A taste of Neuro-Linguistic Programming

By Julian Elvé

Neuro – what?

A common reaction – and many people who discover how useful this way of looking at human behaviour can be do so despite the name! So let's break down that name and see what the bits stand for:

"Neuro" – for "brain", or perhaps more usefully for "neurology", for the nervous system runs throughout the body, not just the brain.

"Linguistic" – for language, and the structure of language, and how that language affects our minds and the minds of others

"Programming" – the ways that we habitually operate our minds and bodies. I prefer to call it "Patterning" because patterns are just the ways you habitually use your mind, use your ability to use language…

What we learn from NLP is that by changing these habitual ways of thinking, by changing these ways of using language that have become almost second nature to us, then we can change all sorts of things that may not yet be useful to us - the way we feel about ourselves, the responses we get from other people, even our health…

So where did it come from?

The first developers of NLP were Richard Bandler, a computer scientist, and John Grinder, a professor of linguistics. Working in California in the early 1970s they started to become curious about the patterns of thought and language that lay under natural genius.

Initially they studied some renowned therapists, including Virginia Satir (originator of Family Systems Therapy), Fritz Perls (originator of Gestalt Therapy) and Milton Erickson (creator of Ericksonian Hypnotherapy).

Bandler and Grinder found that by mapping the structure of how those geniuses "did what they did" it was possible to teach other people to operate with similar effectiveness.

Modelling "the difference that makes a difference"

They went on to develop this idea of "modelling": first understand the structure that underlies excellence (as Gregory Bateson called it - "the difference that makes a difference") and then use that structural understanding to teach other people to perform with excellence. Everything else in NLP stems from this core concept.

Presuppositions

One of the things Bandler and Grinder discovered when they modelled Satir, Perls and Erickson was that these people acted out of a number of important beliefs about the world.

These beliefs have become well-known as "presuppositions of NLP" – no-one is saying that these beliefs *are* true, but many people have found that if they act *as if* they are true then they become more effective in their work, their relationships, their daily life.

Some of these are:

"The map is not the territory"

"People respond to their map of reality, not to reality itself"

"Every action has a positive intention"

"The meaning of any communication is the response it elicits"

"You cannot not communicate"

"There is no failure, only feedback"

"Mind and body are one integrated system"

"People make the best choice available to them at the time – but there may be more useful choices that they are not yet aware of"

"Choice is better than no choice"

"Everyone has all the internal resources they need"

Even now you might be wondering how different your daily life would be if you acted "as if" some of those were true…

Four Pillars

Later developers in the field began to model excellent communicators, people who were extremely effective in getting their view across and influencing people.

This led to the basic model of effective communication often known as "The Four Pillars of NLP":

Gain and maintain rapport with the person you are dealing with.

Be clear about what you are seeking to achieve in any situation (your "outcome")

Notice what effect your actions and words are having – the effect on others, the effect on yourself.

Be flexible about what you do - so that you can change in response to the reaction you get – and keep moving towards your outcome.

Rapport, rapport, rapport

"...and the greatest of these is rapport"

You might be wondering where you can start, right now, to gain some of the benefits of NLP in your life?

It is a truism in NLP circles that everything starts with rapport.

You could, as you read this sentence, think about the times when you have had easy, fast rapport with another person.

Was it the way you (subtly) matched their body language?

Was it the sort of language you used, and the tone of voice?

Did it spring naturally from the curiosity that you felt about their view of the world?

Was it because you listened at least as much as you spoke?

Was it because you took the time to get into their "map", to acknowledge what was real for them right then, before you tried to explain your point?

Or was it something else?

And when you have noticed what works for you, how about trying a little bit of that the next time you are talking to someone you used to think of as "difficult"?

And how would you know if what you were doing was working?

And there's more...

We only have space here for the briefest of tastes of the huge range of material that comprises the field of NLP.

If you like to learn from books here are some good introductory texts:

"Principles of NLP"; O'Connor, Joseph & McDermott , Ian; Thorsons 1996

"Introducing NLP"; O'Connor, Joseph & Seymour, John; Thorsons 1993

Books are useful – they convey a lot of information in a concise way – but they perhaps do not capture the spirit of NLP.

So if you really want to find ways to make your life more effective, more true to you and a lot more fun then:

Try on a few of the presuppositions of NLP...

Think about what you really want, and how you will know if you've got it...

Try things...

Notice what works for you...

And above all – be curious!

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