

Communications using the Meta-model

As a business consultant as well as Certified Trainer of NLP, I am often asked 'How can NLP be useful in business?' I think that there are three main areas where we can apply NLP to business. They are self-management, communications and modelling excellence. The area that interests most people is communications. Whatever position you hold, in whatever type of organisation, it is likely that part of your job involves communication with others. It's also likely that that part of the job could be a source of some stress and frustration, as information is easily distorted or sent to the wrong people or arrives too late to be useful.

The two biggest complaints I hear from employees in the companies I work with are 'Nobody told us' and 'Nobody asked us'. Communication is vitally important for business success and people need to feel that they are informed, involved, consulted and listened to. The larger the organisation, the more difficult this is, and the more likely that individuals get the impression that their voice isn't being heard.

I believe that one of the reasons for this is that frequently when we are having what passes for a conversation with someone else, we are either not fully listening or we make so many assumptions about what is being said that we do not learn anything new from what we are hearing. We simply use it as further support for our (already established) point of view.

Let's go back to basics. We have five sensory systems which process information from the outside world and turn it into perceptions. The amount of information available to us is way in excess of what we can usefully handle; therefore it has to go through a filtering process to sift out the information which is relevant, useful or interesting. There are many types of filters, some are simple functions of the nervous system, and others such as our beliefs and values are created as a result of experience. Our beliefs filter our experience very effectively: Imagine two people meeting at a party. The first person, John, regards himself as objective, level-headed, down-to-earth and sensible. The conversation gets around to UFOs and aliens. John laughs at this discussion. He is convinced that there is no intelligent life on other planets. Another person in the group, Peter, says to John 'Well, as a matter of fact, I was abducted by aliens'.

What do you imagine John's first reaction is going to be? To laugh some more? Accuse Peter of having had too much to drink? Call Peter a liar? You probably wouldn't expect him to say 'Really? Wow! I didn't think that was possible. You must tell me all about it.' Why not? Because John is going to make sense of Peter's statement through the light of his own filters. And this is precisely what we all do, most of the time, even with much more trivial topics.

We filter our experiences to support what we already believe to be true. The more deeply held a belief is, the harder it is to challenge it. The old saying 'I'll believe it when I see it', would be much more accurately expressed as 'I'll see it when I believe it'.

So most of the time when we are engaged in conversation, we end up with an impression of what was said that is incomplete, inaccurate or both. Not all of this is a result of the listening – what we say is also filtered to make our conversation concise and easy to follow. NLP has a lot to offer in improving this situation. The tool I find most useful for understanding someone else's point of view and recovering what has been lost in the filtering process, is known as the Meta model.

It is essentially a set of questions that can be used to challenge incomplete or inaccurate statements and recover the meaning that has been lost to the filters. The result of using it is that you can help people to be more precise and specific in what they say, and sometimes help them to view their experience more constructively.

The Meta model is usually divided into three parts that correspond with the three actions of the filters: Deletion, Distortion and Generalisation.

Deletion

There are several different kinds of deletion. One of the most common forms of deletion is heard in business as comments like 'Communication is terrible at present' or 'There's a complete lack of teamwork' or 'performance is up this month'. What these statements have in common is that they have deleted information about what is actually being done and covered it up with an abstract noun. For example, the word communication replaces details about who is communicating what to whom (or not!). To recover these details, simply ask 'Who is not communicating about what?' or 'What work should the team be doing together?' or 'Who is performing well at what?' Simply ask. But since this is not the kind of question that people get asked regularly, you should take care in how you ask. It must be done with rapport, you must demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in the details, otherwise you risk sounding like the Spanish Inquisition!

Another common form of deletion is where the information about who is doing something is lost. For example 'They don't listen to me' or 'She didn't invite me to the meeting' or 'They turned up late'. You may think you know who is being referred to, but sometimes it's a good idea to check. The ubiquitous 'they' is usually worth challenging, to find out whether or not the speaker actually knows whom they are referring to! In this case all you have to ask is: 'Who specifically?'

Sometimes this kind of deletion is paired up with a further type, known as an unspecified verb. This is when the details of how something was done are filtered off, as in 'He rejected my idea' or 'They upset us' or 'She ruined that project'. Again we may think we know what is meant by each of these statements – and we may be wrong again! Find out more by asking 'How specifically?' In the former case you may find that what 'he' said about the speaker's idea was he needed more time to consider it.

Of course, if you are going to ask these questions, there has to be a purpose. You will quickly lose a lot of goodwill from friends and colleagues if you start challenging every deletion you hear. It is probably most useful to use this kind of approach in interviews, coaching sessions, counselling and investigation of training and organisational development needs.

Distortion

The second area of the Meta-model deals with distortion. I should emphasise that this is unconscious distortion as a result of unconscious filters, not any wilful distortion of facts. One of the most common forms of distortion is 'mind-reading', where a person claims to know someone else's feelings or thoughts, as in 'You don't like me' or 'He's angry with me' or 'They won't agree'. Sometimes these judgements are made on valid information, but if you suspect that they are simply invented you can ask 'How do you know?' Again, done with rapport and genuine interest, this can be a powerful question that could bring someone to a useful realisation that they actually have no reason to assume hostility from another person (or assume anything else!)

Another form of distortion is when opinions and value judgements are expressed without being attributed to anyone. These may be heard as comments such as 'You should work hard all the time' or 'It's not a good idea to throw away those files' or 'It's best to keep an open mind'. None of these comments are presented as a subjective judgement, but rather as objective fact. All proverbs also come into this category. A statement like this may be preventing someone from thinking for himself. To challenge it, a good question to ask is 'Who says?' or you could use 'According to whom?' There is, as with all Meta-model questions a risk of this sounding aggressive, so ensure that you are in rapport before asking.

A third kind of distortion comes when something is taken to have a meaning that may not be accurate. For example 'I didn't get the promotion. The boss doesn't like me.' Or 'Sales are down. The product range is awful this season.' In neither case does the one statement necessarily imply the other, but the speaker is taking the two to be connected in this way. There are two ways that this can be challenged. First you can challenge the logic. For example, 'How does your not getting promoted mean that the boss doesn't like you?' or 'How does a drop in sales mean that there's something wrong with the product range?' The other way to challenge this would be to focus on the counter example. For example 'Are there other people whom the boss likes that didn't get promoted either?' or 'Have sales ever fallen when the product range was good?' Either way, to challenge this type of distortion

will focus attention on faulty deductions and get back to what is actually known as fact. This can be really useful in problem solving and counselling situations where there seems to be no way forward and no choices. Challenging the distortions will usually open up some possibilities.

Generalisation

The third area of the Meta-model deals with generalisations. Generalisations are useful; they give us the ability to spot patterns and to apply experience in one situation to another similar one. However, they also form the basis of prejudice and narrow-mindedness, so it can also be useful to challenge them on occasion. The most common form of generalisations involve words like never, always, everyone, no-one, all. For example 'It always rains in Manchester?' or 'Nobody ever listens to me?' or 'All salespeople are extraverts'. Clearly these statements are untrue, but many people act as if their generalisations were true and miss opportunities and possibilities because of it. The 'rule of thumb' here is that all generalisations are untrue – including this one! The way to challenge generalisations is simple: you echo back, 'Always?' or 'Nobody? Ever?' or 'All of them?' (with a suitable amount of incredulity). Alternatively you could look for the counter example, as in 'Is it ever fine in Manchester?' or 'Has anybody ever listened to you?' or 'Are there any salespeople who are introverts?'

I would urge particular care when challenging generalisations. Often when a person says something like 'Nobody ever listens to me' (especially if it's said with some feeling) it's an indicator that somebody in particular is not listening to something important right now. The person may be feeling undervalued or rejected and a smart response like 'What nobody? Ever?' may not be the most tactful thing you can say! In that case, treat it like a deletion and ask 'Who in particular is not listening to you?'

There are other kinds of deletions, distortions and generalisations. The ones I have discussed here are some of the most common I have encountered in business. The overall effect of the questions I have suggested is to challenge the validity of the statement and encourage the speaker to be more precise, more specific in what they are telling you. With practice you will be able to avoid some of the common frustrations of communications at work – such as preparing a report and being told afterwards 'That wasn't what I wanted' or tailoring a presentation to suit what you had been told about the audience, only to discover that the information was incorrect. Using Meta-model questions won't entirely remove the subjectivity from a point of view, but it may bring you closer to understanding what is really being said – and what is really meant!

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