

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox - Rapport: Non-Verbal Behaviours

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This entry is an ongoing series focused on using Neuro-Linguistic Programming in our practice of amicable dispute resolution. For ease of reference and the convenience of readers, I will list in this and subsequent entries the series and links to it.

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

In this, the second in the series, 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.

I hope this month's entry has provided a useful primer for building non-verbal rapport and that readers might take the time to practice the skills until they become part of their unconscious competence. Have fun!