

Kluwer Mediation Blog

A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: The Meta-Model (Part 1)

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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](#)
2. [A Neuro-Linguist's Toolbox – Language: The Hierarchy of Ideas](#)

The first entry in this series looked at the NLP Communication Model. It is recommended that you read the entry on the NLP Communication Model before reading this entry.

By way of a brief recap, miscommunication can occur because our experience of our external environment is filtered by our neurology such that the resulting internal representations (our memories and experiences) become a shadow of reality. It is filtered once again when we seek use words to describe our internal representations; our words becoming a shadow of a shadow of reality. These filters essentially distort, generalize and delete our experience of the world.

These processes of distortion, generalization and deletion are vital in that they allow us to manage and cope with the large amounts of input that bombard our nervous system at any one point. They also make it possible for us to create and learn. For example, imagination and creativity is a function of our being able to distort reality in our mind and consider “What If?” Generalization allows us to learn from one event/instance and be able to apply in all other similar events.

Unfortunately, these processes can also have negative effects. For example, generalization may cause us to take an instance of someone's uncaring behavior and lead us to conclude that that person is uncaring. And when that person displays caring behavior, distortion causes us to change the meaning of that behavior into something that matches our generalization. Finally, deletion also allows us to ignore behaviors and information that do not match our generalization. In this way, these three filtering processes can also limit the richness of our experiences and trap us in

unhelpful mindsets.

From a mediation perspective, these processes form the perceptions and biases that we often find in parties (and sometimes ourselves!). NLP's way of dealing with these perceptions and biases is through the NLP Meta Model (not to be confused with the Meta Model of Mediation).

The Meta-Model was modeled from Virginia Satir's systemic family work. What the co-creators of NLP noticed was that when working with clients, Virginia Satir would ask questions that would often lead them to readjust their subjective realities. NLP's perspective is that since our subjective realities shape our behaviors, a readjustment in subjective realities can lead to an adjustment of behaviors, hopefully for the better.

Mediators, of course, already do this. For example our acts of reframing statements adjusts parties' subjective realities in a bid to move them closer to agreement. The NLP Meta Model provides mediators another tool in their tool box that they can use.

In this and the next entry, I will share some of these Meta-Model patterns and the questions we can ask to shift these realities. Before doing so, it is important to highlight 2 matters when using the Meta Model.

First, the Meta-Model is not a magic bullet. Do not expect a single question to make a complete shift in the speaker's mind. It is like a reframe. It can sometimes make a significant shift or you may need to string a number of interventions together to achieve the shift in subjective realities.

Secondly, asking these questions can sometimes be threatening as it causes the listener to question their subjective reality. It is therefore vital for a mediator to maintain rapport with the parties and utilize softening frames like "Help me understand how..." Or "Let me play devil's advocate here and ask you..."

Having said that, what follows are the first of three Meta-Model linguistic patterns that mediators may find helpful when seeking to adjust parties' subjective realities.

The first Meta-Model linguistic pattern is known as a mind-read. This is where the party makes a statement that purports to know what the other party is thinking or feeling.

An example would be "He doesn't care about the company". Many mediators will generally accept this statement and seek to gather more facts. Some might seek to reframe with a "So the company is important to you?" or acknowledge the emotion beneath with a "You must really feel upset about that".

The NLP Meta Model response is to find out the evidence for that statement by asking "How do you know he doesn't care?" Making the speaker identify the evidence achieves 2 things. First, it recovers data and secondly, it surfaces to the speaker's attention that this view is an attribution of intention on the part of the speaker and not reality. In an ideal situation, this question will get the speaker to acknowledge his subjective attribution and become more open to other realities.

The second Meta-Model linguistic statement is a connecting statement. Essentially, two concepts X and Y are subjectively connected. For example "He is a bad father because he comes home late every day." In this statement, a subjective connection is made between "Coming home late" and "Being a bad father".

The NLP Meta Model response is to question the connection between X and Y. The mediator might ask “How does coming home late mean he is a bad father?” The answer to this might get more information about the interests involved e.g. spending time with children. The mediator might also ask “In what ways can one come home late and still be a good father?” This question will cause the speaker to reconsider the connection made.

The third and last Meta-Model linguistic pattern is the lost performative. A lost performative refers to a statement, usually a value judgment, belonging to the speaker’s model of the world which is made as if it were a statement about the world itself. Put another way, the speaker takes rules that are true for him/her and states them as if they were true for everyone else. For example, “It’s bad to be unreliable” or “Being inconsistent is not good for business”.

There are two NLP Meta Model responses to the lost performative. The first is to ask “for whom?” This requires the speaker to identify the person the standard, belief or judgment would apply to. The second way is to ask “According to whom?” Both these responses seek to enable the speaker to identify him/herself as making the judgment and applying it to a specific person/context. This may then enable the speaker to be aware of the limits of the model of his/her world and allow for more choices.

By way of closing, some readers may be wondering how best to practice recognising and responding to Meta-Model patterns such that they can become second nature. From personal experience, I would recommend that readers first spend some time learning to recognise each of the 3 patterns in their daily interactions. For example, you could take one day identifying Mind Reads in the things they read, in the conversations they have and in their own speech. Once the mind is attuned to that specific pattern, one can then practice the correct responses consistently.

I hope readers have found this useful and will take the effort to practice recognising and responding to these patterns.

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