



Social Justice Conference 2023

MEDIATION SKILLS

Use of language, choice of words and neuro-linguistic programming [NLP] during mediation sessions



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A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – A Starting Point and Building Rapport

Before diving in, for those who might be unfamiliar with NLP, I think it is important and useful to provide a brief background here so that readers who are interested in finding out more can explore the literature and trainings available.

NLP was the brainchild of John Grinder and Richard Bandler. In the early 1970s, they and, later, their students set out to study people who excelled in their respective fields and those that did not. They were interested in finding out what “the difference that made the difference” was. Put simply, NLP was a methodology for modelling human behaviour. As a result of their initial modelling attempts with therapists, they identified certain patterns of behaviour that allowed these therapists to achieve seemingly miraculous results with their clients. Grinder and Bandler found that they could replicate and even enhance these results when they utilized and modified these patterns of behaviour. The NLPers, as they have sometimes come to be referred to, went on to model other examples of excellence that cover teaching, sales, managing, healing, and sports, just to name a few.

To be entirely transparent, there are many detractors of NLP. There is an entire skeptic's page devoted to debunking NLP. It has been criticized by scientists as pseudoscience and even the field of Neuro-Science (whose research is confirming many of the things that NLP has been proposing) has chosen to distance itself by saying that the propositions in NLP are not steeped in science. And here I was thinking that scientists were supposed to be open-minded.

My mission here is not to defend NLP. As the internet saying goes, “haters will hate”. From my perspective, NLP has never claimed to be a science. It is a model, which in my experience works. I am pretty sure that there is no scientific evidence that “mediation works”. But I know that it works, as do many readers of this blog. And interestingly enough, you do not have to believe that it works, for it to work. You just have to genuinely try it out. And this is what I invite readers to do.

Having said my piece, I want to devote the rest of this month’s entry to some general thoughts on building rapport from an NLP perspective and then expand on this in future entries.

A key part of NLP is the process of building rapport. The basis upon which rapport works is based on the idea that people like people who are like themselves. As the adage goes, “birds of a feather, flock together”.

I know that some readers at this point are saying “but what about ‘opposites attract’”? Opposites do attract, especially if you are a magnet. But consider that when you meet someone for the first time (for example, when you, as a mediator meet parties), we often look for what’s the same. Finding something in common is a powerful way to connect with someone else. Some would suggest that the urge to seek out what is familiar is a powerful drive for humans. For some, this drive can be so strong that it can cause them to resist change. Ironically, we (as mediators) face this problem every time we try to get parties to move away from the familiarity of the problem they are having towards considering new (and therefore change) ways of thinking and solutions.

Fortunately, NLP provides a simple (albeit not simplistic model) to build and utilize rapport. The process starts off with “Pace-ing” (misspelling deliberate) the other person. Once sufficient rapport has been established, one can then to “Lead” the other person towards more useful ideas or behaviours.

It is sometimes easier to illustrate this metaphorically. Many people run as a physical activity and there are a number of ways to get someone to increase their running speed. One way is that some people are self-motivated. They simply increase their speed. Others might increase their speed because someone might be shouting at them or if they perceive someone catching up to them. However, one way to help them increase their speed subtly is to run with them at their speed. More accurately, run with them at their pace. Once a joint rhythm (or rapport) is established, the pacer can subtly increase their pace and more often than not, the person being paced will follow.

This is essentially what the rapport building model seeks to do. Pace and Lead. It is important to note at this point that unless building rapport is your only goal, pacing by itself is insufficient. One needs to take that rapport and lead the other person somewhere more useful.

What can one pace? Most of us seek to establish commonality via content. We will talk to someone and make a connection through the people we know, the schools we have attended, the books we have read, the places we have lived, the experiences we’ve had, etc. And that is absolutely fine. Content-based rapport is useful in social settings where we have the luxury of time to explore these matters.

However, there are many other aspects of the human “be-ing” (again misspelling deliberate) that we can pace. I offer you a list of possible aspects below, which I hope to explore in more detail in future entries.

1. Non-Verbal Behaviours

This denotes our physiology and tonality. I have explored pacing physiology in June 2012 and the impact of tonality on communication in August 2013.

2. Representational Systems

NLP posits that we take in information through five channels and process it via six modalities. These are referred to as representational systems. The representational systems can be paced. [L] [SEP]

3. Values and Beliefs

Put simply, values are what we hold as important to us. We may have different sets of values for different contexts in our lives, or they may be fairly homogenous. For each of these values, there will be beliefs related to those values. These can be paced. [L] [SEP]

4. Meta-Programs

These are sometimes referred to as personality preferences and I have done an initial exploration of how these personality preferences interact to produce conflict in October 2017. Meta-Programs are the content-free filters through which we view the world. A common example used is “whether the glass is half full or half empty”. Both answers are correct. They are just different when seen through different filters. Therefore, pacing how someone sees the world is yet another way to build rapport.

5. Metaphors

Humans are meaning-making and there is some suggestion that the human brain works associatively and metaphorically. These metaphors are far more than figures of speech, they represent how interpret the world and affect the narrative through which we interact with it. Deep rapport can be built one’s metaphorical world was paced.

6. Linguistic Patterns

Finally, the linguistic patterns we have can be paced. This may be in the form of fillers that we use or certain turns of phrases or a particular linguistic structure.

[A Neuro-Linguist’s Toolbox – Rapport: Non-Verbal Behaviours](#)

I would like to focus on how one can build rapport using non-verbal behaviours.

In our field, it is trite that non-verbal communication is as important, if not more important, than verbal communication. Put another way, how we say something is sometimes more significant than what it is we say. A commonly cited study lists the components of communication as:

Physiology: 55%

Tonality: 38%

Words: 7%

While there have been criticisms of the study size and demographic and even disagreements about the exact percentages, the two main points that I would highlight from the study remains. First, that physiology and tonality (the non-verbal behaviours) form a larger proportion of the communication package than the spoken word, Secondly, where the spoken word is inconsistent with the non-verbal behaviours, we tend towards believing what is unspoken.

I'm sure we have all had the experience of communicating with someone where their physiology and tonality (non-verbal behaviours) do not match their words. Someone could be saying "I'm ok" when it is extremely clear from their non-verbals that they are anything but "ok".

From the perspective of negotiation and mediation, it is useful in 2 ways. First, this incongruence in communication often gives us a clue that there is something more that needs to be explored. Perhaps there is an interest to be uncovered or an unhappiness that is yet to be voiced. Secondly, it becomes important for us, as professional communicators to be as congruent as possible.

As you read this, some of you may say "Isn't this body language?". In a sense, it is and it isn't. Much of mainstream literature relating to body language leads people to think that discrete meanings can be derived from the gestures we make or the postures we take. The phrase "body language" itself contributes to this idea. Hence, one often hears generalizations like "Crossed Arms or Legs" means that the person is defensive or closed to new ideas or "Touching their mouth" means that the person is lying.

I don't know if these equivalences drawn are accurate or not. And that is the point. To say that these generalizations are universal cannot be right, especially if one takes into account the differences across genders and culture.

To be fair, some of the more nuanced pieces on body language talk about looking for non-verbal clusters, congruence and to be sensitive to culture and context. A person crossing their arms might not be defensive but simply cold. Context matters when making meaning.

NLP approaches non-verbal behavior from a different perspective. Can you remember a time you were having a wonderful conversation with someone? The kind where time seems to fly? You may have noticed that at these times you and your companion might have been speaking at the same rate or sitting in the same way or making the same gestures or using the same phrases? Or perhaps you might be a people watcher at a restaurant or a café and have noticed that you can tell whether the groups were getting along by watching whether their non-verbals were synchronized or not.

In NLP terms, we describe this state of synchronization as being in rapport. It should not be surprising that people who get along will synchronize their behavior, both verbal and non-verbal. What might be more surprising to some is that, building on the idea that human interaction is systemic, the reverse is true. NLP suggests that one can build systemic rapport by pacing the other person's non-verbal behaviours.

This means that when a person sits a certain way, one can subtly sit in a similar if not exactly the same way. When a person uses a particular gesture when speaking, one can subtly match that gesture when speaking. If a person speaks at a particular speed, one can speak at the same speed.

Pacing is achieved through matching, mirroring and cross-over mirroring. The first two are best illustrated with an example.

If the person you are seeking to pace is seated with his left leg crossed over his right, tilts his head to his right when he talks and gestures with this right hand when he speaks, matching involves manifesting one's non-verbals in the same way right down to the left and rights of it.

Mirroring is the same thing, except that one manifests one's non-verbals in the same way but in reverse. So one would sit with the right leg crossed over the left, the head tilted to the left and gesturing with the left hand when speaking. It is like being a reflection of the person in a mirror.

When teaching this, I often use the metaphor of a radio transmitter. In order to receive transmissions from that transmitter, we need to know what frequency they are transmitting on. Their non-verbals is the frequency and in order to build rapport with them, we need to tune our non-verbals to the same frequency. Following from this radio metaphor, just as we can still receive transmissions even if our radio is not tuned exactly to the same frequency (as long as it is close enough), the same is true here. We don't have to sit in exactly the same way or gesture with exactly the same enthusiasm. As long as they are similar enough, systemic rapport can still be established.

At this point, it is important to make clear that the purpose of matching/mirroring is not to mimic or make fun of the other person. This will lead to the opposite outcome of destroying rapport. One must match/mirror subtly and with respect for the other person. As with most things in life, Intention matters.

Apart from directly matching/mirroring the other person, it is also possible to match one aspect of the person's non-verbal communication with another aspect of your non-verbal communication. This is known as cross-over mirroring. The most common application of this is to speak at the speed at which the listener is nodding or vice versa, to nod at the speed at which the other person is speaking. The writer uses this often and to good effect.

What specific parts of non-verbal behaviour can we pace?

In terms of physiology, we can pace posture (how one holds the head and body), gestures (movement of the hands, usually when speaking), facial expression (smiles, frowns, etc) and breathing. Of these aspects, posture, gestures and facial expressions are easiest to pace.

It is useful to note two things here. First, pacing posture, facial expressions and breathing are synchronous. In other words, it is happening at the same time. Pacing gestures however is not synchronous. People generally gesture when they speak. It would be very odd for you to gesture synchronously when they speak! The idea therefore is for you to pace their gestures when you speak. The second relates to breathing. This is hard for most people to track and many tend to stare at the chest of the speaker to try to identify their breathing patterns. This is not recommended, and inappropriate even before the age of #metoo. There are two clues to identifying the breathing pattern of the speaker. One is to look for the rise and fall of the speaker's shoulders. Many adults breathe in the upper one-third of their lungs. Their shoulders will inevitable rise and fall with their breath. The other clue is that people generally breathe out when they speak. So, if one was minded to pace the speaker's breath, one can breathe out when they are speaking and take a breath when they do.

In terms of tonality, we can pace tone (how high or low one's pitch is), tempo (how fast or slow and how rhythmic one speaks), timbre (how clearly or distorted the quality of one's voice is) and volume (how loud or soft one is speaking). Of these, tempo and volume are easiest to pace.

It is useful to note three things in relation to pacing tonality. First, and to state the obvious, pacing tonality is asynchronous. You can only pace when it is your turn to speak. Secondly, when pacing tone, one does not have to achieve the same pitch as the other person. For example, if the other person was had a particularly low pitch, it would be absurd to expect a woman to achieve the same pitch. All she needs to do is speak at the lower end of her tonal register. Third, people often have reservations about pacing volume. They are concerned that by raising one's volume, it will add to the conflict.

This is when the notion of "leading" (which was discussed in January 2018's entry) comes in. Briefly, while pacing helps us build rapport, building rapport isn't the ends but is simply the means. Rapport is only useful when it allows us to lead our counterpart or the parties some place more useful. Going back then to the concern about raising one's volume, in order to deal with someone speaking loudly and aggressively, the trick then is pace the volume and accompany it with words that are non-confrontational. Once the pace is made (which can happen in the course of a couple of seconds), then one needs to lead the volume downwards. This must be done gradually, in small steps otherwise, the speaker might not follow. And when they do follow, sometimes, they will follow you all the way down or just part of the way. In the latter situation, simply re-pace at the new level and lead again. When practicing this in NLP workshops, participants are often surprised about the efficacy of this method.

Needless to say these are just words on a page and has very little use (apart from serving an informational function) unless we put it into practice. I would like to suggest a number of exercises one can undertake to practice these skills.

Physiology

1. Sit at a cafe and watch people. Observe whether their physiology are in synchrony.
2. Find a particular person sitting at another table and pace their physiology for 5 mins. Then pick another. And another.
3. Work with a friend who also wishes to practice pacing. Sit or stand across from each other and take turns pacing their physiology. You can pace the entire physiology or isolate certain components to practice.
4. Practice this in real time with an unsuspecting friend. It is crucial to remember that you are seeking to pace not mimic. respect the person you are pacing. Intention matters.

Tonality

1. Find a talk show on YouTube and isolate a certain phrase that the host typically says. Then practice pacing the components of tonality with that phrase, seeking to replicate it exactly. Then practice with different phrases until it becomes smooth and easy.
2. Work with a friend who also wishes to practice pacing. Take turns speaking a phrase and pacing it. Again, you can match the entire tonality package or isolate certain components to practice.
3. Practice this in real time with an unsuspecting friend. Again, pace respectfully, don't mimic. Intention matters.

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Representational Systems

I would like to focus on how one can build rapport using representational systems.

As a starting point, I'm sure you can remember hearing people make statements like:

- I see what you mean
- I hear what you are saying
- I feel where you are coming from
- I understand what you are mean

Most of the time, when we hear these statements, we chalk it up to metaphorical expressions of expressing understanding. However, NLP, takes the approach that these expressions are more than metaphorical. That they are literal descriptions of what is happening inside our heads.

It is perhaps easier to illustrate this through a thought experiment. In a moment, not yet, I would like you to think of a “dog”.

In order for you to do that, you probably had in your mind:

- An image of a dog
- The sound of a dog barking
- The feel of a dog's fur
- The smell of a dog
- The taste of a dog (hopefully not, unless it was a hot dog)
- The word “DOG”

You might have had only one of these or a combination of more than one. In NLP terms, we represent the world to ourselves in one of six ways.

- Visual
- Auditory
- Kinesthetic
- Olfactory
- Gustatory
- Digitally

At this point, the astute reader may notice that the first five ways of representing the world revolve around the 5 senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. The sixth way of representing the world is more meta, more digital and is more a label without connection to any particular sense. For example, the word “DOG” has nothing to do with any of the senses. It is simply a label. The word “Understand” says nothing about how one is representing that understanding.

These ways of representing the world are referred to as representational systems. How we represent the world in our heads finds expression in our language. Hence, someone who “sees” what you are saying, may literally make a visual image of your communication in their minds. Someone who “feels” your burden may literally be experiencing what the weight of that burden may be like for you. As illustrated earlier, someone who “understands where you are coming from” may be understanding you via any combination of the five senses. It's just that the word “understand” does not give you a clear clue of which sense is in play.

The words like “see”, “hear”, “feel” and “understand” are referred to as predicates. At this point, it is useful to point out that for the purposes of this entry, the olfactory and gustatory representational systems will be taken to be under the umbrella of the kinesthetic representational system. But for the purposes of completion, two sentences that come from the olfactory and gustatory representational systems are “Something doesn’t smell right” and “This incident left a bitter taste in my mouth” respectively.

Following from this then, if we can identify the representational system that any particular person is operating out of at any point on time, it would make sense to communicate to them in that representational system. So, if a person is functioning visually at any point in time, we can choose to draw them a picture or use slides to show them what we mean. If a person is functioning aurally at any point in time, we can choose to tell them a better story or express the idea through a metaphor. If a person is functioning kinesthetically at any point in time, you can choose to let them physically use or feel what it is that is being talked about.

Essentially, these examples pace the representational preference of the person at a content level. Interestingly, one can also pace someone at the process level by using predicates from the representational system that they are currently operating out of. Below are examples of pacing via predicates for four different representational systems. “A” is the statement made, “B” is the response that paces by predicates (predicates are italicized).

Visual

A: I don’t see what you are saying.
B: Let me see if I can find a way to illustrate this better.

Auditory

A: This doesn’t sound right.
B: I hear you. Listen, let’s talk through this a different way.

Kinesthetic

A: This doesn’t feel right.
B: We just haven’t connected with this matter in way that allows us to grasp the issues fully.

Digital

A: I don’t know what you mean.
B: I understand. Let’s think about different ways to examine this issue to make it easier to comprehend.

Most people would have no issues with the proposition of pacing content. If a person is “visual”, it makes sense to show them pictures or slides. If a person is “kinesthetic”, it makes sense to let them handle the product. Unsurprisingly, people in sales have known this for years. For example, when they studied successful car sales people, they found that those that were more successful, very quickly identified the representational system the potential buyer was operating out of and then proceeded to highlight those features that addressed more of that representational system. “Visuals” would have their attention focused on how beautiful the paintwork was, the design and how they would look in it to others. “Auditories” would have their attention focused on how the

powerful engine sounds and how quiet it is in the vehicle so that they can enjoy their favourite music. “Kinesthetics” would have their attention focused on the solid build of the vehicle and how they can feel the power of the engine on the expressway. “Digitals”, who are generally concerned with criterion, would have their attention focused on the efficiency of fuel consumption or the safety features of the vehicle.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that as mediators or negotiators, we should become sale persons. While some people may go as far as to suggest that mediation or negotiation is like making a sale, I disagree. All I am pointing out here is that by pacing content and process via representational systems, we have yet another tool for developing rapport.

At this point, some readers might be wondering why, or even if, this works. Does it work? In my experience, and the experience of many NLPers over the years, it does. Why does it work? Let me illustrate with an analogy. For those readers who have learnt a foreign language, you will know how tiring it is to listen to and speak in a language that we aren't familiar with. It takes bandwidth to process language from something unfamiliar to something which is familiar so that we can understand it. And of course, when someone communicates to us in the language most familiar to us, understanding it is effortless. We are likely to feel a closer rapport with that person.

Well, think of representational systems as different languages that people speak. “Visuals” communicate in a way that is foreign to “Kinesthetics” etc. And even though a “Kinesthetic” can understand a “Visual” with effort, it still takes effort and the connection is not so easy. So communicating to a person in their particular representational language makes it easy for them to understand you.

And this is where it can help us as mediators. The first benefit of course, is to help us build rapport with our parties by speaking their language. The second benefit is to help parties translate from one representational system to another. A “kinesthetic” person may really not see what a “visual” person is saying. A mediator skilled in this can make what the “visual” is communicating solid enough for the “kinesthetic” to grasp.

At this point, I would like to highlight a caution. Astute readers will note that whenever I am referring to a person, I have put references to “visuals”, “auditories”, “kinesthetics” and “digitals” in quotation marks. I have done so to point out that these labels are fleeting. There is no such thing as a visual person. Or an auditory one. Or a kinesthetic one. Or a digital one. As flexible human beings, we operate out of all representational systems. Some of us, due to what we do, have a highly developed representational system. For example, painters have a highly developed visual sense. Musicians, an auditory one, etc. However, that doesn't mean they don't operate out of other representational systems.

The important thing then is to identify the representational system that the person is using at that moment in time. This, of course, seems like an onerous task. But it seems simpler once you understand that you only need to identify critical moments to pace representational systems. For example, at the beginning of an interaction, pacing to build rapport is helpful. Moments where there is some tension or misunderstanding is another. Of course, ideally, once we develop these skills of identifying and pacing representational systems at an unconscious level, we can do this without thinking.

How then do we build these skills? For the moment, identifying representational systems begins by listening for the predicates that people use in their language. See the table of predicates below.

List of Predicates

Visual

See
View
Look
Find
Show

Auditory

Listen
Hear
Sound
Ask
Talk

Kinesthetic

Grasp
Hold
Handle
Feel
Grip

Digital

Seem
Think
Know
Understand
Sense

Obviously, don't practice this in the most important conversation of your life. When you are learning to do something, your capacity to process content is reduced. So if you are having an important life changing conversation, attend to that. When you are having coffee with a friend or listening to your friends talking to one another or even watching a movie, listen for the predicates.

Once you are comfortable listening for the predicates, then start to formulate pacing responses. You can do this in your mind, or on a piece of paper. The important thing is practice.

Once this is easy to do, then start delivering some of your pacing responses. It can be as simply as "I see" or "I hear you" or "I get where you are coming from" or "I know what you mean".

One last thought. You will probably find one representational system that is easy for you to identify and to pace. This is probably the one that you are most comfortable with. Do not be content with this. Know which ones are less familiar to you and work on those. It will pay dividends.

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Representational Systems

I would like to focus on other ways one can identify the representational systems that are in use at that point in time.

We will look at each of the visual, auditory, kinesthetic and digital representation systems in turn. For each of these, we will look at four aspects (where relevant and appropriate) that will provide us clues to the representational system that is in play. These 4 aspects are posture, gestures, rate of speech and breath. One quick caveat, these 4 aspects are systemic and should not be looked at in isolation. Instead, we need to assess them holistically.

Visual Processing

Someone who is processing visually tends to have an upright posture. They will hold their bodies straight, their heads tilted slight upwards and while they may not stand still, their bodies or feet will move very little. Sometimes it may seem as if they were looking at something in the air in front of them. And in a sense, they are looking at the pictures inside their mind space.

To emphasize this, when talking, their hand gestures often occur above chest height, sometimes head height. These gestures may be animated and seem to be pointing to or illustrating things in the air. This makes sense if they are trying to point out to you the things they are seeing inside their mind.

Because of their posture, someone processing visually will exhibit shallow breathing, usually in the top third of the chest. This is commonly detected by the marked rise and fall of the shoulders.

This will in turn affect their rate of speech. They will tend to speak quite quickly and often at a higher pitch (relative to their normal pitch register). Again, this makes sense if you imagine that they have many images or a very clear image and they are trying to put into words what they see.

Auditory Processing

Someone who is processing auditorily tends to have a relaxed posture. Not too upright nor hunched. Their heads may nod, bob or move from side to side, and their bodies may also shift from side to side almost as if they were moving to a beat inside their head, And in a sense, they are.

Their hand gestures will be at chest height or mid-torso and will generally move rhythmically and often in beat, and to emphasise the impact of what is being said.

Breathing is often at the mid-chest although this is often hard to detect. Their speech tends to be rhythmic, their pitch variable and can sometimes seem sing-song.

Kinesthetic Processing

Someone who is processing kinesthetically, tends to have a hunched posture and their heads are often angled downwards. They may also move very little, almost as if their bodies were very heavy.

Their hands gestures, if any, are often at the lower torso and are generally not animated. Again, they might move as if they were very heavy.

Someone processing kinesthetically will breathe deeply and fully. Sometimes, it may even seem as if they were sighing. This in turn affects their speech. They will speak relatively slowly and likely to be at a lower pitch (relative to their normal pitch register). It will almost be as if they were feeling and weighing everything in order to process it.

Digital Processing

Someone who is processing digitally tends to have an upright posture with a relatively unmoving body. Their head is often tilted to the side as if listening to something and they will have minimal hand gestures. However, they may cross their arms when they speak or position a hand to their chin or the side of their head, almost as if they were listening to a telephone.

Someone who is processing digitally will manifest variable rates of speech, pitch and breathing. However, their choice of words will almost always be measured and precise. These will be the wordsmiths of the world.

So these non-verbal c(l)ues provide us additional ways to identify the representational system that is currently in operation. It is important to point out that it is more art than science, although there is some science involved. As such, one should be making a judgment call taking into account the predicates and these non-verbal c(l)ues.

How might one build the skill of identifying these additional indicators of representational systems? One way would be to engage in the past time of people watching. The next time you are part of a group who are having a conversation and you don't have to speak, listen to and watch the people speaking. Identify their predicates and notice the correlation the predicates have with how they hold their body and head, how much they move, where they breathe, their rate of speech, their pitch and their hand gestures.

As you get more skillful with this, then begin to practice this when having a conversation with someone. Of course, do this in a social, low risk situation until it becomes second nature to you. Then, depending on your assessment of what representational system they are using, match their non-verbals and use predicates from that representational system and notice how it affects your rapport and communication with them. And just for fun, mismatch the non-verbals and predicates and notice how that makes a difference.

There is one additional non-verbal c(l)ue that I wanted to discuss separately and these are eye-accessing cues. The NLP model of eye-accessing cues postulates that one's eyes will move in certain directions to access certain types of information. According to this model, when someone is accessing the visual representational system, their eyes will move up and to the right and/or left. When someone is accessing the auditory representation system, their eyes will move horizontally to the right and/or left.

Before looking at kinesthetic and digital accessing, it is useful at this point to note that the NLP eye-accessing cue model is a little more complex than what has just been represented. For example, the model makes a distinction between whether an access is remembered or constructed. So, if the person's eyes go up and to their left, for most people (80% of right handers and 50% of left handers) this means that they are accessing a remembered image. A question

like “What is the colour of your living room” might prompt that this access. If the person’s eyes go up and to their right, in most people, this means they are constructing an image. A question like “What would your living room look like painted with purple polka dots?” might prompt this access. The same applies to auditory access. Whether the eyes go to their left or right determine whether it is remembered or constructed respectively for most people.

Two points can be made here. First, the reverse is true for the remainder of people (20% of right handers and they other 50% of left handers). In other words, for people who fall into this category, the eyes moving to their left indicate construct and moving to their right indicate remembered. Secondly, it is important to note that a constructed sound or image does not mean that the person is lying. This is a fallacy that was unfortunately perpetuated by Hollywood.

From a communication perspective, this does not affect us. When we see their eyes move upwards, it is visual access and when their eyes move horizontally, it is auditory.

Having now noted this additional layer of complexity, we can look at kinesthetic and digital access. In most people, when their eyes move down and to their left, they are accessing digitally. Put another way, they are talking to themselves. A question like “Can you recite your favorite nursery rhyme quietly to yourself?” might prompt this access. When their eyes move down and to their right, they are kinesthetically accessing feelings or sensations. A question like “How does your right foot feel right now?” might prompt this access.

Readers will quickly realise that this means that, while moving the eyes to the left and right does not matter for visual and auditory access, it does for kinesthetic and digital. Without having to go into a complex analysis on this matter, three quick solutions present itself. First, you have the benefit of predicates and other cues to help you come to an educated guess. And this will often resolve the matter. However, on the assumption that it does not, then secondly, go with the averages. Since most people access kinesthetic when going down and to the right, communicate with them kinesthetically and calibrate to their response. If it maintains or improved rapport, then you have probably got it right. If it does not, try a digital response and see what happens. Finally, if all else fails, go with the digital response. Readers will remember from the third post in this series that the digital system is separate from any particular representational system. The digital system is one of words which is meta to sight, sound or touch. As such, when speaking to someone using the digital system, the listener is free to access whichever representational system that they wish.

How might one practice this? Like calibrating to the other non-verbal c(l)ues, people watch. Notice where their eyes go when they are listening or when they are being asked a question. Note where their eyes go last before they respond and identify that representational system. Correlate your observation with the predicates they use and the other non-verbal c(l)ues. Again, do this in a social and low risk situation, not in the most important life conversation at least until you gain facility with this.

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Values

I would like to focus on pacing something deeper than just behaviours, values.

Values

In NLP, values are things which are important to us. They are higher level generalisations that help us decide whether actions (ours or others) or a particular situation is good or bad, or right or wrong. In some NLP circles, values are also referred to as “criteria”.

This is better illustrated by an example. Can you think of a time when somebody did or said something that you were affronted by or that you found offensive? As you think about that time and work through your initial emotional response to it, what was it about that person's action that caused you to be so upset? What did his/her action mean to you? Why was it important to you? Chances are that anytime that an action upsets us significantly, it is because it goes against one of our values.

It is not easy to identify these values because they are deeply held and often unconscious to us. They can however be elicited. For example, if I were to ask you this “What is important to you in a relationship”?

Do take a moment to fully consider this question. What word or phrases come up? What do you want? Why is what you want important? As you identify these words or phrases, you will probably come up with a list of 3-7 items. My list would be:

- Fun
- Touch
- Love
- Togetherness
- Communication

Based on this list, I am not likely to stay in a relationship with someone that likes to spend time alone, does not like physical contact or is very serious. I will instead gravitate to someone with whom these values are met.

At this point, it is important to be clear. This is my list of values of what is important to me in a relationship. Yours will look different. It may be longer or shorter and may share common values with my list. And everyone else's list will be unique to them.

How do we use this in conflict resolution? Following the same principle of building rapport using non-verbal behaviours or representational systems, one simply paces. This can be done by feeding those values back to speaker when one summarizes or paraphrases, or by getting them to elaborate on what those values mean to them. By doing so, the listener gets a clear sense that you not only appreciate something that is core to them, but are interested in finding out more about what is important to them.

For example, someone might say "Things worked well for a while and then he stopped sharing information. At that point, I wasn't sure I could trust him anymore."

In this short sentence, two critical bits of information jump out. The first is that the counterpart stopped sharing information. The second was that, as a result of the counterpart stopping the sharing of information, trust was affected.

From this, one can hypothesize that "Trust" is a value for the speaker. One can also hypothesize that "Sharing Information" is important. That may itself be the value or it might be an example of a more abstract value like "Communication".

Often, when a speaker expresses a value, it is often accompanied by tonal or behavioural marking. What this means is that the speaker will manifest some kind of tonal or behavioural change while expressing that value. This could be pausing before the word, or saying it in a different volume, or manifesting a facial colour change or using gestures to emphasize that value.

Of course, right now, we are simply making an educated guess. What is important is to test the hypothesis. For example, we could paraphrase/summarise and ask them whether trust (or communication) is important to them in a working relationship. We could ask them to say more about what trust means to them and why it is important. We can even feed that particular value back to them and watch that response. Often, when you have correctly identified the value, by feeding it back to them, you will see a congruent non-verbal acknowledgement from them. And if we have correctly identified a value, doing this will itself will build rapport with that party.

I appreciate that this may sound quite complicated. The good news is that mediators already do this as part of their practice, but not in relation to values but in relation to interests. As mediators, we are trained to elicit the interests of parties by asking questions that probe for what is important behind the positions they come to the table with. And because parties aren't always explicit about

their interests, we are also trained to “listen between the lines” to identify what is important to them.

These same skill sets are applicable to eliciting and listening for values. And the bonus is that when eliciting for interests, values often pop out. In fact, some of the higher level interests are often expressed as values.

What follows is an activity that can help you hone your ability to elicit and listen for values.

- Find a friend to practise eliciting their values with. Identify a context like relationship, family, work etc
- Ask him/her “What is important to you in a [insert the chosen context]
- Listen for his/her answers and list down the values that are expressed. Sometimes, they may be at a loss for words when asked this question. This is because they are accessing something that is so deeply unconscious that it will take them some effort to put words to what is important to them.
- Using the list you have elicited, paraphrase the values to them to check if you have understood them correctly.
- Then for each of the values, ask them what each value means to them and why they are important.
- For fun, feed the wrong set of values back to them and notice their reaction. For example, if in the context of business, the values elicited are integrity, success, relationship and win-win, say to them “So, let me understand if I’ve got this. In business what’s important to you is short term profit, getting one up on the other person and competition. Is that right?”
- Then, again for fun, now feed the correct set of values back to them and notice their reaction. You will notice that in this latter situation, the values will resonate with them and you may even see behavioral manifestations of rapport like a flushing of the skin or a shift in breathing.

[A Neuro-Linguist’s Toolbox – Language: The NLP Communication Model](#)

In human communication, in order for two people to understand another, they must share a common “code”. This is often in the form of language. Language is one of the essential tools that we use as mediators. Without language, we would not be able to elicit from the parties the nature of the problem, assist them in defining the issues, exploring their interests and guide them in creating solutions for their problems.

When parties (and the mediators) do not speak the same language, it is inevitable that misunderstandings and misperceptions will occur, and one could say that this is unsurprising. However, even when parties speak the same language, misunderstandings and misperceptions

can occur. The problem is that we may not always realise this because we are under the illusion that speaking the same language means that we understand one another.

This happens because the internal representations (our memories or experiences) that we hold in our head does not accurately represent reality. This is best captured by one of the tenets of NLP, coined by Alfred Korzypski, "A map is not the territory it represents". Unfortunately, most people operate as if their maps are an accurate representation of reality and cannot understand why reality does not conform to their maps. This explains why two people can perceive the same event or experience so differently and act as if what they perceive is reality.

This disparity between our perceptions and reality occurs because our neurology engages in filtering processes that seek to assist us in coping with and making sense of the world. It is estimated that more than 2 million pieces of information bombard our neurology every second. Miller however, posits that our conscious attention is usually limited to 5 to 9 chunks of information at any one time. As such, one would be crazy to try to consciously attend to all available pieces of information.

Therefore, to maintain our sanity, our neurology has to filter incoming data so that we only pay conscious attention to what is more relevant at any point in time. These filtering processes are Distortion, Generalization and Deletion.

Stated simply, Distortion is the process by which we alter or make shifts in our perceptions, changing our experience of sensory input. It is the basis of our creativity, allowing us to plan for the future, dream and fantasize.

Generalization is the process by which one element of a person's experience becomes representative of the entire category of experiences. It basically allows us to generalize and learn from previous experience thereby eliminating the need to relearn a concept or behaviour every time we are confronted with a variation of the original.

Deletion is the process by which we selectively pay attention to certain aspects of our experience and exclude others. As mentioned earlier, there is far more external data available than is possible for us to be consciously aware of. Therefore, the process of deletion is useful in that it reduces the world to proportions that we can easily handle.

Because a package of experience must pass through these three filters before it is coded and stored, the content of the memory that is stored is very different from the original content of the package of experience. However, it is this memory that is very often taken to be an accurate representation of experience. In essence, the map is mistaken for the territory. This often causes problems in communication.

And while these filtering processes are useful in some contexts, they can also be limiting. For example, someone who has a low opinion of themselves may be constantly distorting, generalising and deleting data to reinforce what they already believe. Confirmation bias is an example of these filters in action.

Of course, the process does not stop there. In order to communicate a particular memory, idea or concept to another, one must code the memory, idea or concept into words so as to convey meaning to another. The words are not the experience but are labels for meaning. Put another way, words are the symbolic representation of experience.

Unfortunately, in order to code experience into words, these three filters operate as well so that the words that are finally used are a mere shadow of their original meaning. This is one of the reasons why words cannot express how we see, hear or feel in our internal representations about certain situations. Further, the words that are used will not mean the same thing. Since words are a symbol of subjective experience, the same word may refer to different reference experiences for different people. Therefore, the assumption that the other person's map for the word is the same as yours can be the cause of many instances of miscommunication.

For example, take the word "fair". Most people would agree with the statement that they would like to be treated in a "fair" manner. And the person who says this clearly knows what s/he means by this (and how it is represented in their internal representations). Therefore, the word "fair", for them, is a linguistic symbol for their internal representation.

Someone listening to that statement may agree with it and is even likely to think that s/he understands what the speaker means by "fair". The reality however is that the listener, after hearing the word "fair", is unconsciously overlaying his/her own internal representations onto the word. The result then is that both parties assume they are talking about the same thing when what they actually mean (their internal representations) can be vastly different.

In a future entry, we will look at how distortions, generalisations and deletions can be recovered via the NLP Meta Model. For our purposes in this entry, now knowing the NLP Communication model and how misunderstandings can occur, there are two immediate things that we can do to improve communication.

The first is to recognise when someone is using a word or phrase that requires clarification. The clue generally is when the word or phrase is abstract. When encountering such a word or phrase, it would be helpful for the listener to seek clarification. One way of doing this is by asking "When you say [word/phrase], what do you mean?" Their answer will give you a better sense of whether you share their perspective, or that you view it differently. In the latter situation, it might mean that it is something that you would have to discuss the meaning of and perhaps come to a common or, at the very least, closer understanding.

The second is to recognise when you, as a speaker, are using words or phrases that are abstract. Your listener may not have the awareness to recognise this possible communication trap, nor the skill to seek clarification. It may therefore help to, after using the word or phrase, provide more information and context about how you see it and what you mean.

Doing these two can have an immediate and powerful impact on your communication.

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: Using Presuppositions

In previous entries, we have seen how the use of language can traverse a continuum from the specific to the abstract, and how we can directionalize our communication and therefore our listener's attention in a desired direction. We have also explored how we can use specific questions to recover information that has been distorted, generalized and deleted, and how this can assist in challenging perceptions and creating movement in the listener's minds

Before going further, I feel I should provide readers a heads up. The discussion that follows is a little involved and may feel like one is back in school learning English. My apologies in advance. It is the nature of the subject. I suggest a strong cup of coffee (or other legal stimulant of choice) and I trust that for the intrepid reader that soldiers on, you will find value.

Having said that, this entry and those following, explores how linguistic presuppositions can be used to "incept" ideas in communication. Put simply, every statement/question contains assumptions that we must accept, as a matter of simply understanding and responding to that statement/question.

This is best illustrated by a true story from my misspent youth. During my university studies in New Zealand, I had a friend who liked to go around asking people the following question:

"Are you still beating your wife?"

Before going further, I should say that this is obviously a politically incorrect statement and should not be taken to indicate any kind of approval for said behavior (one can never be too careful in today's "lit" world). I share this here as a factual description of what my friend said, and who obviously did so for shock value.

I was constantly surprised by how many were confounded by this. They simply did not know how to respond to this Hobson's choice. An affirmative or a negative would be equally damning. I didn't know it then, but this was a presupposition in action. In order to meaningfully respond to the question, one had to accept the presupposition inherent in that question, i.e. I have a wife and have beaten her at some point.

For completion, I should add that there were a rare few who recognized the obvious trap and either refused to answer, or responded by saying "I have never had a wife" or "I have never beaten my wife" which directly challenged the presupposition.

When I finally learnt about presuppositions, I immediately recognized what my friend was doing then, but more importantly how we can use presuppositions in our work as mediators to help parties come to agreement. Since then, I have taught mediators and negotiators how to use presuppositions artfully. I would like to share some of these thoughts with readers.

Consider the following sentences:

- “The both of you have been experiencing conflict”
- “This dispute has created some problems between you”
- “It is good that you have chosen to resolve your dispute through mediation”
- “There are a number of obstacles and challenges to resolving this matter”
- “There are a number of possible solutions here that can give us an agreement”

The words in bold are abstract nouns that are likely to occur in a mediation.

There is nothing miraculous at this point. We can easily construct sentences that contain a noun (of some kind) thereby creating a statement or a question that contains a presupposition of “Existence”. The problem is a simple single-layered statement like “There is a solution here” can be simply responded to with “There is not”.

Therefore, to effectively incept a presupposition, one needs to create a sentence of question that is multi-layered. And this is where other presuppositions can come in. Consider:

1. “There is a garden behind the house”
2. “Did you know there is a garden behind the house?”
3. “Did you know that John did not realise that there is a garden behind the house?”

All these sentences share the same presuppositions of “Existence”, i.e. there is a garden and there is a house. However the second and third sentence is multi-layered in that they contain presuppositions of “Awareness”. Presuppositions of “Awareness” allude to ways we cognitively interact with others and the world. Consider:

- Think
- Realise

- Know
- Feel
- Aware
- Consider

These words all allude to how we are aware of others and the world. In the second sentence above, by using the words “Did you know...”, we have added an extra layer to the communication that focuses the listener’s attention on “whether they knew”. Therefore, regardless of whether the question is answered in the affirmative or negative, the presupposition of “Existence” of the garden and house is unconsciously accepted.

The third sentence is simply illustrative of creating two additional layers using presuppositions of “Awareness”; “Did you know” and “John did not realise”. One is now asking whether the listener was aware of John (and yes, this is an extra presupposition of “Existence” i.e. someone called “John” exists) not realizing that there is a garden behind the house. In this third sentence, the presupposition of the garden and the house is even more deeply embedded. And even if the listener were to ask “Who’s John?”, the garden and house are taken as given.

How might we use this in mediation? Consider the assumptions we want to parties accept as assumptions when they engage in mediation. For example:

1. That in general 7 out of 10 disputes that go to mediation get settled
2. That cooperation can go a long way to resolving disputes
3. That there will be a number of possible solutions that can be created

Again, the presuppositions of “Existence” are bolded. Making these single layered statements runs the risk of parties directly challenging the presuppositions. However, if we were to layer in presuppositions of “Awareness”:

1. I don’t know if you know, but most people are surprised to find out that 7 out of 10 disputes that go to mediation get settled
2. It is common for parties to be pleasantly surprised when they realise that cooperation can go a long way to resolving disputes
3. As the mediation proceeds, we will begin to see a number of possible solutions that can be created so that we can identify the best one to solve this problem

I would like to make three closing points.

First, readers may find the above discussion a little two-dimensional. This is because we have really only covered the basics of using presuppositions. I have limited my examples to the two presuppositions (“Existence” and “Awareness”) discussed, and needless to say, there are many other presuppositions which I will explore in future entries.

Secondly, it is clear that the information shared in this entry can be used unethically. I have addressed this in previous entries. It is sufficient to say here that how the tool is used depends on you. I take the position that all our interventions as mediators should be ethical and respectful.

Finally, some readers might feel a bit overwhelmed by the information and concepts in this entry. I invite you to take a step back and realise that as part of our day to day communication, we use presuppositions all the time. What is important to us as professional communicators is to use it purposefully and ethically. I also invite you to spend some time noticing the presuppositions we use in every day communication, two of which we have discussed.

[A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: Using Presuppositions](#)

Above we explored how linguistic presuppositions can be used to “incept” ideas in communication. Put simply, every statement/question contains assumptions that we must accept, as a matter of simply understanding and responding to that statement/question. Specifically, we explored the presuppositions of existence and awareness.

In this entry, I would like to discuss the presuppositions of “Binds” and “Time” as they are often used together.

Put simply, the presupposition of “Binds” is any sentence giving the illusion of choice.

Consider:

“Would you like this shirt in blue or red?”

Or

“Sooner or later, you will realize that dealing with this is unavoidable.”

Congratulations to those who, having read the previous entry, immediately recognized the presupposition of Existence (“shirt”) and the presupposition of Awareness (“realize”). Astute readers will have noticed that common to both sentences is a choice, indicated by the word “or”.

This use of “or” is more obvious in the first sentence, where one has to pick between “blue” or “red”. Whatever the choice, the presupposition is that a shirt in either of those colours will be picked. It is also useful to point out that this first sentence is in the form of a question.

While the second sentence is in the form of a statement, the use of “or” is less direct and applies to when the presupposed event will happen. This sentence presupposes that dealing with this (whatever “this” is) is unavoidable. It is simply a matter of time, and that “sooner or later”, it will occur.

This is where we turn to the presupposition of “Time”. Put simply, presuppositions of time are semantically indicated by words delineating time. The ones that work hand in hand with binds are “sooner”, “later”, “now”, “before” and “after”.

Consider the following sentences:

1. “Share with me your side of the story.”
2. “Let’s identify solutions to that problem.”
3. “Let’s explore solutions to your problem.”

These are sentences which you might use in a mediation. They are fairly direct and can sometimes meet resistance. In sentences 2 and 3, parties may disagree that there are solutions to the problem, or might be unwilling to do so.

The presuppositions of “Binds” and “Time” allow for communication to be layered more subtly. Consider the following sentences alternatives:

1. “Would you like to share with me your side of the story now or after the claimant has had a chance to speak? ”

2. "Sooner or later, we will begin to identify solutions to that problem."
3. "Would you like to explore solutions to your problem before or after the break?"

I have chosen not to indicate the "or" as these are obvious. The words in bold are the presuppositions of time.

These alternatives say the same things as the first set, but has a softer effect. Instead of suggesting the event directly, the sentences presuppose that the event will happen, and it really is only a matter of time. Using this structure redirects the resistance in the listener's mind from the event that you wish to have happen, to when it will happen.

So far, we have only considered the "or" structure for binds. It is possible to construct a bind without using an "or". Consider the following sentences:

1. "While you consider ways to resolve this conflict, we can continue to flesh out these agenda items."
2. "Are you still considering ways to resolve this conflict?"
3. "Have you decided on the ways to resolve this conflict yet?"

These sentences all presuppose the happening of an event i.e. identifying ways to resolve the conflict, without the use of an "or".

As readers consider the different ways you can apply what they have learnt, it is useful at this point to address two matters that readers might already be thinking.

First, it is important for the use of binds to be subtle. Binds are not unique to NLP and one often encounters binds when a salesperson is trying to pressure you into purchasing something. For example, "would you like to sign the contract with your pen or mine?". In NLP, we frown upon this type of use. Instead, the use of binds needs to be subtle and layered.

Second, and this is even more important than subtlety, binds need to be used with integrity and respect for the parties. As mediators, we should not seek to strong arm parties into an agreement. Instead, we should use our language and behaviours to enable and empower parties to find sustainable outcomes to their conflict. Using binds allow us to subtly influence parties towards those outcomes.

Finally, I should say that there is a fair bit more to the presupposition of “Time”. This entry has only focused on those presuppositions of time that help us in the construction of binds. In a future entry, we will look at other aspects of presuppositions of time that can assist us in mediation.

[A Neuro-Linguist’s Toolbox – Language: The Hierarchy of Ideas](#)

1. A Neuro-Linguist’s Toolbox – Language: The NLP Communication Model

The last entry looked at the NLP Communication Model. Specifically, it explored how our experience of external environment is filtered by our neurology such that the resulting internal representations (our memories and experiences) were a shadow of reality. The language we then use to describe our internal representations to others is similarly filtered such that the words that get used is a shadow of a shadow of reality. Not realizing this can cause miscommunication because even though two people may use the same word, they may not mean the same thing, nor do they necessarily draw from the same reference experience. Understanding the NLP Communication Model allows us to be aware of these internal processes, and to seek or provide appropriate clarification when communicating with others.

The Hierarchy of Ideas is based on the understanding that language, concepts and ideas fall within a continuum of communication that range from specific details to big picture abstractions. As an example, the notion of “animal” is expressed at a particular level of abstraction. From this level of abstraction, one can conceptually and linguistically move in three directions.

The first is to go in the direction of specificity and obtain more details. This is referred to in NLP as chunking down. Examples of questions that would move in this direction would be:

- What/Which specifically?
- What are examples of these?

Asking these questions will allow us to elicit a layer of responses that are of a lower level of abstraction than animal. For example, we might say that examples of animals are “Cat”, “Dog”, “Bird” etc.

We can chunk down further from this by applying these same questions to one of these examples. Let’s take “Dog” and ask “What specifically?” At a certain level of specificity, we will encounter a layer of responses that is bifurcated into 2 sub-categories. The first is types of dogs. In this sub-

category, for example, we may derive the list “Golden Retriever”, “Dachshund”, “Labrador” etc. The second is parts of dogs where we may derive for example, the list “Ears”, “Nose”, “Tail”, “Paw” etc. We can of course chunk down further from these categories to elicit more specific layers.

The second is to go in the direction of abstraction and to look at the bigger picture or interrelationships between things, ideas and concepts. This is referred to in NLP as chunking up. Examples of questions that would move in this direction would be:

- What is this an example of?
- For what purpose/intent?
- What will this do for you?

Asking these questions will allow us to elicit a layer of responses that are of a higher level of abstraction than animal. For example, we might say that animals are examples of “Living Things”, “Life”, “Transport”, “Food” etc. It should be immediately obvious that not all animals are “Food” or “Transport”. But if we started from “Food” or “Transport” and chunk down, we can certainly see how animals could be examples of these. Needless to say, we could chunk up from these to elicit a more abstract layer of responses.

The third is to move laterally from any concept within a layer. This referred to in NLP as Chunking Sideways and is a function of a 2 step process. The first step is to chunk up. The second step is then ask “What are other examples of this?” which essentially chunks down but laterally.

To illustrate, let’s say we would like to chunk sideways from the concept “Animal”. Put another way, we would like to generate a list of items that are on the same level abstraction as “Animal” but of a different logical type. From our earlier examples, Chunking up from “Animal” (Step 1) gets us, inter alia, “Living Things” and “Food”.

Let’s pick “Living Creatures” and ask “What are other forms of living things?” This might generate the list “Humans”, “Plants”, “Insects” and “Bacteria” which along with “Animals” are all examples of living things. Of course, if we had picked “Food” as the higher lever chunk to work off, we would derive a different list.

Having covered how the mechanics of how to traverse the Hierarchy of Ideas (Up, Down and Sideways), I would like to suggest three ways you can apply this.

The first is in facilitating communication. Most people have a preference about the range of specificity or abstraction at which they communicate. Some process information and communicate at the big picture level while others process information and communicate at the level of details. Of course, this does not mean that that one can only communicate at a particular level. There is usually a range within the continuum that one is comfortable with. Unfortunately, many of us have had the experience of communicating with someone who is operating at a level of specificity (or abstraction) that does not match ours. Perhaps you can remember a time when you asked someone a question looking for a general response and got a 20 min answer complete with mind-numbing details. Conversely, you might have wanted a slightly more detailed response to your question than “It was ok”.

In this situation, one can facilitate communication (and build rapport in the process) by first matching their level (In NLP, we refer to this as pacing. You may wish to refer to the first section on rapport) before leading them in the direction you wish them to go by asking them the appropriate questions for chunking up, down or sideways.

This segues us into the second application. Most of us will be familiar with the interest-based model of conflict resolution and the 7 Element framework that comes out of Roger Fisher’s work. Essentially, one looks behind positions to identify interests, before creating other ways to meet those interests. Positions generally exist at a relatively low level of specificity. Eliciting interests involves the process of chunking up. It is to identify a more abstract layer(s) of needs that allows us to open up the space for resolution. Creating options is essentially the process of chunking sideways from the initial position.

If the initial position was “money”, and meeting this position was not possible, chunking up may reveal that the interest behind money is “feeling valued”. This then allows us to explore different ways to meet this interest which may include a promotion, enhanced benefits, a better office etc. In the parlance of the 7 elements, these are all possible options.

Sometimes, chunking up once may not surface an interest that is abstract enough to open up the space to resolve the matter. In these situations, one may have to chunk up a number of times until a sufficiently abstract need is identified before identifying other ways to meet that need.

The third application relates to agenda setting. There is of course no one correct way to set an agenda. Mediators however do generally agree that an agenda can be helpful to keep the discussion on track, and that when creating an agenda, the items listed should cover all relevant issues and be phrased neutrally. Unfortunately, most of the time, parties do not state their agenda items in a neutral fashion. A common item is “compensation”. Some may feel that listing “compensation” on the agenda presupposes that some fault is involved and may cause the other party to doubt the impartiality of the proceedings.

The prescription of course is for the mediator reframe this issue with a term that is neutral. This is often easier said than done and many mediators find this challenging to do in real time. A fairly simple process to assist mediators in doing this is to chunk up to create a more abstract layer of terms, some of which are likely to be more neutral than “compensation” and using that as the agenda item.

By way of illustration, if we chunk up, “compensation” can be an example of “Fault Acknowledgment” or “Payment” or “Money”. The latter two are more acceptable than “compensation” and can be more safely used on the agenda.

I invite readers to chunk up on agenda items that they may have found challenging in the past, just for the practice.

One final point before closing, just as others have a preferred range within the Hierarchy of Ideas to operate within, so do we. One can train ourselves to extend our range by getting into the habit of asking the questions to chunk up, down or sideways, as is appropriate.

To share a personal example, I used to be a details and small-chunk person. As such, I often did not see the big picture or the consequences of certain actions. Put simply, I used to miss the forest for the trees. After learning the Hierarchy of Ideas, I would ask myself the chunking up questions as I went about my day. Just doing this alone has assisted me in being able to see the picture better and to think more strategically. It does require time and effort, but then again, doesn't every skill worth having?

[A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: The Meta-Model](#)

By way of a brief recap, miscommunication can occur because our experience of our external environment is filtered by our neurology such that the resulting internal representations (our memories and experiences) become a shadow of reality. It is filtered once again when we seek use words to describe our internal representations; our words becoming a shadow of a shadow of reality. These filters essentially distort, generalize and delete our experience of the world.

These processes of distortion, generalization and deletion are vital in that they allow us to manage and cope with the large amounts of input that bombard our nervous system at any one point. They also make it possible for us to create and learn. For example, imagination and creativity is a function of our being able to distort reality in our mind and consider “What If?” Generalization allows us to learn from one event/instance and be able to apply in all other similar events.

Unfortunately, these processes can also have negative effects. For example, generalization may cause us to take an instance of someone's uncaring behavior and lead us to conclude that that person is uncaring. And when that person displays caring behavior, distortion causes us to change the meaning of that behavior into something that matches our generalization. Finally, deletion also allows us to ignore behaviors and information that do not match our generalization. In this way, these three filtering processes can also limit the richness of our experiences and trap us in unhelpful mindsets.

From a mediation perspective, these processes form the perceptions and biases that we often find in parties (and sometimes ourselves!). NLP's way of dealing with these perceptions and biases is through the NLP Meta Model (not to be confused with the Meta Model of Mediation).

The Meta-Model was modeled from Virginia Satir's systemic family work. What the co-creators of NLP noticed was that when working with clients, Virginia Satir would ask questions that would often lead them to readjust their subjective realities. NLP's perspective is that since our subjective realities shape our behaviors, a readjustment in subjective realities can lead to an adjustment of behaviors, hopefully for the better.

Mediators, of course, already do this. For example our acts of reframing statements adjusts parties' subjective realities in a bid to move them closer to agreement. The NLP Meta Model provides mediators another tool in their tool box that they can use.

In this and the next entry, I will share some of these Meta-Model patterns and the questions we can ask to shift these realities. Before doing so, it is important to highlight 2 matters when using the Meta Model.

First, the Meta-Model is not a magic bullet. Do not expect a single question to make a complete shift in the speaker's mind. It is like a reframe. It can sometimes make a significant shift or you may need to string a number of interventions together to achieve the shift in subjective realities.

Secondly, asking these questions can sometimes be threatening as it causes the listener to question their subjective reality. It is therefore vital for a mediator to maintain rapport with the parties and utilize softening frames like "Help me understand how..." Or "Let me play devil's advocate here and ask you..."

Having said that, what follows are the first of three Meta-Model linguistic patterns that mediators may find helpful when seeking to adjust parties' subjective realities.

The first Meta-Model linguistic pattern is known as a mind-read. This is where the party makes a statement that purports to know what the other party is thinking or feeling.

An example would be “He doesn’t care about the company”. Many mediators will generally accept this statement and seek to gather more facts. Some might seek to reframe with a “So the company is important to you?” or acknowledge the emotion beneath with a “You must really feel upset about that”.

The NLP Meta Model response is to find out the evidence for that statement by asking “How do you know he doesn’t care?” Making the speaker identify the evidence achieves 2 things. First, it recovers data and secondly, it surfaces to the speaker’s attention that this view is an attribution of intention on the part of the speaker and not reality. In an ideal situation, this question will get the speaker to acknowledge his subjective attribution and become more open to other realities.

The second Meta-Model linguistic statement is a connecting statement. Essentially, two concepts X and Y are subjectively connected. For example “He is a bad father because he comes home late every day.” In this statement, a subjective connection is made between “Coming home late” and “Being a bad father”.

The NLP Meta Model response is to question the connection between X and Y. The mediator might ask “How does coming home late mean he is a bad father?” The answer to this might get more information about the interests involved e.g. spending time with children. The mediator might also ask “In what ways can one come home late and still be a good father?” This question will cause the speaker to reconsider the connection made.

The third and last Meta-Model linguistic pattern is the lost performative. A lost performative refers to a statement, usually a value judgment, belonging to the speaker’s model of the world which is made as if it were a statement about the world itself. Put another way, the speaker takes rules that are true for him/her and states them as if they were true for everyone else. For example, “It’s bad to be unreliable” or “Being inconsistent is not good for business”.

There are two NLP Meta Model responses to the lost performative. The first is to ask “for whom?” This requires the speaker to identify the person the standard, belief or judgment would apply to. The second way is to ask “According to whom?” Both these responses seek to enable the speaker to identify him/herself as making the judgment and applying it to a specific person/context. This may then enable the speaker to be aware of the limits of the model of his/her world and allow for more choices.

By way of closing, some readers may be wondering how best to practice recognising and responding to Meta-Model patterns such that they can become second nature. From personal experience, I would recommend that readers first spend some time learning to recognise each of the 3 patterns in their daily interactions. For example, you could take one day identifying Mind Reads in the things they read, in the conversations they have and in their own speech. Once the mind is attuned to that specific pattern, one can then practice the correct responses consistently.

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Essentially, the NLP Communication Model suggests that our memories and experiences are a lesser representation of our external environment because our neurology automatically filters out extraneous data so that the information that is presented to us is in manageable chunks. These filters essentially distort, generalize and delete our experience of the world.

These filters operate again when we seek to use words to describe our internal memories and experiences. Therefore, words used do not fully represent the internal memories and experiences that we hold in our head, which in turn does not fully represent the external world upon which those memories and experiences are based.

In communication, we often assume that we understand what the speaker means by the words they use. In reality, we are filling in, from our own experiences, what we understand those words to mean. However, our experiences may or may not match the speaker's reference experiences. When they do not, miscommunication and misunderstanding occurs. These filters also explain why perceptions and biases occur.

The Meta-Model was modeled from Virginia Satir's systemic family work and it is a model of language which allows us to linguistically recognize and recover the distortions, generalisations and deletions that have occurred in communication.

In the previous entry, we considered three Meta-Model patterns and the questions to ask to recover the information that has been filtered out. These patterns were the Mind-Read, the Connecting Statement and the Lost Performative. In this entry, we will cover 3 more patterns.

The first pattern is the Universal Quantifier. These are words which imply or state absolute conditions about the speaker's perception of reality. They usually indicate that a generalization has been made from a specific experience in the speaker's life. The universal quantifier linguistic pattern is identified through the set of words like "all", "every", "always", "never", "every", "nobody".

An example of a sentence with a universal quantifier would be “He is never on time!”. Another example would be “Nobody cares about the company.”

There are two ways in which Meta-Model responds to the universal quantifier, both of which seek to get the speaker to loosen the belief upon which the generalization is based.

The first way is to exaggerate the universal quantifier by using the universal quantifier on itself with appropriate voice tonality. To illustrate, in relation to the two examples provided above, one could say “Never?!” or “Nobody?!” Obviously this must not be done in a way that ridicules the speaker. Rapport must be maintained and the idea is to respectfully get the speaker to consider that the generalization made is too far reaching.

The second way is to elicit a counter example from the speaker’s model of the world that contradicts the generalization. Again, in relation to the two examples used earlier, one could ask “Was there ever a time when he was on time?”, or “But you care, don’t you?”

The second pattern is Modal Operators which define the boundaries of the speaker’s model of the world. They are the “rules” which govern the limits of possibility and necessity for the speaker. To go beyond these boundaries would be to invite a catastrophe that the speaker believes to be beyond his control.

There are two types of modal operators. The first are modal operators of necessity or non-necessity. This refers to words that indicate a lack of choice. Examples of modal operators of necessity would be words like “have to”, “must”, “should”; or in non-necessity form, “haven’t”, “must not”, “should not”.

The second are modal operators of possibility. This refers to words that indicate the limits of possibility, or impossibility, in the speaker’s model of the world. Examples of modal operators of possibility are “can”, “will”, “may”; or in the form of impossibility, “can’t”, “won’t”, “may not”.

In the Meta-Model, there are two ways to respond to the modal operator linguistic pattern. The first way works with the modal operators of non-necessity or impossibility like “can’t”, “won’t”, “shouldn’t” and the response is to ask “What stops you?” This serves to take the speaker into the past to isolate the experience from which the generalization was formed.

For example, if the sentence were “I can’t accept this deal!”, one could respond “What stops you?”.

The second response is applicable to all types of modal operators whether positively or negatively stated. This is to ask “What would happen if you did/didn’t”. This response serves to take the speaker beyond the boundaries of the model of their world so that they can consider what was previously not possible for them to consider.

For example, if the sentence were “I have to stay in the company”, one could respond “What would happen if you did?” or “What would happen if you didn’t?”

These responses assist the speaker in expanding the boundaries in their model of the world that will ideally increase choice for the speaker.

The final Meta-Model pattern we will explore is known in linguistics as a Nominalization. Nominalizations are essentially abstract nouns like success, love, relationship, problem, integrity, happiness, communication and peace. Unlike concrete nouns (pen, chair, computer, wheelbarrow), nominalizations are essentially verbs or processes that have been made static and generalized across time.

Examples of statements containing nominalizations would be “Our relationship is not working out” or “We have bad communication”. The problem with these statements is that the nouns seem immovable making the situation seem final.

The Meta-Model prescribes denominalizing abstract nouns. Put another way, convert the abstract noun back into a process. For example, in response to the first statement, one could ask “In what ways would you like to be relating instead?” Denominalising “relationship” back into the process of relating adjusts the speaker’s subjective reality so that there is now some movement possible. Things don’t seem so final. The same can be done to the second statement by asking “How would you like to be communicating instead?”

In closing, it is useful to briefly repeat 2 points that was made in the previous entry about the use of the Meta-Model.

First, one should not expect a single question to make a complete shift in the speaker’s mind. This might sometimes occur but more often than not, you may need to string a number of Meta-Model together to achieve the desired shift.

Secondly, one should always pose the Meta-Model questions with care and respect. One should maintain rapport with the speaker and utilize softening frames like “Help me understand how...” Or “Let me play devil’s advocate here and ask you...”

This entry concludes our foray into the use of the Meta-Model. There is of course much more to the Meta-Model and I invite readers to find out more on their own.

That’s it from my side.

We are in the process of compiling an NLP Skills course specifically aimed at mediators. Should you be interested, or just want to find out more, please drop me an email on eugene@oppermansinc.co.za

The extract of this short introduction on NLP was modelled verbatim from one of the leaders in NLP and conflict resolution: Joel Lee a professor at National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law of Singapore and with gratitude and recognition of his teachings and blog to NLP and conflict resolution.



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