

Introduction

Many trainers use Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to better understand learning styles and to develop a greater rapport with learners. If you want to be better at developing a rapport with others - and if you want to communicate with and influence others more effectively - the first step is to understand what is important to them.

Everyone has a different perception of reality. We all experience the world through our senses and then we filter information through our own generalisations, distortions and experiences to create our own beliefs, memories, thoughts, feelings, ideas and attitudes. We base our decisions and actions on these beliefs, even though they may not be wholly accurate. Because our perception is only an approximation of the real world, it is likely to be quite limited. As a result, our decisions and our behaviour can also be limited.

With a deeper awareness of how the mind works and how it affects behaviour, you can unlock your own capabilities and overcome any obstacles that may be holding you back from a more successful life.

Also, by understanding human dynamics and the way other people process and use information - and how their values and beliefs shape their perception of reality - you can be more effective in any endeavour that requires effective communication, whether that is interpersonal skills, building relationships, influencing others, training, conflict resolution, negotiation or motivating and inspiring others.

This is essentially the premise behind Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) - a personal development approach which is becoming widely used in business to improve interpersonal skills, relationships, sales and performance.

NLP is a set of beliefs, skills and techniques that help people to communicate more effectively, think more clearly and manage their thoughts/moods and behaviour more effectively. It empowers individuals to change their limiting beliefs, improve their effectiveness and create a better quality of life.

Defining NLP

NLP is a multi-dimensional process that develops behavioural competence and flexibility and it sheds light on the mental and cognitive processes behind behaviour. It is an empowering set of beliefs about how to communicate with other people.

At its essence, NLP is the study of the link between our nerves and the nervous system (neuro) and our language (linguistic) and how they interact and influence each other to produce either effective or ineffective behaviour. 'Programming' is about carrying out a planned sequence of actions to get a pre-planned result. So Neuro-Linguistic Programming can be thought of as using language in a systematic and pre-determined fashion to achieved a planned result or outcome.

History

NLP was developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder - under the tutelage of Gregory Bateson - at the University of California, Santa Cruz. It started as a study into how psychotherapists and excellent communicators achieved results. They extensively modelled Fritz Perls, the originator of Gestalt Therapy; Virginia Satir, a renowned family therapist, and Milton Erickson, the world famous hypnotherapist, to develop a set of techniques that would help therapists to become more effective. However NLP soon became a toolbox for improving interpersonal communication and its application spread to other fields.

Preferred systems

NLP helps us understand how people are different. We all have a preferred system through which we code our memories and experiences. Without us being consciously aware of it, our five senses of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling are constantly receiving and processing information about the world around and within us. In NLP, we call these our representational systems.

For most circumstances and most people, the three dominant systems for mental processing are visual (sight, mental imagery), auditory (sound, speech) and kinaesthetic (feelings, emotions). The other two senses - gustatory (taste) and olfactory (smell) - are closely associated but seem to be less significant in general mental processing.

NLP helps to provide clues or signals that we can use to establish what a person is doing internally and therefore which senses or combinations of senses they are paying attention to. This gives us a valuable insight into how their mind is working.

For example, people who respond to visual stimuli will use language such as: Do you see what I mean? Do you get the picture? Look at this for me. Crystal clear. Black and white. Responding to those people, using the same language, gives them confidence that you have understood them and that you have a rapport.

Also, by realising that people do things because they see them as important - and not just to spite us - we become more open and flexible. This helps us to empathise and put ourselves in the other person's shoes.

Application

Many trainers use NLP to identify the types of training style that will best suit their learners. But few have tried to embed NLP tools and techniques within their organisation.

At least one global management consulting organisation is establishing NLP as a standard development for managers. Others are running NLP practitioner courses to help any middle and senior managers improve the way they interact with others at work*.

NLP is not only invaluable as a methodology for developing self awareness and emotional intelligence, it provides people with a different thinking framework which can enhance their self-confidence.

It can also help you to manage your mindset and 'state' better. For example, it has been used very successfully to overcome phobias, such as the fear of public speaking. Those who fear public speaking often experience a sequence of mental actions. They see the audience; imagine them staring and criticising; they feel tense and have butterflies in the stomach and they call this sensation 'fear'.

NLP can help them to change this perception, so they see the audience; imagine them smiling and giving encouragement; they feel tense and have butterflies in the stomach but they call this sensation 'excitement'.

NLP can really help trainers to read the audience better and it offers a flexible approach to explain things in a different way. By using the language of their preferred representational system, we can encourage people to be more receptive to the training and make the content appealing in a way that really helps them to process the learning.

Now it's time to offer NLP to managers, as part of their soft skills development, so they can use the tools and techniques to influence and communicate with others better, create rapport and coach, consult, sell or get the results they really want.