

Neuro-Linguistic Programming

An Introduction for Mediators

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Neuro-linguistic programming concerns itself with human behaviour. The problem with writing about NLP is that you are trying to communicate in language about non-linguistic experiences. In order to discover what NLP is about you have to try it, not read about it. But with that caution, here is a brief history of, introduction to and description of some of the highlights of NLP that are particularly relevant to practice as a mediator.

NLP started life as a technique of studying those who perform extremely well in some field so as to learn how they do it. From this has been derived numerous techniques with the broad aim of enabling people to live more effective lives. By more effective, NLP means giving people more choice of how to respond in any particular situation. An underlying tenet of NLP is that the more choice you have of how to behave in any particular situation, free from the unwanted influence of society, upbringing or conditioning etc., the greater likelihood you have of achieving the result you want.

History of NLP

NLP emerged from southern California in the 1970s. The co-creators of NLP were John Grinder, who was an assistant professor of linguistics at San Jose University, and Richard Bandler, who was a psychology student there.

The foundation can be traced back to the work Richard Bandler was doing recording and transcribing therapy sessions of the psychotherapist Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt Therapy. Bandler distilled linguistic patterns out of Perls' work that Bandler felt might be the key to Perls being so effective. Bandler took these ideas to John Grinder who recognised the connection with transformational grammar, the work of Noam Chomsky, to which John had also contributed.

To the study of the work of Fritz Perls they added analysis of that of Virginia Satir, the well-known family therapist. In 1975 they published their first book entitled *The Structure of Magic*, an account of their work on Satir and Perls.

Grinder and Bandler found themselves puzzling over the question what makes the difference between someone who is merely competent at something and someone who is truly brilliant at it? In their quest for the processes that could bring about the most positive change in the life experience of clients, Bandler and Grinder then began to study Milton Eriksson, the leading hypnotherapist of his age.

As they saw it, relying on what people said about why they were successful did not seem to work. Fritz Perls, for instance, had written many books about how his therapy worked. As far as Bandler and Grinder could see, however, while these books might help people become competent therapists, they did not seem to enable anyone to become anywhere near as proficient as Fritz Perls himself.

The problem with relying on people describing how they achieve excellent results is that frequently they do not know. They may think they know and it is these theories that they pass on to other people. Similarly, those who try to learn by observation tend to begin by forming a theory about how the subject works and then test whether this is right. As will be explained in more detail later, having the theory affects what the person sees. An observer with a theory will tend to see evidence that supports the theory and will tend to fail to notice evidence that is inconsistent with it.

The foundation of Grinder and Bandler's work was that they would carefully avoid having a theory. Instead they would copy what the therapist did until they were achieving results similar to the ones the therapist achieved. Having done that, they would then alter their behaviour to see which of the bits of behaviour that they copied were essential to achieving the results and which were irrelevant.

For instance, Milton Eriksson had suffered from polio so that he spoke with a very deep gravelly voice. Initially Grinder and Bandler mimicked the deep gravelly voice. They also noticed that he used different intonations in his voice at different times during his therapy sessions. They also mimicked that.

Later they found that they could drop the deep gravelly aspect of the voice and use a voice more like their own. However it remained, they discovered, critical to Milton Eriksson's work that the different intonations be retained.

Bandler and Grinder's study of the work of Milton Erickson was published between 1975 and 1977 in the two volumes entitled Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson.

Development of NLP

From the work with these three therapists Bandler and Grinder developed the original technology and techniques that had become known by about 1975 as neuro-linguistic programming. Each of them separately has also developed and continues to develop further techniques. For instance, Grinder, now working with his partner Carmen Bostic-St.Clair, has put forward what he calls New Code NLP that works purely with process, without any discussion of the issues a client is using it for.

In addition others have developed new techniques or variations that are now regarded as part of NLP.

Relevance to Mediators

NLP is now a wide subject and inevitably people disagree about what is properly included within it and what is not. That does not need to concern us here. What is clear is that NLP has some extremely useful approaches and techniques that can help a mediator. For the purpose of this paper, we are going to look at four main areas. Each of these areas has depths we will not reach, but each of them has been and could be extremely useful in the toolbox of a mediator's skills.

Some are about the mediator looking after him or herself to be in as good a state, or frame of mind, as possible. Others are for a mediator to use in relation to the parties, perhaps to build the best relationship, or to enable them to be as creative as possible in finding resolution to the dispute.

Rapport

Introduction

The concept of rapport was well known before Bandler and Grinder embarked on their work. However, until then, while it was acknowledged that a good therapist needed to be in rapport with his or her client, there was very little guidance on how a therapist

might establish rapport.

NLP makes rapport one of its cornerstones. An NLP practitioner assisting someone through one of the NLP techniques will continuously monitor his or her state of rapport with the client. Indeed, another of the tenets of NLP is that there is no such thing as a resistant client, only a lack of rapport.

It is almost impossible to describe rapport. Essentially, rapport is a feeling you get when there is a deep connection between you and the person you are with. When in rapport, your influence will be greater; the other person will find you more persuasive and will tend to follow your lead.

All mediators are trained to believe that building rapport is vital. Most of what they are trained to do is derived from NLP, whether or not this is made explicit. Some of what follows is therefore likely to be familiar to most mediators but some is likely to be new.

Body language

Perhaps the best known aspect of rapport concerns posture and body language. It is well known that when a group of people are in rapport they tend to mirror each other's posture and movements. So, if you want to get into rapport with someone else a good technique to start with is to match, in some way, their posture and body movements.

Breathing

NLP takes matching the more obvious body language and movements a stage further. NLP recommends matching breathing with the person with whom you wish to be in rapport. Match the speed of breathing, the depth of breathing and place in the body where breathing is happening – belly, low chest, high chest etc.

Voice

In establishing rapport NLP suggests that you should pay close attention to your voice. Again, notice as many aspects of the other person's voice as you can – pitch, speed, volume, musicality, etc. – and match these.

Leading

Once you are in rapport with someone it is possible to help them move from the emotional state that they are in to a different, possibly more useful, emotional state.

For instance, if someone is angry they are likely to be moving fast and jerkily, they will probably be speaking loudly and possibly at a slightly higher pitch than usual. To gain rapport it is necessary to match these behaviours. However, once you are in rapport you may well be able to diffuse the other person's anger by gently slowing your voice down, slowing your movements, lowering your voice and deepening your breathing. The likelihood is that if you were in rapport to start with the other person will follow your lead, the emotional charge will be disbursed and they will become able to deal with whatever is happening more rationally.

Language

One area in which NLP can justifiably claim to be groundbreaking concerns the use we make of what NLP calls the representational systems. Representational systems correspond to our senses – visual, auditory, kinaesthetic (feeling) are the main ones. These senses are the way in which we take in information from the outside world. However, they are also the systems that we use to process information within ourselves.

Language can demonstrate which one of the systems we are using at any time. For instance, if someone says “I see what you mean” they are using the visual representational system. In contrast, if they say “I grasp your meaning” they are working with the kinaesthetic representational system.

NLP advocates matching your language with that of the person with whom you are trying to get into rapport. This, NLP asserts, will contribute, alongside the other aspects mentioned above, to the building of a close sub-conscious relationship that enhances your ability to influence.

State Management

NLP sets great significance on practitioners being able to put themselves into, and maintain, a resourceful internal state, no matter what happens. Similarly a mediator must be able to handle whatever crops up with confidence and assurance so as to continue to remain in rapport with all parties and seamlessly to restore or maintain the momentum of the mediation.

Your performance in any circumstance depends on the state in which you approach it. Go out feeling tentative and unsure of yourself and the performance you give will be tentative and lacking in confidence. Go out with assurance and confidence and your performance will match.

NLP has a number of techniques for this which mediators will find useful for ensuring a peak mental state.

Anchoring

Humans make connections between external stimuli and their internal emotional state. Pavlovian like, ring the bell and, if so conditioned, they start to salivate.

This is used shamelessly by the advertising and film industries. For instance advertisers take advantage of the conditioning provided by our culture to evoke a good feeling with, say, a nostalgic scene and then link that feeling to their product. Similarly, we all can sense when the film score wants us to feel that something frightening is about to happen – the Jaws music is a fine example.

Rather than be victim to this phenomenon we can take control of it and use it to our advantage. With small amounts of training we can build for ourselves a connection to the state we felt when we were at our most successful or resourceful. By then applying the chosen external stimuli we will reconnect with that internal state we have chosen.

This is a technique well used by sports players – but you can link music or a particular touch to less aggressive states than thrashing the Australians at rugby.

Chain of excellence

In common with other systems, NLP takes advantage of the link between breathing, posture and state to affect behaviour. Through the so-called chain of excellence NLP offers you another way to improve your performance in any situation by first, altering your breathing, then your posture. This leads on to a change of state from which improved performance can flow.

Beliefs, Values and Attitudes

Beliefs, attitudes and values are, according to NLP, our servants, not our masters. Unfortunately the world often does not seem to operate on that basis. Sometimes we hold beliefs that are derived from our culture or upbringing but do not serve us well today.

NLP has techniques intended to help us clarify our beliefs and values. If we discover we have beliefs or values that we no longer find useful, NLP shows us ways of changing them to more useful ones.

Within NLP there have also been created useful attitudes to work by – sometimes called the presuppositions of NLP. Many NLP teachers have their own lists and the language

is not always identical. Nevertheless, sometimes approaching a problem with a different attitude can enable you to see your path through.

With that spirit in mind here is a list of presuppositions selected, amended and explained for use by mediators.

NLP Presuppositions for Mediators

1. The map is not the territory

NLP directs attention to the limitations of our sensory systems, both absolutely – we cannot hear the sounds bats make – and neurologically – we have to select what we pay attention to in order not to be overwhelmed. It is this process of ‘making sense’ of the world that is both extremely useful and dangerous. We make sense of the world by paying attention to things that support our view of it. So, if we believe that people are selfish we will see and hear things that support that view, so reinforcing it. And the reverse is true if we believe people are altruistic.

2. People operate from their map of the world

And of course each person’s map is different.

As mediators we spend much of our time attempting to enable the parties to see that their story is not the only one and that none of the stories are necessarily the ‘truth’. NLP has many ways of doing this. Guiding people to the discovery that their map of the world is impoverished can enable them to see new horizons and possibilities.

3. Rapport is meeting people in their map of the world

As has already been mentioned, you achieve rapport by fitting in with another person. This applies to posture, movement, voice and language, but it also applies to the map from which they operate. As you discover the beliefs that drive someone so you will be able to enable them to feel heard. Once they have the feeling that at last they have been understood you will be able to challenge the assumptions on which their map is based.

4. The meaning of the communication is the response you get

If you get a response that is helpful – not necessarily the one you would prefer, but at least that is a clear response to the question asked – you have communicated successfully. But sometimes you get a response that does not seem to make sense. And then it is easy to blame the other person for not hearing you properly.

This presupposition underlines, in the specific area of communication, an underlying theme of NLP – by taking responsibility you also take power. For some people, if they have not been understood their only response is to repeat the communication more loudly. More powerful is to take responsibility for the miscommunication, learn from it and try again. Questions to ask yourself might include ‘What do they believe about me/the other party/the world for that to be a sensible answer/response to what I asked?’

5. If what you are doing is not working do something different

Einstein is alleged to have said that a definition of insanity is ‘doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result’. Another way of putting it is ‘if you go on doing what you always did you will go on getting what you always got’ – fine if that is what you want, less so if not.

The key in this situation is reflect on what happened and, based on that reflection, try something different.

6. Behind every behaviour is a positive intention

People, it is suggested by many psychologists, try to meet their needs. And they do so, of course, in their map of the world.

So if one of the parties in your mediation is behaving irrationally, what do you do? You could try to persuade them to be logical. To do so is judging their behaviour against your sense of what is rational and trying to persuade them of what is logical to you. In short, it is operating from your map not theirs, so you will lose rapport.

Another approach is to try to see it from their map. What is the positive intention behind this behaviour and what do they believe about the world/you/the other party that makes this behaviour a good way of achieving this intention? Curiosity along these lines is more likely to yield insight than sticking to your map.

7. Every behaviour is useful in some context

Sometimes it is extremely difficult for the detached mediator to see how some particularly emotional outburst can have a positive intention. This presupposition challenges us to be more understanding.

People develop through the systems in which they live – families, schools, workplaces, communities etc. Individuals will find ways of meeting their needs in whatever way is appropriate for that system. The problem is that we then tend to take that strategy into other systems and find that it is not so successful. Obvious examples of this are found in cultural differences.

A mediator's challenge is to find the need that the person is trying to meet and to show them how to do so in the context of the mediation, as opposed to the context in which the behaviour was learnt. This may be by showing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour – not colluding in bullying behaviour would be an example.

8. There is no such thing as failure, only feedback

If a course of action does not lead to where you want, your response is likely to govern your future success. To treat an unwanted outcome as 'failure' is likely to push you into a less resourceful state – 'I got it wrong, I am a bad mediator!'.

If you treat the response as feedback you can find a new way of achieving your intention in this situation and add to your repertoire of possible action for the future. Again, curiosity is the key – what is going on here that caused me to get this outcome as opposed to what I was looking for? – what can I now do differently that makes achieving my intention more likely? – how will I recognise this situation in the future so I do not fall into the same trap?

9. Choice is better than no choice

If you only have one way of responding in a particular circumstance your success will depend on whether that way works with these people in this situation – you could call it luck. Have several ways of handling the situation and you can make an informed choice that is likely to be better than relying on luck.

In your discussions with the parties to a mediation you will try to help them see

different routes to an acceptable outcome and a wide choice of acceptable outcomes.

10. The person with the most flexibility of behaviour has the highest probability of achieving the outcome they desire

The claimant saying 'You must pay me £1m to settle this dispute' may lead to many objections from the defendant. 'I must receive £1m to settle this dispute' already leaves open who pays it. The defendant may be able to assign a debt rather than meet this demand personally.

'I must receive a payment equal to £1m' allows payment in a different currency. 'I must receive value of £1m' allows the defendant to contract to sell goods to the claimant that the defendant has and the claimant wants at a discount.

The mediator's job is often to explore with a party what are all the possible ways in which their needs could be met or in which they could meet the other party's needs.

Linguistic Techniques

From the section History of NLP above, not to mention its name, it is unsurprising that NLP has, at its core, language techniques. As is mentioned above, the connections between the linguistic patterns of both Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir and the work of Chomsky in 'transformational grammar' were clear to Bandler and Grinder. From this connection they elicited what they called the meta-model of language and from the work of Milton Erickson they derived their so-called Milton model.

The Milton model is a series of language patterns that are linked to influencing through varying levels of trance. While this could be used ethically by a mediator, this paper will concentrate on the Meta-model which is of direct relevance for mediators.

Meta-model

The basis of the meta-model picks up one of the underlying themes of NLP – deletion, distortion and generalisation. As we take in images, sounds etc and delete, distort and generalise in order to make sense of the world, so we do the same linguistically. In the first instance, we translate our experiences into language and, by doing so, mould our experience by the language we choose. We see a sunset and describe it internally. The act of describing it limits our experience. Once we choose to describe the sunset as 'nice' it is different to us than if we had chosen 'awesome' or 'breathtaking'.

This process is then continued into our analytical thinking. From our culture, upbringing and experience our thinking flows down familiar channels. These are our patterns. We generalise from some experiences to all experiences and we delete experiences or possibilities that contradict our patterns or assumptions.

Finally these distortions, generalisations and deletions emerge in our statements. ‘They will never accept that’, ‘That’s not possible’ and ‘Saying that means they are not serious about wanting a settlement’ are all statements every mediator has heard. Each conceals assumptions that, if left unchallenged, could jeopardise the chances of settlement on bogus grounds.

The meta-model identifies and classifies different types of deletion, distortion or generalisation and has formulations of questions that can be asked to unpick the distortion. Thus a phrase like ‘they are all involved in this charade together’ has a number of distortions embedded in it. In meta-model terms there are, for instance, missing nouns which can be exposed by the question ‘who is in this charade with whom?’

This structured technique of questioning enables the interviewer to show to the interviewee how their internal thinking is getting in the way of wider choices and possibilities.

In the context of mediation this thinking will often be one side’s assumptions about the other side. In wider life, this can be about limiting beliefs – such as a person’s own ability to deliver something that would help settle the dispute. It can even be about a person’s own unconscious beliefs – particularly the case where someone’s behaviour is given a meaning – ‘X means they are not taking these discussions seriously’.

By using the meta-model, you can expose the deletions, distortions and generalisations that participants bring to the process. Once these distortions are exposed they can be challenged and shown to be true or not.

Take the phrase ‘that would never work’ said of a proposal put forward by a participant. Accept it at face value and you have to find another proposal. A much better response is to engage with the linguistic limitations asking a question like ‘what stops that idea working?’. The effect is then to require the person who made the statement to identify some of what has been left out in the first generalisation. So the answer might be ‘Well I know the other side cannot deliver the replacement widgets within the three weeks they propose because they require an 8 week delivery time’.



So now, as the mediator, you know the speaker is making an assumption about the ability of the other side to source the widgets they have offered as part of the settlement. You can then deal with that assumption directly, perhaps by inviting the other side to respond to the concern that they will not be able to deliver in that time frame. You may then learn that they have had an order cancelled.

While certainly of wider application than mediations, the meta-model helps mediators find the right challenging question and so open up possibilities that might otherwise be left unexplored.

Summary and Close

In this paper we have looked at a number of techniques that form part of NLP and are useful for mediators. You may think some of them are well known or commonsense. NLP does not claim to be original; indeed most of its content is explicitly derived from the exceptional work of its original geniuses.

NLP provides us with tools to help us be better mediators, and indeed, more successful in whatever way we choose. Partly this can be by showing us why what we are already doing works. And it can also be by showing us new ways that work. The key from NLP's point of view is that the more working tools and techniques we have, the more likely we are to be able to choose the one that will be successful in the situation we face.