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Ramblings from a Neuro-Linguist: Non-Verbal Communication and Rapport

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Part of my misspent youth was spent on immersing myself in reading about, taking trainings in and practicing Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Over the years, NLP has affected my thinking about and approach to my training and practice of mediation.

Some readers may not be familiar with NLP. I will provide a, necessarily, brief background here and will leave readers who are interested in finding out more to explore the literature and trainings available.

NLP was the brainchild of John Grinder and Richard Bandler. 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, they identified certain patterns of behaviour that allowed excellent communicators to build rapport fairly rapidly via both verbal and non-verbal means.

It is the non-verbal means of rapport building that this entry will explore. It is trite that non-verbal communication forms a significant portion of the entire package of communication. Some studies suggest that up to 93% of communication is non-verbal with tonality comprising 38% and physiology comprising 55%. While there have been disagreements about what these exact numbers might be, there is general agreement that non-verbal communication forms the majority of the communication package and that the non-verbal aspects of communication more often than not override the verbal aspects, especially when they conflict.

How then can the non-verbal aspects of communication be used to build rapport?. Have you noticed that when people get along, they tend to sit or stand in the same way, use the same gestures, speak at the same speed or volume and even use similar key phrases? The rule of thumb that NLP goes by is that "people like people who are like themselves" and when they get along, this manifests as similarities in their non-verbal communication.

At one level, this seems intuitive. What is less intuitive and perhaps a sign that human interaction is systemic is that the reverse is true. Manifesting one's non-verbal aspects of communication to reflect similarity with someone else builds and increases rapport. NLP refers to this as matching/mirroring.

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.

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.

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.

If one accepts the premises in the NLP model of building rapport, I'm sure readers can immediately see the value of this for mediation practice. However, because the mediator is expected to be neutral and impartial in mediation, it is important to be careful as to how the NLP model of building rapport is used in the context of mediation.

When meeting with parties in joint session, it is important not to match/mirror the seating position of any party in particular. Doing so may give one or both of the parties the impression that the mediator is partial. Instead, it would be more useful to match/mirror/cross over mirror parties' speaking speeds or gestures. Done this way, the mediator can build rapport with both parties at the same time without being concerned about charges of partiality. Needless to say, in private session, the mediator can match/mirror the entire range of non-verbal behaviours.

I'd like to make 3 points in conclusion. First, NLP can sound quite incredible when encountering it for the first time. There are entire websites devoted to debunking NLP! In my experience, it works. I do not expect the reader to take my word for it. Try it out but give it a real try.

Secondly, sharing this is intended to give you another tool in the mediation toolbox. One should continue to use all other tools of building rapport that a mediator has available.

Finally, using the NLP model of building rapport is like any other skill. Trying it out in the middle of mediating a real dispute is like practicing swimming when one is drowning. Practice matching/mirroring in social situations first until they become part of your unconscious skill sets before using them in mediation.

I wish you success in your practice!

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