

Psychology on a Page 6: NLP

The cartoon shows the three Primary Representation Systems from NLP; vision, hearing and feeling. The arrows indicate the direction of eye movements that alert you to which system is dominating at any moment.

There was a great deal of excitement about NLP, right from its origins in 1979. It appeared to offer not only some interesting and original ideas, but most of all an access to techniques which anyone, with a little training could use to create 'magic'.

Magic was a core idea in NLP used to describe the fact that certain therapy practitioners could accomplish more in terms of transformation and change than others. These therapists' seemed able to do magic, but Richard Bandler and John Grinder argued that their processes could be broken down, modeled and copied and then would work for anyone who applied them appropriately. Expert therapists modeled in the early days of NLP were Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt Therapy, Virginia Satir, founder of family therapy and the hypnotherapist, Milton Erickson.

Essentially NLP is a set of tools for breaking down, analysing and copying successful processes for change. In addition, it included some ideas about the links between language (including body language) and underlying feelings, values and motives. In particular, NLP challenged three common events in language; distortions, deletions and generalisations. It tackled these by asking the speaker to be specific about how they had come about and thus recovering the deletions, specifying the generalisations and straightening out the distortions. From these interventions, new insights emerged.

Another central idea of NLP is '*the map is not the territory*' which argues that each of us only ever operates on the basis of our internal representation of the world (our 'map') and not the world itself ('the territory'). This resonates with the idea expressed in 'Freud on a Page' (see Blog Archive), that the internal forces always dominate the external representations. We thus limit, distort and impoverish our capabilities by our use of a map that is unable to express the full possibilities and potentialities available - because it is coloured by deletions, generalisations and distortions.

A third core idea of NLP is that of the Primary Representation System. This refers to our major senses and the role each plays in forming our 'map' of the world. Each of us builds this 'map' using the five senses, visual (V), auditory (A), kinaesthetic (K), the primary three and olfactory (O), and gustatory (G) in secondary place. The idea is that each of us favours a single modality of sensory inputs and thus our 'maps' are made of internal pictures (V), sounds/dialogue (A) or feelings (K). These preferences were believed to be reflected in each person's choice of 'predicates' ("I see..." (V), "I hear..."(A), "I feel..."K). NLP theorists believed that eye movements were indicative of which representational system was being used, as shown in the cartoon at the top of the post. Visual representations were signalled by eyes upwards to the left or right, auditory

by eyes moving across on the central level, and kinaesthetic by eyes downwards. An interesting simple test is to sustain a downwards look and notice how difficult it is to stop feelings from welling up!

So far so good. So popular and teachable did NLP seem that within a couple of years a whole host of practitioner organisations offering 'Practitioner' and 'Master Practitioner' courses had sprung up and many people enrolled in these. Business became excited by the potential of NLP to guide and empower change.

However, some serious scientific analysts were finding it hard to establish empirical evidence for the efficacy of NLP. Experimenters have found little evidence of a stable trait in use of predicates and that subjects tended to change their predicates according to the nature of the perceptual tasks they were given. In other experiments they found, that 'K' predicates far outweighed all others in groups of subjects. Once again, we must be careful to use what is practical and useful from NLP without seeing it as a miracle application that can do anything.

One memorable and highly useful acronym from NLP has remained with me since the early days when I was a student of Robert Dilts and David Gordon on their first UK visits.

It is Match > Pace > Lead,

I still find this technique of matching people, joining them at their pace using their body language and verbal style a brilliant way to lead people towards challenging or unfamiliar tasks. You need to be careful to match, not mock – if you are spotted mimicking people too crudely they can feel you are mocking them!

Too soon I have reached the end of my page - indeed, this one runs to two pages - so I will post more on NLP soon, particularly on the technique of reframing which we have used successfully to revitalise brands, services, corporate and institutional reputations. You can download your pdf of this page here: