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### **Article: What is NLP?**

The brief leaflet has been produced by Pace Personal Development to those new to NLP some information on the definition, background and application of NLP.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) has many strengths, but a clear and helpful name isn't one of them! Fortunately, it can be defined in straightforward terms as "the study of excellence".

### **Overview**

NLP was born when a linguist called John Grinder and a mathematician called Richard Bandler asked themselves a simple yet fascinating question: What is it that makes the difference between somebody who is merely competent at any given skill, and somebody who excels at the same skill?

People typically answer that question in one of two ways. Either that some people have natural gifts or talents for a particular skill, or that practice and experience is what counts.

NLP sidesteps these answers by focusing not on what has made the difference in the past between two people of different abilities, but on what can be done now to turn the competent person's performance into one of excellence.

NLP proposes that there are three elements to any skill or behaviour.

- First, there is the external behaviour. That is, what the person actually does and says.
- Second, there is the person's internal computation. That is, what they think, and the way in which they think.
- And third, there is the person's internal state. That is, what and how they feel.

Each of these three elements can be examined in detail. A movement, for example, can be reduced to the level of micro-muscle movements. An internal image can be identified by size, position, colour, clarity, contrast and so on. An internal voice by the words themselves, tone of voice, volume, location and similar. A feeling can be described by position, intensity, temperature, direction of movement...

### **Modelling**

By following this process, it is possible to build up an extremely comprehensive model of any excellent behaviour. This model of excellence can then be acquired by the competent person simply by reversing the process: the competent person makes the same movements, images, voices, feelings.

In some cases, we may need to expand our model to include such things as beliefs and what NLP call 'perceptual filters': the ways in which our past experiences affect the way we now perceive the world.

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Modelling need not involve somebody else. It is equally possible to model yourself. Suppose, for example, that you feel nervous when you have to speak to a large group of people. Instead of finding somebody who is a confident public speaker and modeling them, you could simply find a different situation in which you feel confident (perhaps talking to two or three people) and model yourself in that context.

NLP is the name given to the set of tools, techniques and approaches used to carry out this transformation.

The type of modeling we have described has long been applied to the objective world. Most of the science we now call engineering for example, came about by people studying what worked in natural structures, working out the principles involved and then applying those same principles to new structures.

NLP simply applies the same process to excellence in people. It studies the underlying structures of the skills, behaviours and experiences of excellence. And then assists people in using those structures effectively. Thus NLP is sometimes defined “the study of the structure of subjective experience.”

### **Applications**

NLP has been successfully applied to the fields of business, sport, therapy, education, and the performing arts. The tools it offers can be applied equally well to any human activity.

In modeling examples of excellence in fields as diverse as hypnotherapy, tennis, training, acting and team management, NLP has also developed a number of specific models of excellence which are now considered part of NLP. Examples include a highly successful phobia cure, an elegant format for resolving internal conflict, and an impressive format for running streamlined meetings. These models are typically taught as part of NLP training programmes.

### **Presuppositions**

The work done by using NLP has also resulted in a number of attitudes, or presuppositions, which seem to be useful when aiming for excellence. Note that NLP doesn't claim that these presuppositions are true, merely that it is useful to behave as if they are.

The distinction is an important one. NLP doesn't insist that you change your beliefs about the world; merely that you be prepared to experiment with other approaches. It's rather like catching a train to an important meeting...it may not be true that British Rail timetables are unreliable, but – if it is important to be at the meeting on time – it might be useful to behave as if they are, and phone first to check that the train is running.

Among the presuppositions normally presented on NLP training are:

The map is not the territory

In other words, the description of an experience is not the same as the experience itself. We live in a world which we pay a great deal of attention to words. We often behave as if words were a

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direct and undeniable accurate description of experience. NLP invites us to make a distinction between the words, and the experience they describe.

Choice is always better than no choice

Most of us have an understandable tendency, when we succeed in something, to view our successful approach as the 'right' approach to use in future. NLP suggests that, even when we have behaviours that work perfectly, it is still useful to have other options; to be able to choose from several successful behaviours. That way, if one of them turns out not to work, we have other successful behaviours to call on.

There is no failure, only feedback

When things don't work out the way we'd hoped they would, a common response is to consider that we 'failed'. NLP offers an alternative view – that what actually happened is neither good nor bad, but merely information. Think back to when you learnt to drive. You almost certainly crunched the gears at some point. That didn't mean that you failed as a driver and would never be able to operate the gearbox; it simply meant that changing gear in that particular way didn't produce the result you wanted. You then used that information to improve the way that changed gears.

The meaning of the communication is the response it produces

This follows on from the previous presupposition. If our communications don't produce the responses we would like, we can simply accept that our communication produced the result it did and decide what we would like to do now. The first approach leaves us powerless; we are in the hands of the other person. The latter approach enables us to treat the response as information, and change our own behaviour accordingly. This places us in the powerful position of a flexible communicator willing to take responsibility for achieving the things we would like. (We use the word 'responsibility' in its literal sense; the ability to respond.)

You'll hear quite a lot in NLP about three ways of doing things. NLP takes the view that one option is (obviously) no choice at all, two options is a dilemma and that choice begins only when you have a minimum of three approaches. Having at least three powerful approaches to any goal, and being willing to use whichever option is most appropriate at the time, is what NLP refers to as behavioural flexibility.

### **Behavioural Flexibility**

One of the most powerful forms of behavioural flexibility is what NLP calls 1st, 2nd and 3rd person shifts

When we are experiencing things through our own eyes and ears, we are said to be associated, or in the 1st person. If we now wonder how somebody else is experiencing, and 'put ourselves in their shoes', we are said to be in the 2nd person. And if we see and hear both ourselves and other people as if we were an observer, we are said to be disassociated or in the 3rd person.

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We all of us switch between 1st, 2nd and 3rd person quite naturally, often without really being aware that we are doing it. NLP teaches the skill of deliberately shifting consciousness in this way in order to gather information – to literally see things from another point of view.

### **That Name!**

And where did that awful name come from? Despite the numerous and amusing apocryphal stories, the truth is that the co-founders for NLP, Grinder and Bandler, were in a long-cabin, high in the hills behind Santa Cruz, pulling together the insights and discoveries that were to result in the book *The Structure of Magic*. Towards the end of the marathon 36-hour session, they sat down with a bottle of Californian white wine and asked themselves “what on earth shall we call it?”.

Grinder says the result was “Neuro’ because the patterns we were discovering seemed to operate at the level of our neurology, ‘linguistic’ because of the ways in which our language patterns reveal and impact our neurology, and ‘programming’ because the new discoveries enable us to break free of the way we have been programmed by socialization, and offers us new choices.”

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