative.
Well formed outcomes

In NLP, it is considered essential that goals are rigorously formed, tested and expressed. In business, it is common to find objectives that are defined by the five criteria, namely specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). NLP has nine criteria designed to increase the likelihood of success.

1. State the outcome in positive terms.
2. Ensure that the outcome is within your control.
3. Be as specific as possible.
4. Have a sensory-based evidence procedure.
5. Consider the context.
6. Have access to resources.
7. Ensure the outcome preserves existing benefits.
8. Check the outcome is ecologically sound.

Sensory acuity

When examining how and why things happen the way they do, we rely on our five senses to interpret events and causes. The five senses are often called modalities in NLP literature.

Representational systems

The representational systems are referred to as VAKOG.

V – visual (seeing)
A – auditory (hearing)
K – kinaesthetic (feeling and touching)
O – olfactory (smelling)
G – gustatory (tasting)

People will generally have preferences in thinking patterns. Imagine a garden. What comes to mind most vividly? Is it a visual image of shape and colour or do you smell the grass and flowers more. Maybe you hear the birds and the fountain more vividly.
For each of the sensory modalities there are finer details and distinctions, such as loudness, shades of colour and temperature. These are known as sub-modalities. Our neurological system uses this information to create an internal representation of the world.

A typical change process may involve manipulating the sub-modalities of internal representations. When athletes use visualisation techniques to improve performance, they use all of their senses to remember and imagine what success feels like.

**Internal maps of the world**

Internal representations, in interaction with language (neuro-linguistic) form our perceptions of the world or maps (programming). Each person’s map of the world determines their feelings and behaviour. How often have you heard ‘I am no good at …’ and recognised a self-fulfilling prophecy? Unrealistic maps can often restrict choices and result in problems.

Internal maps are strong influencers on belief and behaviour because they are based on previous experiences through which people filter information about the world around them, gathered through their senses. The resulting ‘reality’ of the world as they see it drives their behaviours, often reinforcing their perception of the world as true.

For example, if somebody feels that ‘nobody ever listens to my ideas’ (their reality), they may not spend a lot of time and effort in presenting them. Their boss, however, may see them as someone who has some good ideas but never fully develops them (the other person’s reality).

There are some NLP tools aimed to help discover the filters somebody puts in place and how they affect what they see, hear and feel. In turn this helps them to see how they react to others and the potential for change. Once they become aware of the impact of filters, NLP techniques are said to help them consciously modify or remove them for a better insight.

**Meta model**

Meta model is a set of specifying questions or language patterns designed to challenge and expand the limits to a person’s model or ‘map’ of the world. The model draws on the idea that language is a translation of mental states into words using grammar and semantics.
In this translation, people are said to go through an unconscious process of:

- deletion (not everything thought is said, as some of the information available is not presented)
- distortion (it is possible to over-simplify or to fantasise about what is possible or what has happened)
- generalisation (somebody may make general statements about what they believe, how they see others and their values, but they ignore possible exceptions or special conditions).

Likewise in hearing, not everything said is acknowledged as heard.

**Reframing**

NLP practitioners feel that individuals choose frames of reference that limit their view of events, just as a picture frame puts borders or boundaries on what can be seen in a picture.

These frames of reference stem from an individual’s beliefs about him or herself, skills and limitations, as well as other neurological levels described below. These can limit what the person sees as possible or, if changed, open up all sorts of alternatives. The premise is that individuals unconsciously set timeframes, boundaries and limits on what can be done that are not necessarily valid.

If somebody is told that they have one hour to complete a task it will most likely result in a different emotional state, approach and quality of work than if they are told that they have one week to accomplish the same task. This illustrates how reframing (in this case a timeframe) can have a significant impact on the choices a person makes.

There are two types of reframing.

- Content reframing. Where the event or the behaviour does not have to be changed, but only the meaning of it. Questioning when behaviour has value might involve: ‘I get annoyed when my boss looks over my shoulder to check what I am doing while I am working.’ To reframe this situation, one might ask questions such as: what else could this behaviour mean? What purpose does she have? A possible reframe might be: ‘She wants to understand more and does not know how to ask for help in any other way.’
Context reframing starts with the presupposition that every behaviour is appropriate in some context. For example, standing up and offering your view in the middle of a lecture may be judged as inappropriate. To do the same at the end of the presentation may be welcomed.

**Behavioural flexibility**

**Neurological levels model**

Robert Dilts developed the neurological levels model as a tool for personal change. This model gives a framework for examining why things happen the way they do. It aims to help people to identify where best to make changes in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

The levels, with examples of how they might be changed if you feel your ideas are not listened to at work, are:

1. **Environment.** The physical and emotional environment including the people you are with, the greater society and culture of which you are a part. For example, if ideas are normally raised in team meetings where there is a competitive atmosphere, could you arrange a private meeting with the manager to sound him or her out beforehand?

2. **Behaviour.** What you do and how you behave, including taking conscious action with the intention of achieving. For example, consider how successful colleagues get their ideas heard. Is it possible to change your behaviour or manner accordingly?

3. **Capability.** How you do things, the skills and processes you employ and how relevant they are. For example, do you need to brush up your listening, communication or presentation skills in order to achieve a greater impact?

4. **Beliefs and values.** What is important to you and what you expect to happen in a given situation? For example, are you conveying the message that you expect to be listened to?

5. **Identity.** Your sense of who you are and the different role(s) you play in life. For example, have you adopted the role of implementer of others’ ideas rather than that of an ‘ideas person’?

6. **Spirituality or connectedness.** Your higher purpose, what makes you who you are, what you offer the wider society and what will fulfil you? For example, do you really believe that your ideas could make a difference? Are you motivated by job satisfaction?
A change at any level can impact upon subsequent levels, for example, changing the environment may impact upon your behaviour. However, it is less likely to happen in reverse.

**Anchoring and swish pattern**

Anchors are associations between what is seen, heard or felt, and emotional states. For many people a smell, a piece of music or an activity will bring memories and associated feelings. For example, a favourite piece of music can induce a feeling of well being and calm when writing or, if fast paced, make one feel energetic.

People are said to be able to deliberately create and trigger anchors to help them change emotions and states of mind or behaviours.

- Think of a state or feeling that you have had in the past that you would like to access again at will. For example, when you felt highly motivated or valued.
- Think of an anchor or trigger that you can use whenever you want. For example, twisting a ring on your finger.
- Recall the memory of the time when this feeling was strongest for you and immerse yourself back into it. Remember the finer details such as the sounds, smells, colours and feelings. When you have accessed them strongly, twist the ring on your finger.
- When the memory fades, stop twisting the ring and shake yourself out of the induced state.
- Repeat this until fully able to recall those feelings at will.

The swish pattern is a technique most often used to break or change habits. It involves changing a response to an existing trigger and re-anchoring it. For example, repeated difficulties with a computer programme may become a counterproductive anchor that triggers angry phone calls to the IT department. This is unhelpful and stressful to all.

This anchor could be made to induce a more positive and useful behaviour resulting in the desired outcome of getting some help and advice.

**Rapport**

Most people would say that having a natural rapport with someone else is pleasant and rewarding. The ability to build a rapport with someone could be described as a useful skill.
Matching and mirroring

Tools for rapport building include:

- matching and mirroring – using similar body language, gestures and facial expressions
- matching by language – using similar terms, for example professional language or metaphors
- matching by voice – using similar pace, tone and sentence structure
- psychogeography – physically aligning yourself with someone rather than opposing them. An example might be sitting asymmetrically at a round table, not on opposite sides of a desk.

Pacing and leading

Once a rapport is built, it is easier to influence people. Pacing and leading is used extensively in therapy and personal development, and can be seen in business areas such as sales, marketing and negotiations.

Having matched your behaviour with that of someone else, they may begin to follow your lead if you change your behaviour subtly. This might occur in customer relations to defuse a potential conflict and leave the customer feeling valued.

References

Articles

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Yemm, G. Can NLP help or harm your business? Management Services, Summer 2006. Volume 50, Issue 2, pp 43-45

Books


**Websites**

**NLP Training**
The NLP Academy offers educational programmes. The syllabus ranges from personal and corporate excellence courses, to the highest class of NLP Certification. [www.nlpacademy.co.uk](http://www.nlpacademy.co.uk) [Accessed 13 February 2008]

**NLP Schedule**
The site has articles, book reviews, links and a searchable database of NLP practitioners. [www.nlpschedule.com](http://www.nlpschedule.com) [Accessed 13 February 2008]

**NLP World**
This site has a lot of information and links to other sites within the NLP community. [www.nlp-world.com](http://www.nlp-world.com) [Accessed 13 February 2008]

**The Performance Partnership**
A training provider that offers a free CD to introduce you to the core principles of NLP. [www.performancepartnership.com](http://www.performancepartnership.com) [Accessed 13 February 2008]
Further Information

Articles

Full text available from Business Source Corporate


Abstract only from Business Source Corporate www.cimaglobal.com/mycima [Accessed 13 February 2008]

Lavan, I. *NLP in business – or more than a trip to the zoo*. Industrial and Commercial Training, 2002, Volume 34, Issue 5, pp 182-187

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Online NLP magazine [www.nlpanchorpoint.com](http://www.nlpanchorpoint.com) [Accessed 13 February 2008]

ANLP
Independent organisation for promoting standards, professionalism and good practice in NLP. [www.anlp.org](http://www.anlp.org) [Accessed 13 February 2008]

Neuro Linguistic Programming and Learning
A University of Surrey project on NLP and adult learning. [www.nlpresearch.org](http://www.nlpresearch.org) [Accessed 13 February 2008]

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