

Getting the Connection

I was talking to a friend about her business mentor. "I love working with her", my friend said. "I feel like she really 'gets' me".

Whilst the pedantic old fogey in me deplores this abuse of the English language, the psychologist in me can't help but pursue this line of thinking. What is it in the communication between two people that creates this valuable sense that the other person just 'gets' you? Is it magic, or something more scientific?

On the surface it might be tempting to think that it's a simple case of shared experiences. I'm fairly sure it's more than that. How often have you discussed a shared experience with a friend or colleague only to be disappointed that they hadn't felt what you felt or had interpreted events very differently. No, this is more than 'you had to be there'.

So does the connection come from similar personalities? To some extent maybe. But how often have you realised that the person who was driving you crazy with their unreasonable behaviour turned out to have the same personality profile as you? It often turns out that people with similar personalities rub each other up the wrong way and find it quite hard to connect.

What about values? Does having the same values create that sense that someone else really understands who you are? No, not necessarily. For most people, values are outside of conscious awareness. So you and I may share a value but it's possible that neither of us knows we have the value and therefore can't be aware that we share it.

What I think is the most important factor in that affirming sense that another person really understands me, is the use of language: the particular patterns of speech that match the way I think and communicate, both inside my head and in the outside world.

And this is good news, because it means that it's possible to create a meaningful connection with another person without having to pry into their personal life, their past history or their private opinions.

By paying attention to the specific language a person uses, it's possible to unlock the patterns driving the way they think and communicate. And if you know that, you really do know what makes them tick!

If you know NLP, you've probably already realised that I'm talking about metaprogrammes. Metaprogrammes are the structural filters on everyday experience that show up as patterns in language and behaviour. They are what the LAB Profile measures.

Metaprogrammes are patterns in the ways that a person thinks, acts and speaks. They are important because they are independent of WHAT a person is discussing and shed light on HOW that person is thinking and speaking. Although metaprogrammes are specific to a context, they are still very useful in understanding what is driving a person in a particular situation.

Let's do an example. If you're the kind of person who likes to get on with the job, to get started and make progress, you like to DO something, then certain patterns of speaking will connect with you.

Suppose you're about to make a presentation. You're all prepared and keen to get started. If the person introducing you were to say, "When you're ready..." that probably would jar slightly. You wouldn't be likely to feel that they understood you well.

Suppose the person introducing you turned to you with a swift 'the floor is yours' gesture and urged, "Go for it!" Would that be a better connection with your frame of mind?

And if you're not so proactive in your approach, if you prefer to take your time, wait and see a bit, think things over, am I right in thinking that the gentle, "When you're ready..." would match your style more effectively?

Now that's just one metaprogramme. It's rare that only one metaprogramme is relevant at a time. Usually, there are several in operation. Let's add in the towards/away from motivation pattern.

If you're a proactive type and you like to get on with the job then 'go for it' will work nicely if you're also Towards motivated in that context. But if you were Away From motivated, 'Don't hesitate' might be more appropriate.

I could go on, I could combine 3 or 4 metaprogrammes to show you how the meaning doesn't change but the form of language can be endlessly varied to suit different combinations. One of them would strike the right note for you; the rest would seem boring, contrived, clichéd or shallow. I could only know which one is the 'right' one by listening to you talk and observing your responses.

In general, all of this happens below conscious awareness. When someone 'speaks your language' you're unlikely to realise that's what happened. You just feel understood. You feel a connection to that person. You feel like they 'get' you.

So you see, it's not some mystical, magical process that creates that experience of connection between two people. It's a shared structure of communication. And it can be cultivated. We can all learn to adjust our turn of phrase to meet the style of our listeners. We can all develop flexibility of expression in the way we speak.

And in my experience, when I get exactly the right phrase to reflect the way that a person is thinking, the degree of connection that results is more than magical.

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