Kluwer Mediation Blog

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Rapport: Representational Systems (Part 1)

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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

In this, the third in the series, I would like to focus on how one can build rapport using representational systems.

As a starting point, I'm sure you can remember hearing people make statements like:

– I *see* what you mean
– I *hear* what you are saying
– I *feel* where you are coming from
– I *understand* what you are mean

Most of the time, when we hear these statements, we chalk it up to metaphorical expressions of expressing understanding. However, NLP, takes the approach that these expressions are more than metaphorical. That they are literal descriptions of what is happening inside our heads.

It is perhaps easier to illustrate this through a thought experiment. In a moment, not yet, I would like you to think of a "dog".

In order for you to do that, you probably had in your mind:

– An image of a dog
– The sound of a dog barking
– The feel of a dog's fur
– The smell of a dog
– The taste of a dog (hopefully not, unless it was a hot dog)
– The word "DOG"

You might have had only one of these or a combination of more than one. In NLP terms, we

represent the world to ourselves in one of six ways.

– Visual
– Auditory
– Kinesthetic
– Olfactory
– Gustatory
– Digitally

At this point, the astute reader may notice that the first five ways of representing the world revolve around the 5 senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. The sixth way of representing the world is more meta, more digital and is more a label without connection to any particular sense. For example, the word “DOG” has nothing to do with any of the senses. It is simply a label. The word “Understand” says nothing about how one is representing that understanding.

These ways of representing the world are referred to as representational systems. How we represent the world in our heads finds expression in our language. Hence, someone who “sees” what you are saying, may literally make a visual image of your communication in their minds. Someone who “feels” your burden may literally be experiencing what the weight of that burden may be like for you. As illustrated earlier, someone who “understands where you are coming from” may be understanding you via any combination of the five senses. It’s just that the word “understand” does not give you a clear clue of which sense is in play.

The words like “see”, “hear”, “feel” and “understand” are referred to as predicates. At this point, it is useful to point out that for the purposes of this entry, the olfactory and gustatory representational systems will be taken to be under the umbrella of the kinesthetic representational system. But for the purposes of completion, two sentences that come from the olfactory and gustatory representational systems are “Something doesn’t smell right” and “This incident left a bitter taste in my mouth” respectively.

Following from this then, if we can identify the representational system that any particular person is operating out of at any point on time, it would make sense to communicate to them in that representational system. So, if a person is functioning visually at any point in time, we can choose to draw them a picture or use slides to show them what we mean. If a person is functioning aurally at any point in time, we can choose to tell them a better story or express the idea through a metaphor. If a person is functioning kinesthetically at any point in time, you can choose to let them physically use or feel what it is that is being talked about.

Essentially, these examples pace the representational preference of the person at a content level. Interestingly, one can also pace someone at the process level by using predicates from the representational system that they are currently operating out of. Below are examples of pacing via predicates for four different representational systems. “A” is the statement made, “B” is the response that paces by predicates (predicates are italicized).

Visual

A: I don’t *see* what you are saying.
B: Let me *see* if I can *find* a way to *illustrate* this better.

Auditory

A: This doesn't *sound* right.
B: I *hear* you. *Listen*, let's *talk* through this a different way.

Kinesthetic

A: This doesn't *feel* right.
B: We just haven't *connected* with this matter in way that allows us to *grasp* the issues fully.

Digital

A: I don't *know* what you mean.
B: I *understand*. Let's *think* about different ways to *examine* this issue to make it easier to *comprehend*.

Most people would have no issues with the proposition of pacing content. If a person is "visual", it makes sense to show them pictures or slides. If a person is "kinesthetic", it makes sense to let them handle the product. Unsurprisingly, people in sales have known this for years. For example, when they studied successful car sales people, they found that those that were more successful, very quickly identified the representational system the potential buyer was operating out of and then proceeded to highlight those features that addressed more of that representational system. "Visuals" would have their attention focused on how beautiful the paintwork was, the design and how they would look in it to others. "Auditories" would have their attention focused on how the powerful engine sounds and how quiet it is in the vehicle so that they can enjoy their favourite music. "Kinesthetics" would have their attention focused on the solid build of the vehicle and how they can feel the power of the engine on the expressway. "Digitals", who are generally concerned with criterion, would have their attention focused on the efficiency of fuel consumption or the safety features of the vehicle.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that as mediators or negotiators, we should become sale persons. While some people may go as far as to suggest that mediation or negotiation is like making a sale, I disagree. All I am pointing out here is that by pacing content and process via representational systems, we have yet another tool for developing rapport.

At this point, some readers might be wondering why, or even if, this works. Does it work? In my experience, and the experience of many NLPers over the years, it does. Why does it work? Let me illustrate with an analogy. For those readers who have learnt a foreign language, you will know how tiring it is to listen to and speak in a language that we aren't familiar with. It takes bandwidth to process language from something unfamiliar to something which is familiar so that we can understand it. And of course, when someone communicates to us in the language most familiar to us, understanding it is effortless. We are likely to feel a closer rapport with that person.

Well, think of representational systems as different languages that people speak. "Visuals" communicate in a way that is foreign to "Kinesthetics" etc. And even though a "Kinesthetic" can understand a "Visual" with effort, it still takes effort and the connection is not so easy. So communicating to as person in their particular representational language makes it easy for them to understand you.

And this is where it can help us as mediators. The first benefit of course, is to help us build rapport with our parties by speaking their language. The second benefit is to help parties translate from one representational system to another. A "kinesthetic" person may really not see what a "visual"

person is saying. A mediator skilled in this can make what the “visual” is communicating solid enough for the “kinesthetic” to grasp.

At this point, I would like to highlight a caution. Astute readers will note that whenever I am referring to a person, I have put references to “visuals”, “auditories”, “kinesthetics” and “digitals” in quotation marks. I have done so to point out that these labels are fleeting. There is no such thing as a visual person. Or an auditory one. Or a kinesthetic one. Or a digital one. As flexible human beings, we operate out of all representational systems. Some of us, due to what we do, have a highly developed representational system. For example, painters have a highly developed visual sense. Musicians, an auditory one, etc. However, that doesn’t mean they don’t operate out of other representational systems.

The important thing then is to identify the representational system that the person is using at that moment in time. This, of course, seems like an onerous task. But it seems simpler once you understand that you only need to identify critical moments to pace representational systems. For example, at the beginning of an interaction, pacing to build rapport is helpful. Moments where there is some tension or misunderstanding is another. Of course, ideally, once we develop these skills of identifying and pacing representational systems at an unconscious level, we can do this without thinking.

How then do we build these skills? For the moment, identifying representational systems begins by listening for the predicates that people use in their language. See the table of predicates below.

List of Predicates

Visual
See
View
Look
Find
Show

Auditory
Listen
Hear
Sound
Ask
Talk

Kinesthetic
Grasp
Hold
Handle
Feel
Grip

Digital
Seem
Think
Know

Understand
Sense

Obviously, don't practice this in the most important conversation of your life. When you are learning to do something, your capacity to process content is reduced. So if you are having an important life changing conversation, attend to that. When you are having coffee with a friend or listening to your friends talking to one another or even watching a movie, listen for the predicates.

Once you are comfortable listening for the predicates, then start to formulate pacing responses. You can do this in your mind, or on a piece of paper. The important thing is practice.

Once this is easy to do, then start delivering some of your pacing responses. It can be as simply as "I see" or "I hear you" or "I get where you are coming from" or "I know what you mean".

One last thought. You will probably find one representational system that is easy for you to identify and to pace. This is probably the one that you are most comfortable with. Do not be content with this. Know which ones are less familiar to you and work on those. It will pay dividends.

The next entry (Part 2) will provide readers some other ways of identifying representational systems. But for the moment, enjoy practicing this entry's skills. I trust you will find it helpful!

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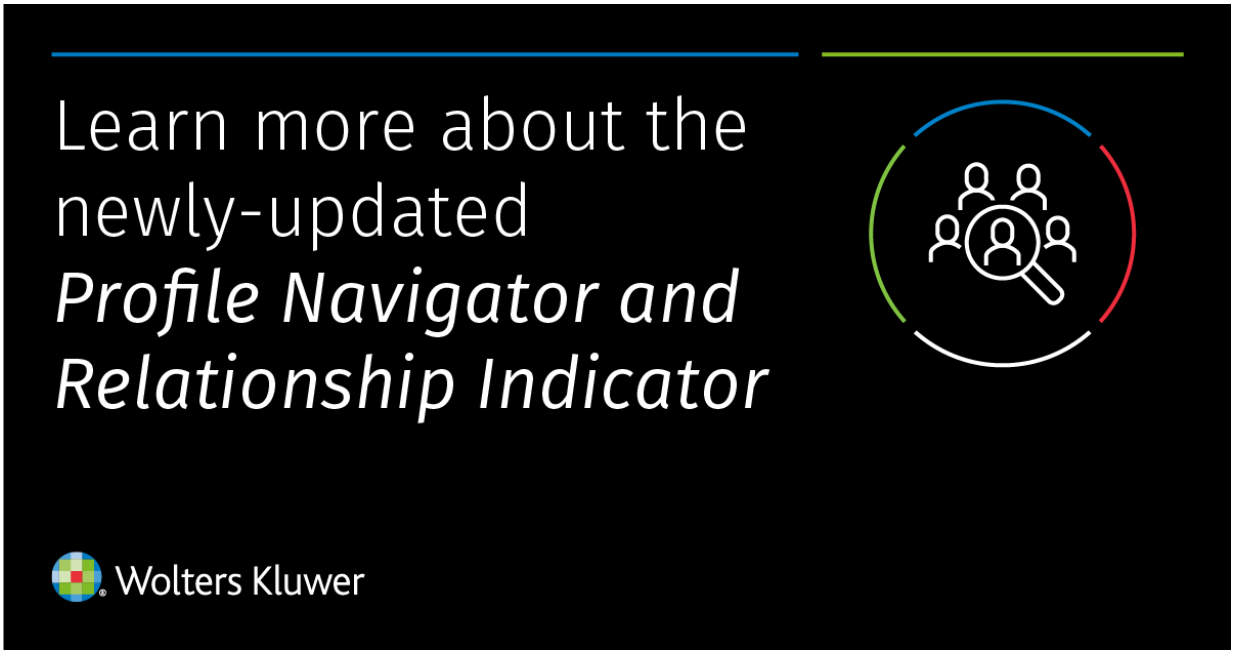

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