
Kluwer Mediation Blog

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: The Hierarchy of Ideas

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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 focuses on the use of language in amicable dispute resolution. For ease of reference and the convenience of readers, I will list in this and subsequent entries the series of entries in this section.

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

The last entry looked at the NLP Communication Model. Specifically, it explored how our experience of external environment is filtered by our neurology such that the resulting internal representations (our memories and experiences) were a shadow of reality. The language we then use to describe our internal representations to others is similarly filtered such that the words that get used is a shadow of a shadow of reality. Not realizing this can cause miscommunication because even though two people may use the same word, they may not mean the same thing, nor do they necessarily draw from the same reference experience. Understanding the NLP Communication Model allows us to be aware of these internal processes, and to seek or provide appropriate clarification when communicating with others.

The Hierarchy of Ideas is based on the understanding that language, concepts and ideas fall within a continuum of communication that range from specific details to big picture abstractions. As an example, the notion of “animal” is expressed at a particular level of abstraction. From this level of abstraction, one can conceptually and linguistically move in three directions.

The first is to go in the direction of specificity and obtain more details. This is referred to in NLP as chunking down. Examples of questions that would move in this direction would be:

- What/Which specifically?
- What are examples of these?

Asking these questions will allow us to elicit a layer of responses that are of a lower level of

abstraction than animal. For example, we might say that examples of animals are “Cat”, “Dog”, “Bird” etc.

We can chunk down further from this by applying these same questions to one of these examples. Let’s take “Dog” and ask “What specifically?” At a certain level of specificity, we will encounter a layer of responses that is bifurcated into 2 sub-categories. The first is types of dogs. In this sub-category, for example, we may derive the list “Golden Retriever”, “Dachshund”, “Labrador” etc. The second is parts of dogs where we may derive for example, the list “Ears”, “Nose”, “Tail”, “Paw” etc. We can of course chunk down further from these categories to elicit more specific layers.

The second is to go in the direction of abstraction and to look at the bigger picture or interrelationships between things, ideas and concepts. This is referred to in NLP as chunking up. Examples of questions that would move in this direction would be:

- What is this an example of?
- For what purpose/intent?
- What will this do for you?

Asking these questions will allow us to elicit a layer of responses that are of a higher level of abstraction than animal. For example, we might say that animals are examples of “Living Things”, “Life”, “Transport”, “Food” etc. It should be immediately obvious that not all animals are “Food” or “Transport”. But if we started from “Food” or “Transport” and chunk down, we can certainly see how animals could be examples of these. Needless to say, we could chunk up from these to elicit a more abstract layer of responses.

The third is to move laterally from any concept within a layer. This referred to in NLP as Chunking Sideways and is a function of a 2 step process. The first step is to chunk up. The second step is then ask “What are other examples of this?” which essentially chunks down but laterally.

To illustrate, let’s say we would like to chunk sideways from the concept “Animal”. Put another way, we would like to generate a list of items that are on the same level abstraction as “Animal” but of a different logical type. From our earlier examples, Chunking up from “Animal” (Step 1) gets us, inter alia, “Living Things” and “Food”.

Let’s pick “Living Creatures” and ask “What are other forms of living things?” This might generate the list “Humans”, “Plants”, “Insects” and “Bacteria” which along with “Animals” are all examples of living things. Of course, if we had picked “Food” as the higher lever chunk to work off, we would derive a different list.

Having covered how the mechanics of how to traverse the Hierarchy of Ideas (Up, Down and Sideways), I would like to suggest three ways you can apply this.

The first is in facilitating communication. Most people have a preference about the range of specificity or abstraction at which they communicate. Some process information and communicate at the big picture level while others process information and communicate at the level of details. Of course, this does not mean that that one can only communicate at a particular level. There is usually a range within the continuum that one is comfortable with. Unfortunately, many of us have had the experience of communicating with someone who is operating at a level of specificity (or abstraction) that does not match ours. Perhaps you can remember a time when you asked someone

a question looking for a general response and got a 20 min answer complete with mind-numbing details. Conversely, you might have wanted a slightly more detailed response to your question than “It was ok”.

In this situation, one can facilitate communication (and build rapport in the process) by first matching their level (In NLP, we refer to this as pacing. You may wish to refer to the first section on rapport) before leading them in the direction you wish them to go by asking them the appropriate questions for chunking up, down or sideways.

This segues us into the second application. Most of us will be familiar with the interest-based model of conflict resolution and the 7 Element framework that comes out of Roger Fisher’s work. Essentially, one looks behind positions to identify interests, before creating other ways to meet those interests. Positions generally exist at a relatively low level of specificity. Eliciting interests involves the process of chunking up. It is to identify a more abstract layer(s) of needs that allows us to open up the space for resolution. Creating options is essentially the process of chunking sideways from the initial position.

If the initial position was “money”, and meeting this position was not possible, chunking up may reveal that the interest behind money is “feeling valued”. This then allows us to explore different ways to meet this interest which may include a promotion, enhanced benefits, a better office etc. In the parlance of the 7 elements, these are all possible options.

Sometimes, chunking up once may not surface an interest that is abstract enough to open up the space to resolve the matter. In these situations, one may have to chunk up a number of times until a sufficiently abstract need is identified before identifying other ways to meet that need.

The third application relates to agenda setting. There is of course no one correct way to set an agenda. Mediators however do generally agree that an agenda can be helpful to keep the discussion on track, and that when creating an agenda, the items listed should cover all relevant issues and be phrased neutrally. Unfortunately, most of the time, parties do not state their agenda items in a neutral fashion. A common item is “compensation”. Some may feel that listing “compensation” on the agenda presupposes that some fault is involved and may cause the other party to doubt the impartiality of the proceedings.

The prescription of course is for the mediator reframe this issue with a term that is neutral. This is often easier said than done and many mediators find this challenging to do in real time. A fairly simple process to assist mediators in doing this is to chunk up to create a more abstract layer of terms, some of which are likely to be more neutral than “compensation” and using that as the agenda item.

By way of illustration, if we chunk up, “compensation” can be an example of “Fault Acknowledgment” or “Payment” or “Money”. The latter two are more acceptable than “compensation” and can be more safely used on the agenda.

I invite readers to chunk up on agenda items that they may have found challenging in the past, just for the practice.

One final point before closing, just as others have a preferred range within the Hierarchy of Ideas to operate within, so do we. One can train ourselves to extend our range by getting into the habit of asking the questions to chunk up, down or sideways, as is appropriate.

To share a personal example, I used to be a details and small-chunk person. As such, I often did not see the big picture or the consequences of certain actions. Put simply, I used to miss the forest for the trees. After learning the Hierarchy of Ideas, I would ask myself the chunking up questions as I went about my day. Just doing this alone has assisted me in being able to see the picture better and to think more strategically. It does require time and effort, but then again, doesn't every skill worth having?

Thank you for reading. I hope readers found this entry both interesting and useful, and will be able to immediately apply some of the ideas. I look forward to sharing more about language in subsequent entries.


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