

NLP: Neuro Linguistic Programming or Never the Popular

Last month, *Training Journal* featured a provocative article by Garry Platt challenging the credibility of NLP. Now it's the turn of Sue Knight, who offers a thoughtful response in its defence.

First of all, I want to acknowledge your article, Garry, and the questions that you pose. I also acknowledge the frustration that you might be feeling. When we try to measure NLP with pie charts and graphs it is a bit like trying to use a drawing pin to nail jelly to the ceiling. NLP is an experiential process. It is a concept that draws on our unconscious minds and that relies on us learning with our muscles, our minds and our hearts. My husband, whose training was as an engineer, says that NLP is less like a pie chart and more like the Mona Lisa. He searches for black and white answers only to find that the questions lead to yet more questions. And that is hard to explain – that the answer, if there is one with NLP, is not so much finding the answer but in uncovering more questions. However, it is in the quality of the questions we ask that we influence the way we live our lives.

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

Garry, I would like to take some specific points that you raise. You say that predicates (words that communicate preferences in the senses that we use in thinking – for example, 'I see what you mean', 'That rings bells for me', 'She had a gut feeling') are NLP. They are not – although you would not be alone in thinking they are, as they are often presented under this banner.

NLP is the process of modelling the structure of subjective experience. 'What on earth does that mean,' I hear readers ask. It means that with NLP we assume (presuppose) that there is a structure to the way we do what we do. This structure consists of patterns of thoughts and behaviours that make up strategies. So on this basis we can assume that we each have our own unique strategies for how we make decisions, how we learn, how we build relationships, how we



programming

Less ?

negotiate, how we get up in the morning, how we get ourselves stressed and so on.

Whatever we do, we have a strategy for how we do it. Most of the elements and usually the key pieces of our strategies are outside of our conscious awareness. So if I admire something that you do – for example, the way in which you build instant rapport with complete strangers – and if I were to ask you how you do that, the chances are that what you tell me would be useless to me because far from being what you actually do you would just tell me what you *think* you do.

The application of NLP to business is to model what we perceive to be excellence in any context – for example, top presenters, successful salespeople – in specific contexts in order to reproduce the results that they get, either for ourselves or to give back to them (to get greater consistency in their results) or to train others.

Since the term NLP was developed by John Grinder and Richard Bandler,¹ there have been thousands and thousands of modelling projects. These modelling projects uncovered patterns of thinking, patterns in language and patterns in behaviour that make the difference in the context of

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the study. Among the earliest discoveries were predicates and eye-accessing cues. They are examples of the output of NLP – they are not NLP. NLP is about finding out for yourself what works and what can work for you by modelling other people or yourself in situations where they, or you, are getting the results that you want to reproduce. ►



WHEN ANSWERS BECOME QUESTIONS

You are right to be skeptical (and I agree with John Grinder, whom you quote);² that is the way to approach NLP. Richard Bandler even suggests that in embarking on the workshop they describe in their original book *Frogs into Princes*³ you treat everything they say as a lie. They do not want to give answers; they want to give questions. And more than that in their work with NLP they want to give us the ability to find our own questions.

There is a Chinese proverb that states: 'If we give a man a fish we feed him for a day. If we teach a man how to fish we feed him for life.' You, Garry, have the questioning skills that are life-giving, I believe, than those people who find a management model and believe it to be the panacea for all ills. However, I am aware that when I give those kinds of answers to my husband they cause more, rather than less, frustration. So what can I say to you and to readers of this article?

NLP is a state of enquiry, a state of curiosity, a state of not accepting what has gone before, so that we continually reinvent ourselves, our beliefs, our skills and the results that we achieve. NLP is a journey towards self-realisation through continuous learning.

The answer, if there is one with NLP, is not so much finding the answer but in uncovering more questions

ASSESSING IN CONTEXT

Here, I would like to pick up on another specific point – the point of the value of predicates. As I mentioned, predicates are a discovery, an output of NLP; they are not NLP in and of itself. My goal is to build rapport with someone, be it in a work or social context. I have found in my 12 years of researching and working with these principles that to speak the same language does have the effect of communicating that you are listening to the other person and of creating a climate of rapport.

However, these elements cannot be taken in isolation. If as a visitor to this planet I were to walk down a street and see a severed finger on the pavement, I might not appreciate its value. It

might be handy for shoving in my ear to obliterate sound, but a piece of cotton wool would work much better. I could, of course, tie some string round the finger to remind me to do something later that day, but I could just note down what it is that I want to remember on a piece of paper. My point is that a finger is indispensable in the context of the whole body.

This is the point that Gregory Bateson⁴ makes with his model of neurological levels (see Figure 1). What he is showing us is that we need to consider the whole; that behaviour, for example, does not exist in isolation of our beliefs or our skills. Indeed, what he does show is that our behaviour is determined by our beliefs and ultimately our purpose, and that whatever we believe will determine what we experience. Basically, whatever you believe you are right!

*A lover's eyes will gaze upon an eagle blind;
A lover's ears will hear the lowest sound,
When the suspicious head of theft is stopp'd:
Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails:
Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste.⁵*

The use of predicates is questionable? Tell that to Shakespeare. (Or indeed pick up any best-selling book and note the density of the predicates. And sales depend on rapport.) In my work with a team of telemarketers (full case study in *NLP Solutions*⁶) by raising their awareness of predicates, they increased the conversion of cold calls to appointment by 25%.

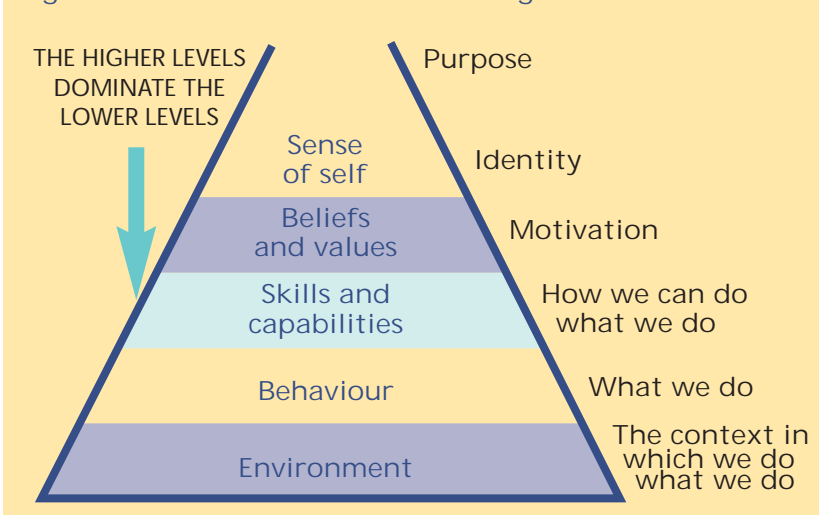
I know, I know I am being cynical too. And I have found a great deal of value in exploring your comments and your article. You have challenged my thinking and I value that highly. For me that is what this is all about. During one of my talks with an audience of people mostly of NLP practitioner status, I too was shocked when a non-NLPer criticised some of the NLP principles and was greeted with an undercurrent of hisses. I'm with you on this one. Members of the audience were indeed missing the point and to me they don't deserve to have been given practitioner certificates. I certainly would not have issued them with one. Then maybe I didn't deserve one either ... or you?

NLP, THE ENABLER

And what do I believe? Well, I believe that we can significantly increase our choices in life to achieve what we want in a way that is of benefit to others. For me NLP has been a major tool in my kitbag that has enabled me to do this. It is not the only tool, but it is one that has served me well. I do fall into that category of passionate evangelists (but I don't treat NLP as the panacea for all). And I wonder what would have to be true for you and the researchers you quote to include those passionate evangelists with their success stories in the research data? What is it that means you rate the pie charts higher than the success stories?

Maybe the pie charts are your kind of predicate. So what if I were to offer you a pie chart based on 12 years of working with hundreds of different companies that showed that the percentage of companies able to give examples of how training in

Figure 1: Bateson's model of neurological levels



NLP had improved the quality of their business and where they were able to demonstrate it, also cut costs, downtime and improve the bottom line?

It was also Gregory Bateson who said: 'It is difference that is the difference that makes the difference.' So for me one of the answers that I have realised over time is that we all – the evangelists, the pie chart proponents, the cynics, the advocates – have our own views; it is in accepting all that we recognise the richness in this diverse world in which we live. I believe that this acceptance of difference is as key to business today as it has ever been but not just to business, to relationships and to life.

A FINAL TALE

I like your story, Garry, and if I were to give any advice at all I would say: 'I'm with the voice in the sky; let go of the branch!' And in response to your story, here's one for you.

One day a traveller was walking along a road on his journey from one village to another. As he walked he noticed a monk tilling the ground in the fields beside the road. The monk said 'Good day' to the traveller and the traveller nodded to the monk. The traveller then turned to the monk and said: 'Excuse me, do you mind if I ask you a question?'

'Not at all,' replied the monk.

'I am travelling from the village in the mountains to the village in the valley and I was wondering if you knew what it is like in the village in the valley?'

'Tell me,' said the monk, 'what was your experience of the village in the mountains?'

'Dreadful,' replied the traveller. 'To be honest I am glad to be away from there. I found the people most unwelcoming. When I first arrived I was greeted coldly; I was never made to feel a part of the village no matter how hard I tried. The villagers keep very much to themselves; they don't take kindly to strangers. So tell me, what can I expect in the village in the valley?'

'I'm sorry to tell you,' said the monk, 'but I think your experience will be much the same there.'

The traveller hung his head despondently and walked on.

A few months later, another traveller was journeying down the same road and he also came upon the monk.

'Good day,' said the traveller.

'Good day,' said the monk.

'How are you?' asked the traveller.

'I'm well,' replied the monk. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to the village in the valley,' replied the traveller. 'Do you know what it is like?'

'I do,' replied the monk. 'But first, tell me ... where have you come from?'

'I've come from the village in the mountains.'

'And how was that?'

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'It was a wonderful experience. I would have stayed if I could, but I am committed to travelling on. I felt as though I were a member of the family in the village. The elders gave me much advice, the children laughed and joked with me, and the people generally were kind and generous. I am sad to have left there. It will always hold special memories for me. And what of the village in the valley?' he asked again.

'I think you will find it much the same,' replied the monk. 'Good day to you.'

'Good day and thank you,' replied the traveller. He smiled and journeyed on. 📧

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If you would like to challenge Sue's views or give feedback, she welcomes contact through the 'Ask Sue Knight' section on her website at www.sueknight.co.uk (where you will also find a previous interaction between Garry and Sue). Alternatively, she can be contacted at (tel) 01628 604438, (e-mail) support@sueknight.co.uk or visit (website) www.sueknight.co.uk

Garry Platt's article 'NLP: Neuro Linguistic Programming or No Longer Plausible?' was published in the May 2001 issue of Training Journal. If you would like a copy of this issue, please send a cheque for £10 made payable to Fenman Ltd.

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3. Richard Bandler and John Grinder, *Frogs into Princes*, Eden Grove Editions, 1979.
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Further reading

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