Kluwer Mediation Blog

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: The NLP Communication Model

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For readers who are new, the "Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox" series is an ongoing series focused on using Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) in our practice of amicable dispute resolution.

The first section focused on rapport (the first of which can be found here). The second section focuses on matters of self-care and personal improvement for mediators (the first of which can be found here).

This third section will focus on the use of language in amicable dispute resolution. We have encountered the use of language in NLP before, specifically in the use of predicates, values and metaphors in building rapport. However, this section will look at how the purposeful use of language can affect one's internal representations, and how this can in turn affect our experience of the world.

To prepare the ground for future entries, it is useful to start by looking at the NLP Communication Model. In human communication, in order for two people to understand another, they must share a common "code". This is often in the form of language. Language is one of the essential tools that we use as mediators. Without language, we would not be able to elicit from the parties the nature of the problem, assist them in defining the issues, exploring their interests and guide them in creating solutions for their problems.

When parties (and the mediators) do not speak the same language, it is inevitable that misunderstandings and misperceptions will occur, and one could say that this is unsurprising. However, even when parties speak the same language, misunderstandings and misperceptions can occur. The problem is that we may not always realise this because we are under the illusion that speaking the same language means that we understand one another.

This happens because the internal representations (our memories or experiences) that we hold in our head does not accurately represent reality. This is best captured by one of the tenets of NLP, coined by Alfred Korzypski, "A map is not the territory it represents". Unfortunately, most people operate as if their maps are an accurate representation of reality and cannot understand why reality does not conform to their maps. This explains why two people can perceive the same event or experience so differently and act as if what they perceive is reality.

This disparity between our perceptions and reality occurs because our neurology engages in

filtering processes that seek to assist us in coping with and making sense of the world. It is estimated that more than 2 million pieces of information bombard our neurology every second. Miller however, posits that our conscious attention is usually limited to 5 to 9 chunks of information at any one time. As such, one would be crazy to try to consciously attend to all available pieces of information.

Therefore, to maintain our sanity, our neurology has to filter incoming data so that we only pay conscious attention to what is more relevant at any point in time. These filtering processes are Distortion, Generalization and Deletion.

Stated simply, Distortion is the process by which we alter or make shifts in our perceptions, changing our experience of sensory input. It is the basis of our creativity, allowing us to plan for the future, dream and fantasize.

Generalization is the process by which one element of a person's experience becomes representative of the entire category of experiences. It basically allows us to generalize and learn from previous experience thereby eliminating the need to relearn a concept or behaviour every time we are confronted with a variation of the original.

Deletion is the process by which we selectively pay attention to certain aspects of our experience and exclude others. As mentioned earlier, there is far more external data available than is possible for us to be consciously aware of. Therefore, the process of deletion is useful in that it reduces the world to proportions that we can easily handle.

Because a package of experience must pass through these three filters before it is coded and stored, the content of the memory that is stored is very different from the original content of the package of experience. However, it is this memory that is very often taken to be an accurate representation of experience. In essence, the map is mistaken for the territory. This often causes problems in communication.

And while these filtering processes are useful in some contexts, they can also be limiting. For example, someone who has a low opinion of themselves may be constantly distorting, generalising and deleting data to reinforce what they already believe. Confirmation bias is an example of these filters in action.

Of course, the process does not stop there. In order to communicate a particular memory, idea or concept to another, one must code the memory, idea or concept into words so as to convey meaning to another. The words are not the experience but are labels for meaning. Put another way, words are the symbolic representation of experience.

Unfortunately, in order to code experience into words, these three filters operate as well so that the words that are finally used are a mere shadow of their original meaning. This is one of the reasons why words cannot express how we see, hear or feel in our internal representations about certain situations. Further, the words that are used will not mean the same thing. Since words are a symbol of subjective experience, the same word may refer to different reference experiences for different people. Therefore, the assumption that the other person's map for the word is the same as yours can be the cause of many instances of miscommunication.

For example, take the word "fair". Most people would agree with the statement that they would like to be treated in a "fair" manner. And the person who says this clearly knows what s/he means

by this (and how it is represented in their internal representations). Therefore, the word “fair”, for them, is a linguistic symbol for their internal representation.

Someone listening to that statement may agree with it and is even likely to think that s/he understands what the speaker means by “fair”. The reality however is that the listener, after hearing the word “fair”, is unconsciously overlaying his/her own internal representations onto the word. The result then is that both parties assume they are talking about the same thing when what they actually mean (their internal representations) can be vastly different.

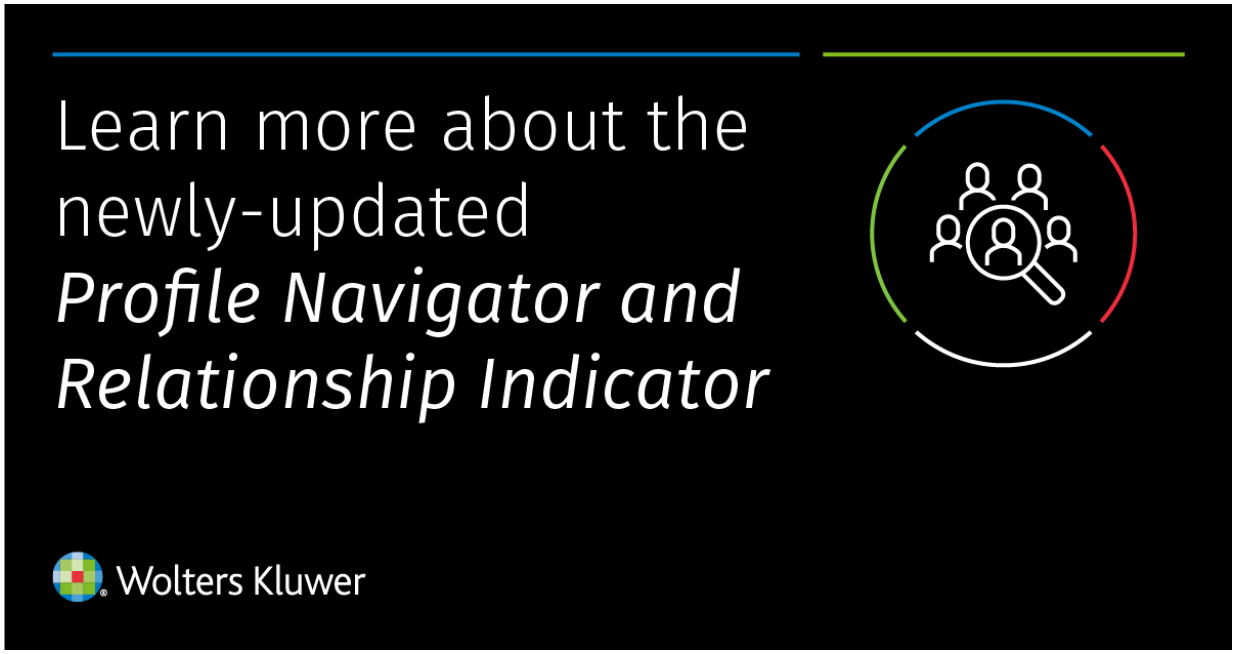
In a future entry, we will look at how distortions, generalisations and deletions can be recovered via the NLP Meta Model. For our purposes in this entry, now knowing the NLP Communication model and how misunderstandings can occur, there are two immediate things that we can do to improve communication.

The first is to recognise when someone is using a word or phrase that requires clarification. The clue generally is when the word or phrase is abstract. When encountering such a word or phrase, it would be helpful for the listener to seek clarification. One way of doing this is by asking “When you say [word/phrase], what do you mean?” Their answer will give you a better sense of whether you share their perspective, or that you view it differently. In the latter situation, it might mean that it is something that you would have to discuss the meaning of and perhaps come to a common or, at the very least, closer understanding.

The second is to recognise when you, as a speaker, are using words or phrases that are abstract. Your listener may not have the awareness to recognise this possible communication trap, nor the skill to seek clarification. It may therefore help to, after using the word or phrase, provide more information and context about how you see it and what you mean.

Doing these two can have an immediate and powerful impact on your communication.

I hope readers found this useful and I look forward to sharing more about language in subsequent entries.



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