

Accelerating team effectiveness with NLP

Continuing last month's look at NLP, Mark West - of R&A Consultancy and Training - looks at how this powerful method can be applied to building more effective and faster forming teams.

What has NLP got to do with teams? Isn't the focus of NLP all on the brilliance of the individual? Yet, when it comes to putting a team together and getting team members all pulling in the same direction, NLP can help you to design something extraordinary.

NLP can be summarised as the study of human excellence in thinking and behaviour – so wherever people have to interact and work together there is a practical role for applied NLP. This immediately makes NLP relevant to teams. However, the way we belong to teams is changing – and this is vitally important.

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We don't belong to one team any more; we belong to many teams. Moreover, some of those teams – project teams for example – may be short lived. We no longer have three months for the forming, storming, norming, performing model of teams. That has a linear and protracted feel about it. In today's cross-functional teams, matrix teams and multicultural teams, top performing executives have to be ready to hit the ground running. So the question is: how does NLP help to achieve this outcome?

There are five foundation blocks to consider:

1. Logical levels.

There is a model in NLP called 'logical levels' which is relevant to team performance. The easiest way to picture this model is as a five rung ladder where the top rung of the ladder represents the team's vision. Vision is about our connection with our purpose and recognising that, when we get in touch with our dreams, we get energised and inspired. Consider the story of two advertising men – Andy Law and David Abraham – who were fed up with the aggression and morals of the advertising business and decided to undertake a new crusade within the industry based on honesty and ethical values. That is vision.

The next rung of the ladder represents mission and can be seen as the way in which we apply ourselves, passionately, to our dream. In the case of Law and Abraham they decided to leave their employers – with 35 colleagues – and create their own creative communications business, St Luke's.

Below that rung we need to ensure that our personal beliefs are supporting what we are doing. If we are working on a project but don't believe that it will succeed, then our efforts will be fatally compromised. Our beliefs are closely allied to our motivation and, again, in the example of St Luke's we can see an energising belief in creating a company that people would be proud to work in, would be different and which would be



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successful.

Another rung down the ladder and we find that we will need to develop a particular set of skills and capabilities in order to make the desired outcome happen. This is not always easy. Although the St Luke's team wanted to break the mould, their new non-hierarchical working culture based around equality and creativity frequently felt like chaos. As a result, the first year of business was full of frustration, conflict and sometimes despair.

Finally, we need to ensure our behaviour is aligned with all the rungs above. This is about congruence and, at St Luke's, they resisted the pressure to put profit first. They refused lucrative but 'unethical' contracts and continued to promote the idea of a working co-operative. Within three years they had won Agency of the Year.

2. Team selection. The mix of 'types' in any team is a well known criteria for team performance but NLP has a specific 'take' on it: people must be plugged in to the vision and mission by recruiting on

neuro-linguistic programming

peoples' values and on the balance within the team of people with complementary organising patterns.

This means team leaders must recognise, for example, that some people work better with big chunks of information while others prefer small chunks, or that some people have avoidance strategies while others have attraction strategies, or that some people always like to open up possibilities while others like to know that there is one 'best' way of doing things.

This attention to values and what NLP calls our 'meta programmes' gives team leaders a practical handle on team working. It provides insights into individual motivators and, importantly, also gives the team a way of recognising its strengths and weaknesses.

3. Team values. The culture of teams is another predictor of performance and is closely aligned to operating values. However, even when people have clearly stated values they are often unclear what that value looks like in behavioural terms. If trust or performance are high values for you then what behaviours would you need to see to know that these things are present?

In addition, people working in teams often have clusters of values – such as trust, honesty and respect – which can be considered together. By working on such clusters, a team can streamline its performance because it knows exactly what values underpin its operation; it has worked out which ones take priority, and knows how they occur in everyday life.

4. Relationships. Generating and maintaining positive relationships is a central concern of performing teams. Just imagine someone coming in to your office with whom you have a poor relationship. What effort do you make on their behalf? How much information do you share? What does their presence do to your energy? Yet, in most teams, relationships like this are endemic.

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It doesn't have to be so. NLP has a suite of tools to help people to negotiate more productively, to see each other more positively and to resolve conflict. Everyone in a team needs to take responsibility for relationships and NLP can show them how.

5. Communication. The final essential team competence is communication. This sits at the heart of NLP. It includes how we build up rapport. It covers the way we speak and ask questions. It is about how we see people and how we listen to them (see panel).

One important point to make about NLP and teams is that the techniques which underpin this model are practical and enjoyable to learn. Have no doubt – people want to contribute; they want to

perform; they want to deliver – but they need the tools to do so. It is the challenge for HR directors and team leaders to provide the NLP insights and expertise that their teams need to succeed.

By Mark West



NLP can be summarised as the study of human excellence in thinking behaviour.

Exploring 'communication'

There is a compelling presupposition in NLP which says 'the meaning of communication is the response you get'. This points to the essential two-way nature of communication and indicates that we need to pay closer attention to both how we communicate and how we receive information. Take the following story, for example, which highlights how skilful communicators are aware both of what other people may be communicating and the power of their own words.

Once there was a ruthless priest who coveted the power held by a wise and kindly abbot. He decided that the way that he could bring about the demise of the abbot would be to shame him in front of his supporters. So he captured a bird

and took it to the abbot when he was sitting among his councillors. And he said to the abbot: "You profess to be wise and far sighted but, behind my back, I have a bird. Is it alive or is it dead?"

Of course the priest planned either to kill the bird if the abbot said it was alive and let it free if he said it was dead - and either way he expected to triumph. But the abbot looked closely at the priest and calmly replied: "Really, my friend, the choice is up to you."

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