TOOLS OF THE TRADE

In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she provides an introduction to NLP

Neuro Linguistic Programming, or NLP as it is commonly known, is widely used in coaching. Its fundamental principle is that it is possible to re-programme the brain to change behaviour mainly by visual, auditory and kinaesthetic processes. It comprises an abundance of theories and processes, some of which we will explore in future articles. This month's article is an overview of the techniques, how they work and their application in coaching.

NLP was devised in the 1970s by psychologists Richard Bandler and John Grinder, whose theories grew mainly from the work of psychologists Milton Erickson, Fritz Perls, Virginia Satyr and other prominent psychologists of the era.

After an acrimonious split from Bandler, Grinder went on to develop New Code NLP firstly with Judith DeLozier, then with Carmen Bostic St Clair. DeLozier also continued to develop New Code with Robert Dilts, a practitioner originally trained by Grinder and Bandler.

The main difference with New Code is that, instead of trying to re-programme the subject from the outside in, it attempts to reach the unconscious mind to effect a re-programming from the inside out. This is because it was found that the conscious re-p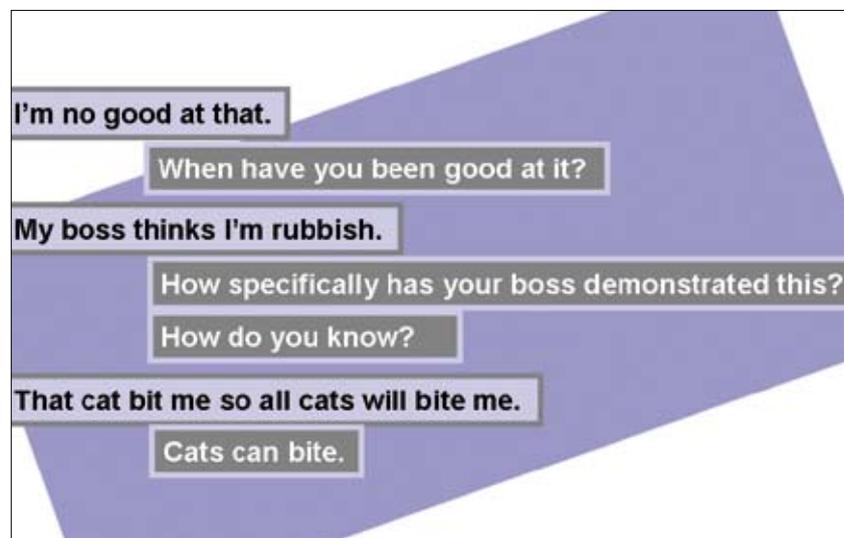rogramming did not last – eventually the unconscious mind would fight back and the new state achieved through the re-programming would fail.

The most widely used NLP processes are Meta Model, Mirroring and Matching, VAK, Perceptual Positions, Logical Levels, Anchors and Time Line, some of which are summarised below. In addition, there are some New Code techniques that appear to cause changes in brainwave patterns akin to meditation, purporting to deliver a higher performance state.

The **Meta Model** examines the subject's words and phraseology to identify deletions, distortions, generalisations and limiting beliefs, and then to re-frame them into less limiting words, for example (see the diagram below).

This is highly useful as long as the practitioner bears in mind that a limiting belief must be honoured as real because it is real to the subject. The coach's job is to ask questions that will enable his coachees to gain new awareness, not to dismiss their statements as limiting beliefs, which would be quite out of place in a coaching style.

Mirroring and **Matching** are core practices in NLP and are applied to words, tone, body language and size, in terms of talking about a situation in the same sized 'chunks' as the subject. There is particular emphasis on mirroring body language, including the claim that rapport can

I'm no good at that.
When have you been good at it?
My boss thinks I'm rubbish.
How specifically has your boss demonstrated this?
How do you know?
That cat bit me so all cats will bite me.
Cats can bite.

be created in this way, even from across a room.

My own experiments over the last eight years appear to show that, while people who are in rapport do indeed mirror body language, this results from a relationship created mainly by eye contact, tone of voice, choice of words and – most important of all – the intention behind the words. If the intention of the manager or coach is genuinely focused on the development and well being of the subject, and their communication skills are sufficient to enable this, rapport will be created and mirrored in body language. If the former aspects are absent, no amount of artificially mirrored body language will create rapport.

Indeed, physical mirroring may have the opposite effect, by feeling 'weird' to the one being mirrored. The effort involved can also detract from one's ability to be 'present' with, and listen to, another person.

A further question is whether it is healthy in any relationship to put oneself in the 'supplicant' position by copying anything at all; it is akin to agreeing with a statement we do not believe in order to curry favour. We tend to like and respect people who are congruent, honest and have a strong sense of self, and this applies as much to those who work for us or want to sell us something as it does to those we wish to impress.

Therefore, the idea of making our body language copy someone else's instead of reflecting our own innate self would seem to be the least effective way of building a strong relationship.

I would suggest that this is because words are formed by the conscious mind, while body language arises from the unconscious and, if faked, may send out two incongruent messages, one from the conscious and a clashing one from the unconscious.

Where mirroring *can* be effective is in repeating people's words back to them, or matching the 'chunks' size of what they are saying. Both are a form of giving attention and demonstrating listening, without risking incongruence because they both derive from the conscious mind.

VAK is a basis for awareness in NLP and divides people into three main types in terms of their responses: **V**isual, **A**uditory and **K**inaesthetic.

Some people have a tendency to one or more of these types, for example a visually-orientated person would speak in visual terms, such as "what I am looking for is…", while a primarily auditory person might have difficulty answering the question "how do you see it?" and would need to be asked "what is this telling you?".

There are two more types: Gustatory ("leaves a bad taste") and Olfactory ("something smells fishy").

Together with Mirroring and Matching, VAK provides the tools for 'calibration' – assessing the subject's state and using the latter processes to alter it. As this invites judgment, care must be exercised by the coach not to extend the judgment to the subject's content or ask leading questions, which would be contrary to the ethos of coaching.

Most people seem able to respond to all the five types of questions. Where the theory is highly useful to coaches is in encouraging their coachees to approach an issue from different perspectives, by asking similar questions from each VAK sense or re-framing the question in another VAK type if the coachee seems to have difficulty answering it.

NLP propounds some fascinating theories about how the brain and emotions work. The processes can be useful in raising awareness and helping people get clear on their

patterns of behaviour. Caution must be exercised by the coach (or coaching-style manager) not to become distracted by a subject's linguistic patterns and movements, as this can result in incongruence and a failure to listen and respond empathetically, and not to make judgments about the subject's beliefs or statements.

As is the case with most psychological interventions, no scientific testing of NLP has taken place, nor results measured. In this article, where I have advocated caution about a process, this is subjective and equally unmeasured and is not intended to reflect the views of this magazine or the coaching world in general.

There are evangelists of NLP who elevate the practice to a quasi-religious status, practitioners who attempt to manipulate people with the techniques and, then again, many congruent, intelligent and highly effective coaches who use the techniques creatively, rationally and with excellent results, as Deni Lyall's accompanying set of case histories in "Tools of the trade at work" expertly demonstrates. ∎

Further reading

1 Ready R and Burton K *Neuro Linguistic Programming for Dummies* John Wiley & Sons 2004

2 McDermott I, O'Connor J *Practical NLP for Managers* Gower Publishing Company 1997

3 Bandler R, Grinder J *Frogs into Princes: Introduction to Neurolinguistic Programming* Eden Grove Editions; revised edition 1990

4 Knight S *NLP at Work: the Difference that Makes a Difference in Business* Nicholas Brealey Publishing; 3rd edition 2008

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