

Understanding NLP: Convincers

It's probably fair to say that although I earn a large part of my living through training people in NLP, most of the people I work with don't want to learn NLP. They usually want to improve their self-management skills or increase sales or become more influential. Some of them want to know how to get a message across or learn new skills more quickly. Some want to change the culture of their organisation. Most of them discover that in order to achieve what they want they have to understand more about the other people around them, whether these are customers, colleagues, friends or family.

NLP has much to offer on the subject of understanding other people. Most introductions to the subject cover rapport building and representational system preferences, but what I most often teach to business people who want to get things done, is how to work with the convincer strategies of other people. The convincer strategy is a way of processing information in order to become convinced. Its useful to know about because a person will use the same strategy regardless of the context and the importance of the thing they are to be convinced of. Have you ever considered what it takes to convince you? Some people appear to make up their minds quickly and others take a long time. If you want to convince someone to buy, to authorise, to agree or to change, wouldn't it be useful to know how that person can be convinced most easily?

One of the greatest benefits of this can be in reducing your stress. I spent some time working with the customer services team of a large organisation. These were the people who took the telephone calls that no-one else could resolve. The people they were speaking to were often angry, upset or rude but the team members were skilled in winning confidence and resolving problems. However, they had some questions: "I told this customer the same thing three times, but he just wasn't convinced. Then I transferred him to my boss and she told him the same thing again and he accepted it – why didn't he listen to me?" or "I explained to the customer exactly what to do, but she kept asking if I could fax some instructions to her – does this mean I wasn't clear?"

Another company I worked with was a small exclusive bridalwear shop. They couldn't understand why they were able to close some sales easily and other customers came back to the shop repeatedly but didn't place their order. They were beginning to think they were missing out on something...

They were! If you need to influence other people then it helps to understand how people become convinced. There are two elements to a convincer strategy, one relates to the way the information is presented, the other is the time factor.

The first is the convincer representational system or how the person has to have the information represented in order to be convinced: Do they have to see it, hear it or experience it for themselves? Think about this for yourself – suppose you have a new colleague. How would you know that the new person was good at the job – would you have to see them do it, hear about it, or perhaps work alongside them and experience it? If you have to see it to be convinced that the person is good at their job, then chances are you also have to see it to be convinced of anything else. Doubtless, the person who coined the phrase "I'll believe it when I see it" had a visual convincer. Someone with an auditory convincer has to hear it to be convinced. The person with a kinaesthetic convincer needs to experience for themselves.

The convincer rep system accounts for the irritating phenomenon of people who receive memos or emails but don't act on them until someone calls them on the 'phone and asks. (Auditory convincer) Or the people who agree to your proposal outlined in a meeting but do nothing until they see it confirmed in writing. (Visual convincer) And the customer who has listened to your explanation but would much prefer it if you could fax something to her to look at! (Visual again)

The convincer rep system doesn't account for the difference between the snappy decision-maker and the person who prevaricates until you begin to think that there must be something wrong...

The second aspect of convincer strategies is the convincer demonstration. Going back to that new colleague, how often does the person have to demonstrate their competence for you to be convinced? Answers to this question will usually fit one of four categories:

Automatic

The person with an automatic convincer will assume that the new colleague is competent unless they demonstrate otherwise. You can convince this person quite easily, but so can everyone else! They are easy to sell to and readily give their support for new ideas. They are probably the 'early adopters' of new technology. Being easily convinced, they can change their minds quickly and don't always stay committed to a decision once they have made it. Interestingly, lots of sales people have automatic convincers and find it difficult to understand why other people are not as easily convinced as they are themselves.

Number of times

This person has to have the demonstration repeated several times before they are convinced. If you're selling to someone like this, either show them the product this

number of times, or show them this number of alternatives. For the customer services team I was working with this knowledge made a big difference. Their comments changed from “Why did I have to repeat myself FOUR times to that man – is he stupid???” to “I’ve just had someone on the ‘phone with a four times convincer” - imagine how much this reduced their stress. As a general rule, the higher the number of times a person has to run their strategy in order to be convinced, the more committed they will be to the decision once it is made. Persuading them to change their mind will also involve the same number of repetitions to achieve the necessary conviction.

There is potentially a shortcut to this, although it will only work if you have good rapport with the person. Suppose you need to convince someone who has a five-times convincer but you don’t have time to go through your proposal five times. After the second time, you say something like “If I’ve explained this to you once I must have explained it five times, isn’t it time you made a decision?” As I said, it only works if you have good rapport...

Period of time

This person needs a period of time to be convinced. It was probably someone with this style who invented the ‘trial period’. It might be a few hours or it might be months, but this person always needs this period time to be convinced. If you’re seeking their support for your project and they say ‘I’ll think about it’ ask them how long they’d like before you meet again. Don’t assume that this is a polite way of saying no.

Again, there is a possibility of a shortcut. Suppose you want to convince someone with a period of time convincer of three months. You present your proposal and they tell you they need to think about it. Do you wait three months? Unless you also have a three months convincer, probably not. So, if you contact the person again after a few weeks, you can open the discussion with a comment such as, “I’ve been so busy since we last discussed this proposal, it feels like at least 3 months since we spoke”. Again, it only works if you have good rapport but for those of us not endowed with the patience to wait three months for an answer it can really speed up the process!

Consistent

This person is actually never convinced. They require repeated demonstration of your competence or the quality of your idea or your product. Nothing you can say or do will convince them. These people make tough managers, as you’ll only ever be as good as your last result in their eyes. Paradoxically, they can sometimes they end up appearing to be inconsistent inasmuch as they may strongly support someone they believe to be doing well, but then if that person fails in any way to meet their standards, they will cease to support them and look for a new champion. Over a period of time it can appear that different individuals are ‘flavour of the month’ for a time, before falling out of favour and making way for the next one. If you want to sell to someone with a consistent convincer, acknowledge that you can’t convince them. One of the ladies in the bridalwear shop had a customer with a

consistent convincer. She eventually told her “I know that I can’t convince you that this is the perfect dress for you. You’ll only know for sure when you’re walking down the aisle in it on your wedding day”. She made the sale AND the customer was happy.

To make full use of convincers, it helps to know your own convincer strategy. If you have, for example, a three time convincer and you make a sale to a person with an automatic convincer, you might not be convinced that they have really bought unless they tell you 3 times! Save them the effort and tell yourself three times – it works just as well.

Of course, the main piece of information you’ll need to be able to make use of all of the above, is the convincer strategy of the person you want to influence. Most of them won’t know themselves and even if they did, in the normal course of business it wouldn’t be appropriate ask! However, most people will tell you, if you know what to listen for.

For example, the customer services team quickly found that the way a person described their problem often gave some clues as to their convincer strategy. After all, they must be convinced that they have a problem! The kind of things customers said varied from “It hasn’t been working properly for about a month, I knew it was time I got some advice” (period of time – one month) to “I’ve tried it 3 times and it just won’t work” (number of times – three) and “I’ve never had any trouble with it and then today it completely packed up” (automatic).

By listening carefully to the way a customer describes the problem, it’s possible to discover their convincer strategy and then use it to convince the same person that you have a solution for them.

So, are you convinced that this knowledge is useful and has numerous practical applications? If not, do you need to read the article again, have a telephone conversation with me or have a go at using it and experience for yourself the results that are possible? Your answer to that question will give you a valuable clue to your own convincer strategy. For myself, I just need to read this through again to be convinced it’s OK to publish!

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