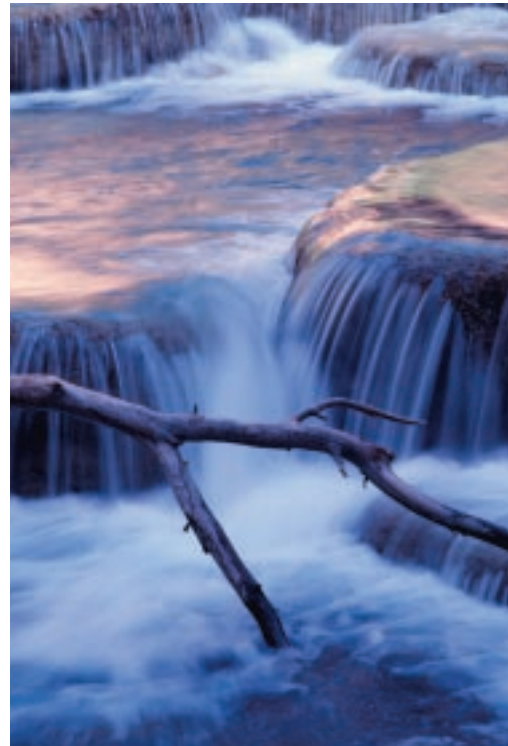


White-water navigators use Neuro Linguistic Programming to navigate change

Colin Reeve



Key learning points

- **White water is today's business environment.**
- **Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) provides trainers and leaders with tools to navigate and excel during rapid change.**
- **Assessment of the six logical levels provides leaders and trainers with a methodology to identify where misalignment exists.**
- **With alignment of the six levels, progress is effortless and inspiring.**
- **Communication between leader/trainer and team needs to be exquisite.**
- **Knowing how to build rapport, understanding language preferences, and knowing how to generate new perspectives are particularly valuable NLP skills.**

Just for a moment, think of white water ... turbulent, exhilarating, roaring, fast,

unpredictable. As a trainer, you have to remember that this is the environment that your participants are experiencing, every day. White water is today's underpinning business culture, and it is my contention that, as trainers, our fundamental challenge is to equip people so that they can navigate more skilfully down, and through, the extreme rapids that they face.

Listening, recently, to Olympic gold medal winner, Matthew Pinsent, I was struck by the contrast between his sport and the business environment just outlined. In rowing, the water is smooth, you often have a cox shouting instructions, and there is always a massive emphasis on training, in order to produce a winning performance. In business, however, the boat is constantly being buffeted by powerful currents, decisions have to be made on the spot by people who may have had little training, and the team has no

idea what conditions will be like around the next bend.

Yet, in both cases, the demand is for world-class performance. How can this be achieved? How can a team share a vision, harness the energy of the water, and work together in such circumstances? How can they pay attention to the needs of the moment and anticipate the future? How can they relax and even enjoy such challenging conditions? The answer to all of these questions lies in incorporating the skills of NLP.

NLP provides leaders, managers and teams with an extraordinarily useful set of models and tools to navigate change. The whole approach can be summarised as the study of human excellence in thinking and behaviour. For companies that are putting a premium on talent management and inspirational leadership, NLP needs serious evaluation.

Trainer exercise: rapport

This simple exercise is intended to help participants to recognise the importance of rapport and some of the key skills that it includes.

Invite your participants to pair up. One person speaks and the other listens. The listener starts by trying to build rapport by showing close attention, good eye contact and generous listening. They may also practise matching posture, tone and breathing to their colleague. Then invite the listener to break rapport by, for example, looking away, showing disinterest, mismatching voice and body posture.

Ask participants to discuss the impact of the matching and mismatching process, how easy or difficult it was and what its effect was on the conversation and relationship.

The language preferences of others must also be taken into account. We all share the same senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell – but we filter information about the world through these senses very differently. By paying attention to the everyday language that people use, you can adapt your communication style so that it has most impact.

Some people filter through their visual senses by always looking for the big picture, seeing what is possible or having a point of view. Others gain understanding of the world through their auditory sense. For example, they may be interested in people who speak the same language as themselves, they may need to make themselves heard or they might be interested in drumming up support from their colleagues. And then there are people who filter information kinaesthetically; they may need to get their teeth into a project or look to their gut instinct before they come to a conclusion.

To elucidate further, if you are trying to paint a picture of the future with a member of your team and they, for example, want to get to grips with the shape of the project, then the chances are that you will fail to reach a clear agreement because you are using different communication preferences. On the other hand, if you are both on the same wavelength or each hearing what the other is saying, you will be likely to have a far more productive conversation. The challenge for a trainer is to encourage leaders to realise the significance of these language patterns, so that they can adjust their language to match that of the people whom they want to lead.

An awareness of peoples' different perspectives makes a massive difference to leaders and their teams. The view someone has at the front of a boat may be very different from that at the back. And if the leader isn't even on board, how can they direct the team and help them to progress?

Pack NLP in your kitbag!

As a trainer, you need these white-water skills just as much as any business manager or director, which is why NLP is such a powerful underpinning approach to have in your kitbag. I am not proposing here that you start teaching your participants NLP but, rather, that there are some NLP skills that are extraordinarily helpful for participants, whatever development path they are on. If you want to help people to become confident, relaxed and energetic on the river's rapids, then there is no better approach to learn.



Author

Colin Reeve is MD of the training consultancy, R&A. An international management consultant, he specialises in the development of high-performance culture, leading, teaming, managing and communicating. He works with some of the world's leading companies, helping them to develop cultures that result in motivated people and improved efficiency. He is an NLP master trainer and master practitioner. Colin is also a black belt in karate, has his own teaching college – The Shotokai College – and often applies the metaphors of this way of thinking and being into his work in business. Telephone: 01344 872026 • Website: www.raconsultancy.com

Working with the flow

Of all the NLP change tools that white-water navigators need, the one that is most useful is that which NLP has termed 'logical levels'. The box below provides a brief summary of what these levels are.

Logical levels in NLP

Level 1: Environment. Are we in the right place? Are our working conditions appropriate for us? Do we have the right tools for the job?

Level 2: Behaviour. Is what we are doing and thinking appropriate? Is it helpful? Are our actions congruent with our values?

Level 3: Capability. Do we have the right skills for the tasks in which we are engaged? Do we have the right strategies and processes in place? Do we know how to achieve success?

Level 4: Beliefs and values. Is what we are doing important to us? Do we believe in it – or are there limiting values in place that prevent us from achieving our potential? Are there some things we should like to do but believe we can't?

Level 5: Identity. How do we perceive ourselves? Do we have a clear sense of our mission?

Level 6: Spiritual. What is our vision? Are we connected to others or to a greater sense of purpose? What inspires us?

These levels have a direct relevance to how people navigate change, but most training does not take them into account. If you learn a new skill, but it does not fit in with your values, beliefs or mission, then you won't be motivated to apply it back at work.



In the terms of our white-water metaphor, let me outline how training that is focused only on skills could impact on a team of people trying to navigate a fast-flowing river. A skills training for a team about to go white-water rafting would probably teach people how to paddle, how to put on their life-jackets and even how to work together in the boat. But this may not be enough – particularly if they want to compete. Why are the team getting into the boat? What does the course that they are going to have to navigate look like? What if people in the team believe that this is a dangerous way of progressing, or if the water they trained on is nothing like the river they usually face? What then?

This happens in business all the time. Companies invest heavily in one aspect of training relating to change, and find it is limited. When you don't take into account people's environment, behaviours, beliefs/values and sense of direction, it is no surprise to find that the boat constantly goes off course or that progress is much slower and harder than should be the case.

NLP training for business holds that alignment between all the logical levels is essential. Get alignment, and progress through the white waters of change becomes not only effortless, but also fast, enlivening and even inspiring.

One piece of work that we have recently conducted highlights how

important this alignment is for companies in the real world.

Our work for the sales team at HJ Heinz in the UK, was based on the understanding that, if the company says one thing but is seen to be doing another (that is, it is out of alignment), that will be extremely damaging to morale, customer relationships and business performance. So our objective with the company's senior sales team was to ensure that their strategy was consistent with the logical levels. The team's high-level description of its approach at these various levels illustrates this consistency:

- **The vision:** to improve the well-being of families everywhere.
- **The mission:** to provide good food every day.
- **The beliefs:** what we eat affects our health; our brands and our people are our most important assets; we will deliver superior business returns.
- **The imperatives:** a commitment to skills and strategies that focus people on quality, effectiveness and innovation.
- **The behaviours:** leadership at every level.
- **The environment:** providing staff with the best tools and resources to allow them to perform at their best.

It is important to note that all these levels are interdependent and support one another. To continue

with our white-water theme, they begin to show the team the gates that they will have to steer through, to complete the course. They give direction and they emphasise that people will both be supported and will have to show initiative as they progress. There is alignment here and, in addressing every level, the Heinz sales team is ensuring that they are fully prepared for the white-water conditions that they have to face.

A further, valid point is that these logical levels apply to organisations as well as to individuals. Companies are desperate for their staff to bring their best into work – to be motivated, to work well together, to generate breakthrough performance – and, on the programmes I run, most people recognise that they are holding back on up to 50 per cent of their engagement at work. This is an extraordinary amount of energy waiting to be harnessed and released.

Trainer exercise: logical level alignment

Consider these questions as your own guide to logical levels in a training context:

- **Environment.** Do I have the right tools and resources? Examples are flipchart, handouts, videos. In what environment will I be training? Consider room size and layout.
- **Behaviour.** What behaviours do I need to be engaged in? Examples are talking, demonstrating, observing, giving feedback.
- **Capability.** What skills will I be using? Examples are rapport building, communication, reframing, giving examples. And how do I need to design the sequencing of the course? That is, in terms of each element and the balance of different media.
- **Beliefs/values.** What are the beliefs and values that support me in my intention to train others? For example, learning is important, everyone has the potential to be better, everyone has the right to share their experience.
- **Identity.** How does this course fit with my mission? For instance, am I congruent?
- **Vision.** What will I see when I'm sure I've fulfilled my purpose? Ideally, interested and engaged delegates who are inspired to transfer the learning from mind to muscle.

Logical levels provide leaders with the key to this conundrum. Imagine a business where people had bought into a vision that inspired them, and were deeply in touch with why they were doing what they were doing. Consider what it would be like if they were engaged through work with that sense of purpose; they would bring their commitment, motivation and belief in a completely different way. And what if they had the best skills and the right tools to achieve their goals? Surely they would be unstoppable?

Navigational expertise

Is this a practical model and, if so, how can leaders be encouraged to apply it?

The leader will rarely be in the boat with the team, which is where decisions have to be made on the spot. It is, therefore, the leader's role to have prepared and developed people so that they are

ready for what they are facing, focused and bringing the best of themselves to the task. If managers block the motivational energy of their teams by taking too much control, by insisting that they make all the decisions themselves or by communicating poorly, this will only block progress.

Let me outline a few of the core NLP skills which are totally relevant to the competencies that trainers and managers need to demonstrate, in order to unlock the energy of their people.

Outstanding communication is essential for white-water navigators. People in teams won't change, or work in new ways, simply because you ask them to. Leaders today need to be able to persuade and influence, build extraordinary relationships and create powerful understanding. These communications skills help to provide the confidence and motivation that teams need when they are out in turbulent waters. These are the skills that will help to sustain them.

Rapport underpins such exquisite communication because, without it, you only have one-way messaging. Having rapport requires that trainers and leaders really understand how to listen generously and that they are committed to understanding the opinions, insights and motivations of others. Rapport is essential in the building up of strong and healthy relationships and is key to building trust. When it comes to rapport, you are the message. If your message, the words you say, the way you speak and your body language are aligned, you will be much more influential in what you do.