

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

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Over the years that I have written for the Kluwer Mediation Blog, I have dipped, from time to time, into the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). And I have received requests from readers to write more about NLP and how it can assist us in our practice of amicable dispute resolution whether mediation or negotiation. This has also coincided with my 2018 resolution to work towards publishing a book on tools from NLP for conflict resolution.

So where possible, and with the indulgence of readers, I will seek to devote my monthly Kluwer Mediation Blog entries towards one aspect of a Neuro-Linguist's toolbox for conflict resolution. This is of course subject to the caveat that where there is something extremely topical, I may choose to depart from this self-imposed practice and devote that month's entry to that topic.

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.

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.

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.

Thanks for reading. I do hope that this series will be of interest to readers and provide some extra tools in their tool box.