Can NLP help or harm your business?

By Graham Yemm

'NLP could be the most important synthesis of knowledge about human communication to emerge since the sixties' - *Science Digest.*

The simple answer to the above is 'both' as it depends on a number of things. Perhaps the first thing to explore is your reaction to seeing those three letters put together? If someone tells you they are an NLP practitioner do you search for your cross and garlic cloves? Or do you welcome them and want to know more?

In this article I want to cover four key aspects:

- Why knowing more about NLP and its uses might be useful for you and others in your organisation;
- What NLP is and some of the key principles;
- How it has been used in some organisations;
- What you might be able to do with it in the future.

Although I have been involved with NLP and using it in work and other parts of my life for over 10 years, I am not one of the evangelists nor do I believe it is a panacea! I am not aiming to defend NLP. I have my own views about what it is and how it can work for those who want to learn more about it – but I can offer no empirical evidence for these and do not intend to. Over that time I have realised that it can help most people and in many different ways. Whether improving the communication and influencing skills of individuals, enabling managers and leaders to operate more effectively, giving sales and customer service people more options when dealing with the wide range of prospects and clients, helping teams to work together, providing tools to address problems or providing everyone with a better understanding of themselves – the list is not limited to particular disciplines or groups.

One of the biggest problems with NLP is its name! Neuro linguistic programming is hardly the branding of a smart marketing team! Apart from being somewhat 'user unfriendly' the last word often carries negative impressions for many. Without giving the whole history, suffice to say that the original developers of NLP, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, were involved in mathematics and linguistics. Much of what they identified and developed was based on the work of well known linguistics experts – one of whom, Alfred Korzybski, had already used the term neuro-linguistic in his work. The principle is that the 'neuro' is to understand how we process and think about things, the 'linguistics' is to consider the words we use and the clues within those and finally the 'programming' is how we have generated the patterns within ourselves and keep running the programmes. NLP is 'a set of guiding principles, attitudes and techniques that enable you to change behaviour patterns as you wish.'

A fundamental premise of the early work done by Bandler and Grinder was that they wanted to study people who were excellent and to identify what specifically they did to achieve this. They wanted to be able to break this down and identify the specific elements and then teach or impart these to others in order to improve their performance. From this early work a number of tools and techniques were created, some were adapted from different disciplines, and others have been developed by people such is Robert Dilts.

Many of these tools and techniques can be very powerful. This, in turn, can lead to the accusations of NLP being 'manipulative'. First question – how do you define the difference between manipulation and influence? Second point; is a chisel a murder weapon when in the hands of Michelangelo sculpting 'David'? Yes, in the wrong hands, NLP has a lot of manipulative tools, especially when you see some of the websites and others about 'mastering the art of seduction' etc!! It has to do with the integrity, and intention, of the user.

For me, one of the most powerful applications of NLP was using it on myself. It helped me to know myself even better, to recognise that I could develop even more flexibility in my actions and interactions and to take more responsibility for my own thoughts and actions. There is a particular model used within NLP called the neurological levels of alignment (or logical levels) that can help in a wide variety of ways and I have found of great benefit for me – and with individuals and groups within clients. The figure shown below is an adaptation from the original. Although some analysts happily take it apart and disprove it – in my experience it works! Make the changes closer to the centre and they will be more long lasting.

Applications in the workplace
There is no limit to where NLP, or parts of it, can be applied. From writing advertising copy to customer service, people handling phone calls, managers motivating their people or sales people developing their skills to
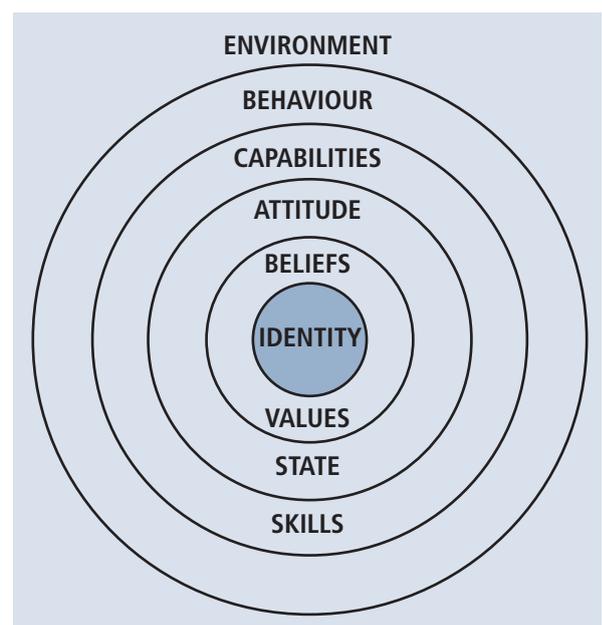

ENVIRONMENT
BEHAVIOUR
CAPABILITIES
ATTITUDE
BELIEFS
IDENTITY
VALUES
STATE
SKILLS

Figure 1: Adapted from Neurological Levels of Alignment, Robert Dilts, and used with permission.

win over more customers, the limits are within the mind of the users.

Although NLP has many 'direct' business applications, I believe that its most powerful use is for individuals to improve their self-awareness and to develop greater skills in their self-management, communication and interpersonal dealings. It can help improve their Emotional Intelligence. The five pillars of NLP (expanded from four!) give a good indication of what it is:

Outcome thinking: Being clear about what you want to achieve, the aims or goals that you want. This can cover long, medium and short-term outcomes. Fundamentally, it is about doing things for a reason.
Sensory acuity: Paying attention to what is happening and the signals you are receiving. The better you can become at this, noticing changes in voice tone, small shifts in body language, the actual words people are using or even eye movements, the more you can understand the other person and tune into them.
Flexibility: 'If you continue to do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got'. If something is not working – do anything else! We can become creatures of habit, yet good communicators and influencers are those who have developed more habits so are not stuck in particular ways of operating.
Rapport: The ability to develop a sense of mutual understanding, to tune into the other person and they feel as though you are on their wavelength. This does not have to equate to liking each other.
State management: Taking control of your own emotions, responses and attitudes. The start point for this is to accept responsibility for these and then to recognise what you can do to generate the 'state' you want for the context.

By using a number of the tools within each of these, we can find ways to enhance our own skills in working with others or shift our attitudes within ourselves. For me, this is the start point for using NLP and not just acquiring some tools and techniques to use on others!

Management and leadership
Many organisations use SMART as their approach to setting goals and objectives. How effectively does this work? There is a technique within NLP which is referred to as 'chunking' or 'stepping up and down' which can
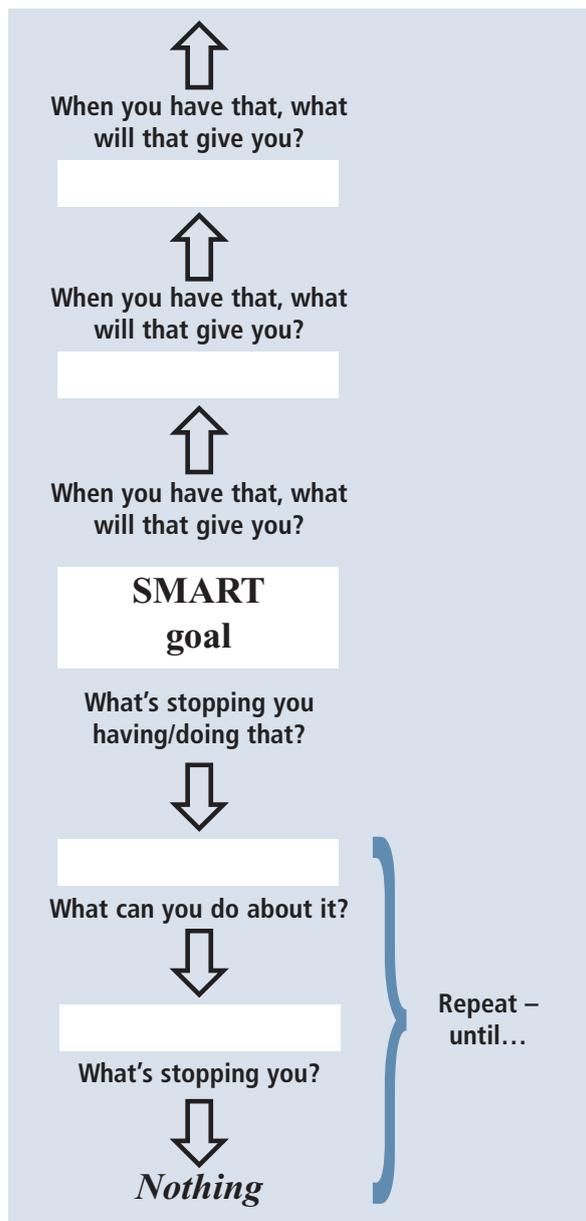
When you have that, what will that give you?

When you have that, what will that give you?

When you have that, what will that give you?

SMART goal

What's stopping you having/doing that?

What can you do about it?

What's stopping you?

Repeat – until…

Nothing

Figure 2

be very useful – and does not have to be mutually exclusive to SMART. For many people the SMART goal is not compelling or motivating in itself for various reasons. It may seem too big or far away and all they can see are potential problems. It could be that it is not giving enough of a challenge or payoff. By 'moving' the goal it is possible to both make it compelling and to create an action plan for getting started and working towards it. The fundamental process is shown in figure 2 and might look very simple. It is, and it is also very powerful, especially when the manager resists the temptation to make suggestions.

There are many aspects of NLP which are very useful for dealing with others. For managers and leaders, these can be beneficial when coaching their team members, getting teams to work together, creating and communicating the way forward and enabling them to be more motivated.

Going beyond those for a change, there are some really useful tools for handling problem-solving challenges or managing change. The good thing with these, is that they can be used alongside more conventional management tools and add strength to a manager's skills-set.

Combining these with attention to the specific words and language can lead to insights for moving forward or overcoming problems. An example would be to use an approach called 'SCORE '. It is worth adding here, that many NLP approaches work more effectively when 'experiential' rather than conceptual.

In this case, putting bits of paper on the floor and moving around them encourages different thinking, despite moving some managers outside their comfort zones!

SCORE is not highly complex – and goes through:

Symptoms - What is happening right now which we want/need to change?
Causes - What are the reasons for this? Which are the key ones?
Outcomes - What do we want to have instead of the present situation?
Resources - What do we have available (people, skills, or whatever)?
Ecology - Will the outcomes, and using the resources, fit our culture?

Sales and negotiation
This is probably an area where many organisations feel that NLP can make a difference and indeed it can. Certainly the range of communication and interpersonal tools can be very beneficial when added to a seller's armoury. Mind you, many top sellers are probably using these without even knowing that they are NLP! Do remember, the majority of NLP tools are not novel. They have been developed by breaking down what excellent people do and presenting it back as standalone tools or techniques.

The obvious start with sales development is to widen people's ability to get into rapport quickly, especially with the more 'difficult' prospects. This can be achieved in a number of ways. The fundamental idea of matching and pacing (ie being like the other) is an area that does encourage the 'manipulative' label. It is something we all do naturally when we feel in rapport with another – just look around you at work or outside. How many people do you notice that appear to be mirroring each other or moving as though choreographed? However, it

is useful to be aware of how you can use this, especially when you sense that you are 'out of sync' with someone. Care is needed though, as clumsy matching and mirroring will come across as insincere.

Another thing that can be very useful for sellers is to use the 'alignment' model (Figure 1). I have found that helping people to make sure their 'identity' fits with the job empowers them. From here, a significant aspect is to address people's beliefs and to bring out any limiting beliefs they may have. It is difficult to sell with integrity if you have limiting beliefs about your product or service, or the organisation – or if you are being asked to do anything which conflicts with your values. When using this with a group of potential sellers in a bank in Saudi Arabia we were able to help some change their beliefs and become very successful whilst one or two who did not want to and felt their values were being challenged were better suited to being moved to other roles.

When these areas are aligned, the sellers can also be helped by learning to manage their state. They have to be able to handle themselves in a variety of situations and often operate in a relatively isolated way. Knowing how to reconnect to a positive or confident state (or whatever they need) is a great asset.

Most sellers are familiar with the idea of finding buying motives and hot buttons and suchlike. Well, NLP has another approach that can give you an even more powerful way of doing this. You can even find out things about the way prospects make buying decisions that they don't even know! From this, you can present your sales case using the appropriate language to increase your chances of success. There is a whole area around 'meta-programmes' which can benefit you here. A commonly used way of working with these is from language and behaviour profiling. For example, in conversation you can establish whether someone prefers to make buying decisions for themselves or do they seek reassurance from others. Think about how that can help with your sales pitch.

For sellers and negotiators, learning to 'reframe' can be important in many situations. Handling objections or blocks can be made easier with this.

Customer service
Whether people are handling customers on the phone or face-to-face, they often have to deal with varying degrees of irritation or anger.

Learning to manage their own state can be really important! Also, developing the ability to not only look at things from the customers' situation but also from a more objective, dispassionate view can help to smooth things over and focus on solutions.

Getting rapport quickly is key for this role. If training people on the phone, getting them to learn to match voice tone, volume and speed can be a great asset. They can diffuse anger and complaints quickly. Developing their listening skills to calibrate the changes in tone or pitch, or to pick up specific words can not only help them resolve issues more quickly, it can also improve their enjoyment of the job.

> **What does make NLP useful is when it becomes part of everyday life and work – and not just a toolkit to delve into**

Using good questioning to change the state of the customer can help. Shifting them from a complaint frame to focusing on the outcome they want can benefit everyone and take the heat out of things. There are various options to achieve this and good customer service people are practising many of them anyway!

Summary
This has only scratched the surface of where NLP can help in the business world. There are so many examples of where it has helped. Encouraging top teams to work together more efficiently and creating a clear vision for the organisation. Doctors have been known to use certain language patterns to help their patients recover more quickly and with less need for medication. As a personal effectiveness tool, learning to change or adapt limiting beliefs can help you manage your time more effectively. Recognising what your own values and their priorities are can help you to handle pressure better and be more resistant to stress. Understanding your own language preferences can help you to become more flexible in presenting your messages, formally or informally, to appeal to a wider audience more of the time.

I can go on and on. There are ways

NLP can harm your business too. The saying, 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing' springs to mind'! Just being familiar with one or two concepts can do more harm than good. On the other hand you do not have to have everyone becoming practitioners or beyond. What does make NLP useful is when it becomes part of everyday life and work – and not just a toolkit to delve into. As with anything in life, whatever aspects or tools are implemented will be most useful when used with 'unconscious competence' – and this means learning the fundamentals, practising them and sticking in there until they just happen.

Yes, there are charlatans out there. Some will promise to train your organisation, your sales team, your trainers or whoever in a couple of days. Hmmm, beware! They can give a flavour only. In my opinion, NLP is a great thing when used with integrity and becomes a part of the way you operate. It is not an answer for every circumstance, nor can it be forced upon anyone. It can be fun to learn more.

It can help your business or organisation in more ways than you can imagine. It can help to change your own life – and improve it, if that is what you want.

Suggested reading:
Words that Change Minds – Shelle Rose Charvet, ISBN: 0-7872-3479-6.

NLP Business Masterclass – David Molden, ISBN: 0- 273- 650165 *www.anlp.org.*

For more information visit *www.solutions4training.com.*

Graham Yemm is a Master Practitioner of NLP and was involved with setting up and running 'The Business Group', which promotes uses of NLP in organisations. He is an accredited trainer for the LAB (language and behaviour) profile programme – 'Words that Change Minds'. He is also one of the founding partners of Solutions 4 Training Ltd. Before this Graham was a partner in a UK based training consultancy, Pragmatica International Ltd for 15 years. During his years as a consultant he has worked with a variety of major companies in the UK, Europe, USA, the Middle East and Russia in sales, people and management skills. Graham has worked with many different organisations conducting both training and consultancy assignments – ranging from professional groups, pharmaceutical and financial institutions to computer manufacturers and dealerships. He has had many years of experience tailoring programmes to address organisational issues around sales, account management, negotiations, sales management and customer service – especially focusing on the communication and personal skills aspects.