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Human Resources

NLP at work – the difference that makes a difference in business

By Sue Knight, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 2002

NLP – neuro linguistic programming – three initials a bit misleading. At a glance, one could think it's all about computers...but neuro linguistic? Could it be some scary futuristic technique coming directly from The Matrix, a new way to control people's minds? It took me a while to realise what was all about. The first book I got on the subject was "NLP At work" by Sue Knight. Sue is a world known author and practitioner, whom I had the chance to meet during a class on NLP at Henley on Thames, England. It was a unique experience on self awareness, communication and human interaction.

The pioneers of NLP were John Grinder and Richard Bandler, who first introduced the notion in their 1978 work "The Mystery of the Sorrow". Since their first work, dozens of books were published, and then NLP "exploded" into the world of therapy and touched deeply the business one, companies all over the world are teaching or using it (NLP).

Sue Knight is one of the first to try to put this intriguing theory in an accessible format, adapted for the business world. Her book is already at its second edition, maybe the best proof for the interest it provoked worldwide. In order to understand what NLP is, we can start by putting some light on the initials NLP. **Neuro** can be associated with the way you filter and process your own experience through senses; **linguistic** represents the way you interpret your experience through language and **programming** in nothing else that the way you code your language and behaviour into your own "program". One has to be flexible when accepting this broad description, as not everything falls under this umbrella.

Neuro, from the Greek neuron, nerve, is actually the thinking about thinking. The principle behind is not a stiff declaration of "best practices" like "think positive" "keep calm", &c. it is really a introspection into *how* to do that, into each one finding own ways to stay calm or to think positive. Each person has its unique view of the world, its own way to accumulate experiences. Looking at the very same object, there

are as many views of it as people watching. One could appreciate the softness of the surface, other the complexity of the structure and yet another could be deceived by the colour and another, and another... a different side of “Neuro” is the body language. This is put in a completely new light, without the well known stereotypes like crossed arms mean defensive, lean forward – interest, and so on. No, again, we are delighted to find a very different approach, unique to the person and respectful.

Linguistic, this time a self explanatory name, it’s all about words and their power. “Words that hurt, words that heal”, the title of a book by Joseph Telushkin, expresses perfectly this magic power. It is widely accepted now that in the world of business (and not only) the form became as important as the content. And that the charisma, the power to lead and to motivate people, to persuade and to influence, has a strong verbal component. That it is very important what you say, and yet more important how you deliver your message.

Programming is the most applied side of the NLP, is about how to put together all your skills and furthermore, how to bring to surface all your hidden, dormant resources, in order to realise your true potential. It about modelling talent in yourself and in others. It is about results.

All these elements can be used in different ways. Not surprisingly, each one will find his or her own way. One can find ways to improve relationships and to gain more control and choice over how to live his life and how to achieve better results. Other will find finer awareness and understanding of thinking processes, language and behaviour, will find “the difference which makes the difference”.

Neuro

“The spiritual life is a life beyond moods. It is a life in which we choose joy and do not allow ourselves to become victims of passing feelings of happiness and depression”

Henry J.M. Nouwen, The Road to Daybreak

The opening concept of the book is the thinking patterns. Each individual has his own way to interpret reality. You take information from the world through all the senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Then you represent this information as a combination of sensory systems and inner feelings. The result is a unique way of coding experience, a thinking pattern.

We can differentiate three major patterns: visual, auditory and feelings. Three different ways to look at the same world. Taking a simple example, say a glass of red wine, one could think about its colour, or maybe a picture of it, whereas another would retain the sound of pouring it from a bottle and yet another will find more relevant the taste, the smell, the feeling of taking a sip. The same glass of wine, all different results. Everyone has a certain preference for one or another. They are all valid, and this is actually the first exercise. Acknowledge their existence and use them as needed. In an era when communication is one of the most widely recognised

problems in business, building an efficient message is crucial. That is not an easy task, as one should employ with grace all these ways, in order to make sure that the message will be appealing to everyone.

One way to recognise a visual person is to observe his or her eye movements. Such a person will constantly look for images and answers “on the ceiling”. Therefore we should be also more tolerant when one breaks the so much valued eye contact. We shall think twice when concluding that such a person tries to hide the truth, a very popular judgement.

Most people have a preference for the visual, while smell and taste are a bit less common thinking patterns. There is neither a right or wrong preference nor better or worse; are they just equally valuable possibilities. The more aware we are of these patterns, the better prepared for communication.

Once you have experienced something it becomes a memory. When you react to a memory you react to the way that memory is stored in your mind. Managing these distinctions in thinking gives the ability to influence and change the nature of the memories, so they are stored in a way that results in feeling them the way we want. Some people become “skilled” in storing memories in a way which leads to depression, anger, despair; but one could also store them in a pleasant, positive way, which gives confidence and optimism. Therefore, managing the thinking patterns can be a very healthy habit.

We shall go now into a derived topic which covers a better known subject: filters. It is about the filters everyone puts on incoming and outgoing information which is therefore let in or kept out.

When two people in dialogue are employing the same filters, they usually build a high level of rapport. Similar patterns will increase the level of trust and mutual influence. On the contrary, using different filters may lead to discord and frustration.

First step is learning to recognise the different filters oneself and others use. Then developing the flexibility in the way one uses the filters dramatically increase the chance for finding a way to communicate with everyone. This is not as simple as there are hundreds of filters that we use every day to translate experience into perception. Of course one cannot know in advance what is and what isn't going to work, therefore awareness and flexibility are key elements.

First of all, we can segregate between associated and dissociated state. Thinking let's say about a recent experience, one could very well situate himself into a associated state, meaning that all memories are seen, heard or felt from inside, as they were lived before. Whereas a dissociated state is described as the experience of being outside your own body, looking at the situation as being lived by other person.

Being capable to switch between the two states can be very productive, as in the first situation one can focus on his or her own feelings and sensations, and in the second, dissociated state, one can detach himself or herself from this, distancing from unpleasant or traumatic emotions, therefore being capable of looking at this event in much more objective and unbiased way.

Thinking about objectives, more exactly looking towards or away from them, is another type of filters. Trying to live the success, the feeling of achieving the goal, be it personal or professional, to be *there*, is what it is called towards thinking. At the other extreme is the away from thinking, the thinking about obstacles, about what you

don't know, about what could go wrong, about what is to be avoided. In general, people which think towards the goal, are more likely to achieve or even to go further the planned goal, whereas the others may achieve only what they are running away from.

Yet another pair of filters is the match - mismatch one. Basically is the way one can look to a group of things. You can see the common traits, the similitude, what binds the group together, or you can look at differences, at what is not like the other, at what breaks a rule. Again, there is no right or wrong attitude, none s better than the other. However in a given context, matching could be essential, whereas in other cases seeing the smallest difference could make the difference.

Talking about how we look at our world, we can also talk about big chunk versus small chunk thinkers. Whilst a person talks about mission, values, feelings, space, style, this is what is called big chunk thinking. One can also look at milestones, planning, schedules, in one word details. Of course, it is useless to repeat the both ways are equally important.

Making classifications on filters might be an interesting scientific exercise, but the main gain is to understand them, using and recognising them and applying them in our life. In business, for example if you need to convince others to achieve whatever result you want, recognising their thinking patterns can be of high value. You can match then in this pattern your way of presenting the information.

In politics and business communication, body language is a long explored topic. There are hundreds of books on what the slightest movement would mean, where and how to keep your hands, where to look, &c. Still, NLP brings another dimension. It tries to describe how you think with your body. It is about eyes movements, about breathing, about posture, gestures, voice tone and intonation, about speaking and body movements. All these elements and more others are communicating our innermost thoughts every moment of every day. And it is not that people cannot recognise all these signals, they do. We all do read others' body language it just that we "learnt" to ignore them; to delete or distort what we pick up intuitively. By developing our conscious awareness of what these signals might be telling us, we start to draw on an immense potential in our communication.

Learning to be aware of body language and the difference between one person and the next, between cultures, creates a marked improvement in how well we understand others, in how we can influence them and they us. Some people have a natural ability to influence, to build rapport with others instantly, to make everyone feel at ease. Others find these persons approachable, easy to talk to on any issue. A. Mehrabian demonstrated since 1972 that non-verbal signals were significantly more influential that the vocal influence and the content of the message. What was really amazing was the fact that over 90% of our ability to influence others lies outside the actual words we use!

The way NLP uses body language is very different from the traditional teaching. It is not anymore about crossed arms meaning defensive, touching the nose meaning lye, &c; it is to respectfully recognise signals in each individual and to find their meaning. The aim is to find patterns in the body language and then to "flex" our behaviour to connect with them.

On the other hand, we can use the body language inversely. Our behaviour can influence how we think and feel. A tensed posture can very well connect us to our

problems; looking down we are “looking” to our emotions related to those problems. Therefore the traditional “*chin up!*” said to someone feeling down could really disconnect the person from her bad feelings.

Linguistic

“Language and word choice form a manager’s primary tool. Used wisely, sound guidance can grow from the seeds of aligned words. Used poorly and all you get are weeds”

Michael Lissack and Johan Roos, *The Next Common Sense*

In the beginning was the word. Your words are your life. They can be your passport to learning and choice or your jailer. Your language is an embroidery of patterns which tells your story. Moreover, in business, language is a powerful tool; it is the currency of business transactions.

By mastering your language, you can improve the quality of exchanged information, increase the level of understanding, bypass resistance, influence the outcomes of situations, communicate in a captivating and compelling way, and finally enrich your language and your life. You can do all these by practicing language skills not only when interacting with others, but especially when you interact with yourself.

Personal success relies enormously on the way we communicate. We have seen already that what we say matters little compared with *how* we say it. The quality of language is one of the important factors that makes the difference between outstanding leaders and speakers and those who would aspire to that status, but are not yet igniting the minds and hearts of their listeners.

One of the early findings of NLP was that skilled speakers use their language in a way to create a climate of trust and understanding. They rapidly adapt their discourse instinctively to the language of the person(s) they are speaking to, in this way building rapport through language.

It is somehow reassuring that you do not have to be Shakespeare or Churchill to convey a powerful, rich message. However you can code the writing or speaking style of any great communicator. In business, the many hours of meetings and presentations and reports, with their cold and neutral language seem to have cast away the compelling communication. By trying to see why one has the tendency to shove at the bottom of the pile certain reports compared to others, you can easily find out that enriched communication is at least one of the answers.

Knowing the fact that the vast majority of people has a preference for visual, starting with it can be a good choice. Of course, the scope of a project report would not be to write it in verses, but still giving an easy to understand example, could help to capture and hold the reader’s attention. Starting with visual, then passing through auditory and even sensorial patterns and playing with them once you discover the preferences of your auditory can be great tactics. Still, the “once you discover” part implies a lot of attention, respect and interest for your listeners or readers. If you really use the same means to communicate to the person in front of you, it really means that you are speaking the same language. If you are using two different systems then you will have

difficulty in understanding and accepting the other's message, giving place to tension and frustration.

Leadership nowadays is no longer a choice, it is a necessity. Choosing to be lead by others could mean the end of your business. However, the ability to lead depends on the willingness to tolerate ambiguity, take risks, and assume responsibility. And it also requires the capacity to inspire others to do the same. When we think about leadership, we always think about leading others, yet the journey really starts from leading ourselves. NLP, specifically the questioning skills, provides a way to lead both yourself and others.

Noam Chomsky, a recognised linguist, distinguishes two levels of language: the surface structure – everything we say, and the deep structure – the underlying meaning of what we say, containing information neither expressed nor consciously known. Several things can happen between the two levels. In the process of conversion from one layer to the other, the message of the communication could be lost or distorted. The closer is the true meaning of what we say to our words, the more coherent the message and the bigger the chance to be convincing.

Many processes are involved in our thinking. We delete, distort, and generalise information regularly, so that it becomes disconnected from its deeper meaning. Typically, the lazy language is one of central communication issues in today's business. It is an imprecise form of expression, elusive and ambiguous. One of the "famous" examples is maybe the "they" syndrome, the impersonal author of all the bad things in the world. "They don't communicate, they don't do enough, and they do too much..." illustrate our tendency to put the source of problems outside ourselves. Therefore the solution goes outside, too. Being elusive and impossible to pin them down "they" leads to our giving over responsibility and the possibility to influence the circumstances and people outside ourselves.

The two NLP pioneers John Grinder and Richard Bandler made a study on language patterns. They put in place a set of questions designed to challenge and influence the constraints people put on themselves. They reconnect the speaker with their experience and are influential in triggering change. By challenging the lazy language we are in a better position to increase the coherence in who we are and the influence we have on ourselves in subsequently on others.

Deletions are examples of language where parts of the meaning have been omitted. Common examples are the lack of precision of the author: "people say", "they decided", "it was decided" &c; the challenging questions, even if sometimes aggressive, could help a lot in passing the clear message: "who said?", "who decided?". The questions reconnect the speaker to the source of the problem, and also their answers give more specific information.

Vague subjects, vague action verbs, comparisons without the other compared side, abstractions, opinions presented as facts, are nothing else than aggravating factors for the loss of efficiency in communication.

Generalisations are a form of distortion, characterised by taking a specific experience and generalise it to make it true outside the given context. Sometimes it is essential to do so. Definitions, rules, concepts are all generalisations. Otherwise we would have to sail a sea of details, every day being filled with countless minute experiences. However, universal statements, like "I always catch a cold during winter" or "they never inform you..." can be very well challenged. Always? Never? Maybe, but it is

safer to be more specific. Other elements, like stoppers, limiters, drivers (musts, shoulds, oughts) do nothing else than put unwanted and useless tension on the speaker.

Distortions are examples of language where the owner of the words changed their experience. It may be that they made wrong connections, used incomplete information, and they become dependent of their environment and chose to feel the way they want to feel. Blamers can be very destructive, especially when left unchallenged. “X de-motivates me” can be true in its essence, but without asking “how does X do that?” you will have nothing else than bad feelings ruling over your judgement and your capacity to act reasonably.

Presuming parts of other people’s thinking or feeling is nothing more than personal interpretations, which so often carry a value judgement. It is much more productive to present objectively the facts, to ask questions, and wait for answers. Somehow similar, the interpretations are conclusions drawn on a particular episode based on another (more general, or not) one. “You are not smiling. You are obviously annoyed with me”. Of course, it could be true. But it could also be that the other has a headache, of a sick child, or that he or she does not have a particular reason to smile.

People do business with us, select us as their customers or suppliers, and choose to be with us, to marry us, to be our friends, more on the basis of the state we induce in them than on any of the content we might offer. To choose the most appropriate dialogue, in line with our overall outcomes, we need to be clear which are the outcomes we want to achieve, not only for ourselves but more important for our partner of dialogue.

Programming

“It’s about people, the rest is technology.”

Ericsson, quoted in *The Next Common Sense*

The process of coding talent is known as modelling. When you step in someone else’s shoes and reproduce what they do and the results they achieve, you are modelling. Modelling involves reproducing the same sequence of thinking, language, behaviour, actions. You might also need to take the other’s beliefs and identity. To use a metaphor, you are generating the code of the program needed to run in order to demonstrate the talent you want.

The purpose of modelling talent in business is to reproduce excellence. If you want to reproduce the success of a certain salesman, presenter, manager, &c, modelling will enable you to do so. The more you model excellence, the more you discover. NLP, goes at a higher level than more traditional trainings, in the sense that it does not stop in presenting *what* is to be done, but it also tries to explain *how* those things work. The process of NLP it enables you to learn how to learn and to enhance ownership and personal discovery in the process of personal growth.

In order to achieve your goals, it is essential to be capable clearly define them, to imagine you there, to feel them. But in our chaotic world, where continuous change is maybe the only thing which does not change, we have to be able to let our goals

unfold, develop together with us. We need to walk forward with clarity, and to be very well aligned with what we believe, and therefore to be in a position to seize the opportunities when they occur. Like in sports, we almost never know where the next opportunity will come from, or how it will look like, we can and have to always be ready for it and flexible enough to use it.

But in order to achieve such a state, we very often have to change. Sometimes extremely deep changes are needed. Robert Dilts, a leading NLP trainer, developed a model for change based on the work of Gregory Bateson, the author of *Towards an Ecology of Mind*. This model, the logical levels of change, provides a powerful framework for achieving alignment.

The first level is the level of **purpose**, the level of spirituality. It is not necessarily linked to religion. It refers more to the value we bring to bigger systems of which we are a part. It could also be the family, team, company, faith, or the world.

Our sense of purpose is lived through the kind of person we are. The **identity or mission** defines our sense of self and how we define who we are.

Belief systems and values are shaped by our purpose and identity, and they support who we are and what we give. Our beliefs are views about ourselves, about other people, about situations, which we hold true. They are emotional and not based on facts.

Capabilities are increasingly becoming known as competencies. They are resources one has in the form of skills, qualities, such as flexibility, sensitivity, analytical thinking, adaptability, &c.

The **behaviour** is the visible part of the iceberg. It is what we do and what we say. All previous levels show themselves throughout our behaviour. Most people have behavioural patterns that support them in achieving their goals and patterns which can sabotage this.

Finally, the **environment** defines the context in which we display our behaviour and therefore demonstrate all the higher (or deeper) levels.

Gregory Bateson pointed out that the rules for changing something at one level are different from those for changing a lower level. Changing something at a lower level, could, but not necessarily would change the higher levels. However, changing a higher level will always trigger changes at lower levels.

So often we see in business attempts to solve issues at one level by dealing at the same level, without searching deeper to correct the above level first.

I will conclude with some of the beliefs of excellence which can be vital for our positive and sustainable change: “Each person is unique”; “there is no failure, only feedback”; “behind every behaviour is a positive intention”; “we have within us all the resources we need” and “mind and body are the same system”. Each of them and many more has to be understood, discovered and experimented. Once we know where we want to go, we will certainly find the way to get there!

“The problem is not in what we do, but in what we become.”

Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*