

Everyone's a Foreigner!

Have you ever been in a business meeting with a colleague and afterwards commented on how well it went? If your colleague looked at you in amazement and said it was a complete waste of time you may have found yourself wondering whether you were in the same meeting. The NLP answer is that you were in two separate meetings, because you were each filtering the experience differently.

A basic principle of NLP is that everyone has their own unique 'map of the world', and that everyone's map is equally valid. Put another way, our experience is filtered through our beliefs and values, memories, language and cognitive processes in such a way that the resulting perceptions are highly individual.

Imagine a person who regards himself as very objective, scientific and down-to-earth. We'll call him John. John believes that there is a 'rational explanation' for everything and that anything that can't be scientifically proven is not true. Suppose John goes to a party and gets into a group of people discussing UFO's and aliens. The person beside him turns to John and says, "I was abducted by aliens."

How do you think John would react? Is he going to say, "How amazing! I didn't think that was possible. Please tell me about it." Or is he more likely to conclude that this person is lying, drunk, attention-seeking or otherwise mentally defective? The latter seems more likely, doesn't it? John will make sense of this person's behaviour in the light of his own belief that what they are saying cannot be true.

So, what we believe tends to shape our perception of reality. The old saying, "I'll believe it when I see it", would actually be more accurately expressed as, "I'll see it when I believe it." Some people have more open minds than others and can challenge their beliefs, but we all have beliefs that we REALLY believe and would never think to challenge.

Often, when someone behaves in a way that we find unacceptable or incomprehensible, it is because we are attempting to make sense of that person's behaviour using our own filters. This is often noticeable when dealing with people from other countries and cultures. Since common values can be expressed in diverse ways, we often find that people in other countries don't do what we expect and it's a common mistake to assume that they don't share our values.

For example, time is valued in many cultures but the way the value is expressed can be different: In northern Europe, people demonstrate their value of time by not taking up your time. In southern Europe, people demonstrate the same value by giving of their own time. So, when a northern European businessman visits colleagues in southern Europe and is taken out for a long, leisurely lunch, he may conclude that

they don't value time because they are taking up his time with what he regards as an unnecessary activity. They may feel insulted if, when the return visit is made, he responds with cold sandwiches during a meeting. He is not giving his time and therefore gives the impression that he does not value his colleagues.

Sometimes, there are fundamental differences in the values. Last year I visited in Singapore, to co-train with a friend. He had warned me that the temperature was 30 degrees, humidity was high and that I should bring my thinnest clothes. I was very surprised then, to spend every training day shivering with cold, because the air-conditioning was turned to around 18 degrees.. It took me a week to figure it out; a week of going outside to get warm; of watching in amazement all the locals bringing sweatshirts to class. Finally I understood - if you live in a cold climate, as we do in Britain, you grow up with a fundamental value that warm = good. In hot climates the reverse is true, cool = good. It's that simple. So when my friend comes to England to work alongside me, I shall be telling him to bring light clothing, because it may be cold outside, but our training rooms are warm - especially in the winter!

So, to understand the behaviour of others, it can be helpful to ask yourself, "What must that person believe, in order to behave in that way?" Or you could ask the person, but they may not consciously know the answer. So stay open to ideas, beware of forming negative judgments, especially in foreign countries. Give yourself a new filter - "Everyone has positive intentions" - and look at their behaviour in a different light. Above all, remember that even the person who grew up next door to you has had different experiences and developed different values. Fundamentally, everyone's a foreigner!

Dianne Lowther