

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Values

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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
2. A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Non-Verbal Behaviours
3. A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Representational Systems (Part 1)
4. A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Representational Systems (Part 2)

In the previous instalments in this series, we explored building rapport by pacing non-verbal behaviours or representational systems. In the fifth of this series, 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.

This has, of course, been a necessarily brief tour of values within NLP with a particular focus on building rapport. Values can be utilized in other ways like persuasion or personal change which may be explored in future entries. Enjoy!