

PROGRAMMED TO SUCCEED

Reprint from Article in Edge Magazine October 2004 Richard Lewis

From its obscure origins in Silicon Valley in the 1970s, NLP the self styled 'science of achievement' is now being used by managers in across the globe. **Richard Lewis** looks at just some of the ways NLP can improve management performance.

NOT SO LONG AGO, PEOPLE WERE SELECTED FOR LEADERSHIP and management positions largely on the basis of their technical abilities. Now, increasingly, it is an individual's softer skills that mark them out for success in these roles. In a recent study into the factors that create outstanding work performance, Harvard University's Dr Daniel Goleman discovered, after analysing data from over 100 different companies, that a manager's ability to display a high awareness of others' needs and preferences and then powerfully influence and effectively communicate with them is twice as important in as their IQ and technical skills combined. This growing appreciation of the need for soft skills has led to a surge in demand for training methods that can develop managers' ability to understand, involve and inspire their staff. And, of the many different soft skills training options available, more and more employers are turning to NLP, a method that has been turbo-charging people's goal-achieving, influencing and communication skills across a range of industries for over 30 years.

WESTERN ORIGINS

NLP or Neuro-Linguistic Programming was developed on the West Coast of America in the mid-1970s by John Grinder, a Professor of Linguistics and Richard Bandler, an undergraduate with a special interest in computer science and psychotherapy. After studying how the leading communicators of the day were consistently achieving spectacular results with their clients, Grinder and Bandler came up with a definitive model of how the human mind works and how people achieve results or not in life. During the late 1970s the NLP model of achievement was applied across a range of businesses to successfully transform the skills, effectiveness and performance of their personnel. From its inception in Silicon Valley, NLP spread across America to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, New York and Washington. Today, there's hardly a single country or industry in which NLP technology is not being applied.

Despite its peculiar name, NLP isn't a grand scientific theory, but a series of easy-to-use techniques that help individuals to achieve their career and personal goals. The chief advantage of the NLP model is that it can be applied to simplify some of the more complicated

things in life, such as making sense of an individual's personality, inspiring consistent performance,

What is NLP?

Neuro-Linguistic Programming gets its name first from the fact that our understanding of the world and situations comes to us through the 'neural windows' of sight, sound, touch and gut-feelings hence 'neuro'. Second, we use language in all its forms to both inform us of situations and then influence those situations hence 'linguistic'. Third, we appear to achieve our results in life by running strategies similar to computer programs which are simply a particular sequence of thoughts, words and actions hence 'programming'.

reducing a problem to its key elements and influencing and communicating with previously unreceptive people. As such, the NLP method has near universal appeal and is now being successfully applied in a diverse range of fields including the theatre, sports, medicine, coaching and leadership and management.

NLP is far more than just positive thinking. It is a solid approach to achievement that enables people to assess situations, set achievable outcomes, use language to understand and inform situations and take effective action. In the business world in particular, these four skills have consistently helped leaders and managers to improve their ability to control their emotions, understand and influence others, and meet compelling goals.

MANAGING EMOTIONS

In November 2003, Business 2.0 published the shocking findings of a series of studies by psychometrics guru Professor Robert Hogan, which found that 55% of managers were unfit for their jobs because of their inability to handle the dark side to their personalities. This is one of the key areas in which NLP can pay real dividends.

Ian was a fiercely ambitious and hard working sales and marketing manager who was renowned within his company for his frequent and seemingly unprovoked angry outbursts. Ian's 'little problem' reached a crisis point for him when he was overlooked for promotion to the senior management team for the second time in two years. Recognising his tantrums were jeopardising his career, he began a series of NLP sessions in a bid to deal with his anger. NLP suggests that our emotional state is a combination of what we are thinking about and how our body is responding. By deliberately changing the images, sounds, words and feelings in our heads or our posture, breathing and muscle tone in our bodies

we can change our feelings almost instantly.

During his NLP sessions, Ian's coach worked to teach him how to handle his feelings of anger as and when they arose. At the outset, Ian was asked to take his mind back to his last angry outburst and to describe his anger. How did the anger make him feel? Where exactly was it located in his body? What did the feeling resemble its size, colour, consistency, temperature, movement and sounds? Ian's answers revealed that when he was angry he experienced a sensation in his chest that felt like a burning hot crimson steel fist that was about the size of a bowling ball. Ian's coach then asked what would have to happen to the steel fist in order for it to feel tolerable. Without hesitation he responded that it would have to transform itself into a cool moist light blue bath sponge.

Ian was then encouraged to picture a scene that he knew would make him angry in his case, a forthcoming managers meeting in which hapless colleagues would begin to justify themselves at length. As he felt the steel fist of anger rising in his breast, Ian was told to transform the burning hot steel fist into a cool, light-blue sponge and to experience how comfortable it felt.

By giving form to our uncomfortable feelings and then transforming their imagined physical characteristics, NLP helps in the management of negative states such as anger, frustration, intolerance, impatience, nervousness or stage fright. As a result, it buys managers time to get to the heart of the issue. Within six months of his NLP training, having successfully transformed his relationship with his colleagues and team members by learning to manage his emotional state in the moment and concentrate on doing his job well, Ian was finally

NLP enables managers to control negative emotions such as anger, helping them to avoid destructive outbursts and tantrums.

appointed to the senior management team at the third attempt. The NLP method's capacity to improve people's influencing and communication skills is also highly relevant to leadership and management. Jill was an experienced finance manager who was becoming increasingly frustrated by her inability to connect with other people in her organisation in particular her boss. As a manager, Jill recognised that she was expected to achieve results with and through others and to be able to get on

with her customers and colleagues of all levels. In a bid to boost her career prospects, Jill started an NLP course. At the beginning of her first session Jill remarked forlornly that it was as if she 'spoke a different language' to most other people in her company. Little did she realise that this

By recognising and respecting other people's metaprograms, managers can ensure they speak to them in terms they like to hear

throwaway comment was truer than she could have imagined. NLP explains that a large part of our individual and highly characteristic ways of thinking, acting, talking and behaving are due to personal tendencies or 'metaprograms' that operate out of our conscious awareness. By teaching people to identify their own and others' metaprograms, NLP enables them to alter their behaviour to enjoy greater influence. The four most important metaprograms are an individual's affiliation, assessment, focus and time tendencies. The ability to identify an individual's preferences in each of these key areas gives the NLP-adept manager a four-letter code that provides an invaluable insight into that person's personality and character. An individual's affiliation dictates if they

"NLP CAN ENABLE US TO GIVE FORM TO OUR UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS AND TRANSFORM THEIR IMAGINED PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS"

are extravert (E) or introvert (I) whether they prefer to think, work and relax on their own or with others. Their assessment metaprogram governs whether they are a sensor (S) or intuitor (N) whether they prefer to make sense of a situation by looking at individual details or taking in the whole picture. A person's focus tells us if they are a thinker (T) or a feeler (F) whether they prefer to focus upon the outcome or on the people and process aspects of a task. The time metaprogram determines whether they are judgers (J) or perceivers (P) if they need to work to a timetable or would rather just go with the flow.

TARGETED BEHAVIOUR

After learning this, Jill rapidly came to the conclusion that she was an INTP she tended to be an introverted, big-picture, goal-oriented and flexible time individual. This put her at odds with most of the people that reported into her, and gave her the exact opposite profile from her boss, who she recognised was an ESJF extrovert, thorough, process-driven and structured. This realisation enabled Jill to transform her relationship with her boss in a matter of weeks by simply honouring his ESFJ preferences. She made a point of running issues by him in conversation rather than sending him a customary

memo (thus addressing his extraversion), explaining ideas to him in terms that he already understood and trusted (thus addressing his sensing), and considering the process needs and human impact of projects when making decisions (thus addressing his feeling). In addition, Jill began to include detailed time-lines in all proposals, make that extra effort to get to meetings and submit her reports and expenses on time, and to keep him in the loop when facing difficulties rather than waiting for a full-blown crisis to develop (thus addressing his judging). By raising her awareness of these four basic metaprograms in others, Jill was able to structure her words and behaviour to suit not only the specific needs of her boss but also each of her direct

"NLP CAN HELP BRING OUT THE KEY JOB CHARACTERISTICS THAT HAVE TO BE MET FOR AN INDIVIDUAL TO BE MOTIVATED AND ENGAGED"

reports and her colleagues. Her newfound awareness and ability to connect with others so impressed her boss that when he retired the following year he recommended her as his replacement, and she was promoted to head of finance.

MANAGING MORALE

Another area in which NLP can assist managers is as a coaching tool to help achieve and maintain job satisfaction by defining career goals. NLP recognises that we are all motivated by our values though many of us are unclear what they actually are. Unless we make the effort to bring them out into the open and commit them to paper, we run the risk of ignoring them, allowing them to become conflicted or dashed by others.

Ash was a software testing supervisor who undertook NLP coaching because he felt 'stuck in a rut' and like a 'hamster in a wheel' at work. He had no idea what he would rather be doing, only that his current job wasn't right for him and that he was just going through the motions of work. In such instances, NLP coaching can help bring out into the open the job characteristics that have to be met if an individual is to be fully motivated and engaged.

To begin with, Ash was asked to list the things that were really important to him in a job. His responses included recognition, challenge, variety, stimulation, good colleagues and good working atmosphere. He was then asked to come up with three additional things that encompassed everything he'd said so far and got to the very heart of what was really important to him. He settled on freedom, respect and money.

Ash's coach then asked him to think of a position that existed in or out of the

company that would honour all of these values. He immediately began to describe a job that his firm had been thinking about creating over the previous six months. In order to help Ash maximise his chances of being appointed to the new position, his coach led him through the six point POTERE outcome-setting process which helps us to program our minds for success by describing our outcomes in a way that encourages their achievement. POTERE stands for positive, own part, tangible, evidence, resources and effects, so Ash was first of all encouraged to think about what he wanted to be and to then write it in a single positive line, as if he'd already achieved it. He was then asked to describe his own part in achieving his aim the first three steps he would take. Next he was asked what tangible results would indicate that he had achieved his outcome, and what evidence would let him know that he was on target as the weeks and months went by. Finally, Ash was prompted to consider what resources time, money, training, experience and advice he would need to succeed and what effects both good and bad achieving his outcome would have on him, his family, friends, colleagues and community. After this simple ten minute process, Ash felt a new confidence that he could achieve his outcomes by following the roadmap he had described. By simply verbalising and writing down the steps he needed to take toward his goal, Ash's dreams seemed suddenly attainable. He returned to work revitalised, his feelings of lethargy and constraint replaced by a newfound energy as he set out to achieve his goals.

Of course, these are just a few of the ways NLP can be applied in work situations to boost individual and team performance. By understanding how different people's minds operate the programs that govern them managers can apply NLP in a whole host of ways to essentially reprogram their staff to behave more effectively, be it through goal setting, leadership, problem solving, relationship and team building or better communication. As the wider business community wakes up to real benefits NLP can bring, a growing number of MBA programmes are including the study of this 'science of achievement' within their courses. This trend looks set to continue, because when it comes to soft skills that deliver hard results, NLP is proven to succeed.

RICHARD LEWIS is a certified NLP Trainer, Executive Coach and Director of Organisational Psychology Consultancy Q-OPD International.
www.qopd.co.uk