

Neuro Linguistic Programming and Organisational Development

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The origins of NLP

NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) is the study of how the mind and our verbal and non-verbal communication interact and work together. It provides us with very practical tools that, when skillfully and responsibly used, enable us to harness the power of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and produce improved outcomes in work, relationships and life in general.

NLP was founded in the early seventies in Santa Cruz, California by John Grinder and Richard Bandler. John was an associate professor of linguistics and Richard was a psychology student at the University of California. Together they began to identify key underlying communication patterns of three highly successful psychotherapists – Frits Perls the originator of the Gestalt school of psychotherapy, Virginia Satir – the world renowned family therapist, and Milton Erickson – the world famous hypnotherapist. Later on they also used the profound influence of Gregory Bateson the British anthropologist and writer on communication and systems theory.

So although NLP itself is not very concerned with theory, it is well founded in four extremely successful people who revolutionarised the world of communication, especially in the area of psychotherapy. From these initial models, NLP has developed in two complementary directions. First, as a process to discover the patterns of excellence and success in any field. Second, as a model of thinking and behaviour based on the patterns used by outstanding people.

Understanding a cumbersome name

The “Neuro” part of NLP stands for the basic idea that all behaviour is a result of neurological processes triggered by our five senses as we experience the world, make sense of the information we get from it and respond through our thinking, feeling and behaviour. Body and mind are intricately united as a whole.

The “Linguistic” part of the name refers to our use of language to organize our thoughts and behaviours and communicate with others. This includes our non-verbal communication which in fact accounts for 93% of the impact of our communication. “Programming” refers to how we have learnt to think, feel, and behave in relation to the world and how we can **choose** to organize our ideas and feelings to produce the best results in whatever we do.

NLP is also based on a number of presuppositions that form the basis of the NLP way of thinking. These are:

- The ability to change the process by which we experience reality is often more valuable than changing the content of our experience of reality.
- The meaning of the communication is the response you get.
- All distinctions human beings are able to make concerning our environment and our behavior can be usefully represented through the five senses.
- The resources an individual needs in order to effect a change are already within them.
- The map is not the territory. In other words reality is our subjective perception after it is processed through our filters.
- The positive worth of the individual is held constant, while the value and appropriateness of internal and/or external behavior is questioned.
- There is a positive intention motivating every behavior, and a context in which every behavior has value.
- Feedback vs. Failure - All results and behaviors are achievements because of what we can learn from them, whether they are desired outcomes for a given task/context, or not.

NLP may be seen as a set of empowering tools that can be applied to practically all areas of our life. It is based on the fundamental notion that we can change the way we think and as a result the way we feel and behave. It also focuses on the idea that we can **choose** the way we think and react to people and events. It challenges unproductive ways of filtering reality and encourages more productive ways of viewing the world.

Applications to the workplace

In the last thirty years that NLP has been around, it has been applied in the areas of Education and Personal Development, Business, Health, Therapy and Law. For the remaining part of this article I will briefly focus on some organizational applications of NLP that can increase the success of an organization and motivate its people towards the achievement of excellence in their work.

Organisational Development

NLP tools and concepts can be effectively used by leaders who want to develop their organizations and make them more successful. Its emphasis on developing well formed outcomes can greatly assist leaders in their vision for the organization as well as for themselves and for every employee in their organizations. Many projects fail to come to successful fruition because from the very outset the goals, objectives, and projected outcomes are not adequately developed. Profoundly influenced by the thinking of Gregory Bateson, NLP looks at organizations from a systemic point of view – a complex interrelationship of various parts each depending on each other and each affecting the other. All parts need to be aligned and in balance in relation to the overall objectives of the organization.

The implications of this are enormous. It requires an organization to look at the product or service it offers in terms of customer satisfaction, motivated and contented employees who feel valued and respected equally, a high degree of competence at all levels of the organization, and an organization with a strong sense of identity that is based on positive values. Ultimately this will be the leading edge businesses will have over their aggressive profit-at-all costs, short-term mentality of their competitors.

Communication

With its emphasis on how human beings communicate and how they can improve their communication NLP concepts can be directly applied to all levels of employees in an organization. Communication is the key to any relationship once the fundamentals of trust and genuineness are present. Lack of clarity in communication has cost organizations a lot in terms of human resources and financial setbacks.

NLP has specific models such as the “Meta Model”, that when applied within the context of a strong relationship, can really clarify the numerous distortions, generalizations, and deletions that we make in our communication that renders it problematic. NLP also focuses on the subjective nature of our perception thus opening up our mentality to consider the value of other people’s point of view and challenge our own beliefs. This attitude works wonders in breaking down walls and building bridges between people. Naturally, it also strengthens the idea of teamwork and of people synergizing to become more efficient and creative in solving problems, generating ideas, and working together.

Another contribution of NLP in the area of communication is the tools it gives us to communicate with influence and persuasion. Due to the way it has developed the effective use of language, NLP has provided us with specific communication techniques that can be used effectively to get our message across in the best way possible and even to influence and persuade others. This approach has obviously been welcomed in the area of sales and marketing and we always needs to be aware of the potential unethical use of NLP when it comes to selling and marketing products or services.

Personal Development – Changing from within

One of the key strengths of NLP is that it focuses on the possibility of **choosing** our ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. In my experience in training and psychotherapy I have met endless examples of people having a deterministic and impoverished view of life and of themselves. They see change as something impossible and for this they give the ultimate justification, “because that’s how I am!”

NLP challenges this notion. If how we are means that our belief systems, thinking patterns and behaviours are self-limiting and self-defeating, destructive towards ourselves and others, or creating unhappiness and demotivation in our lives and people around us, it is well worth the effort try to change them.

Similarly, we can improve on already well functioning behaviours in order to achieve excellence.

Organisations are as good as the people who work within them. As people grow and develop personally from within so does the organization to which they belong. NLP lends itself very well to the process of empowering people to reach their full potential. A recent and thoroughly researched development in this area is the importance of developing emotional intelligence on personal and organizational levels. Newer still is the emergence of spiritual intelligence. We can get many concepts and techniques from NLP that enable the development of these intelligences. Of course, there are other approaches, equally valid and useful, but because of its very practical, hands on nature, NLP provides us with interesting and effective tools.

A word of caution

Just like any other psychological tool NLP may be used manipulatively and therefore can be harmful and deceptive. Anyone practicing NLP needs to do so with care and responsibility and a deep respect for the integrity and well being of people. For instance, you could use influence and persuasion skills to manipulate someone into buying something that they do not really need or want or at an excessively high price, or do something they don't want to do. Do not do this!

People will eventually know when you are not genuine and simply influencing and persuading them only for your own vested interest and not for theirs. They have a built-in detector that no amount of skill can deceive in the long term. NLP needs to be used to develop long term, meaningful relationships, to help people achieve what they want, to empower them and help them come closer to their dreams.