

First Directions in NLP

That is Not What I Meant at All...

Rapport is the first step in good communication. 'Communication skills' is not an esoteric discipline, that only public speakers and the caring professions need to study. We are all excellent communicators, and still we are misunderstood. If you are a human being you will have been in a situation where you said something you thought was clear, only to be amazed at the response. An innocent remark is taken personally, or a well meant offer of help is refused with a reply like, "Don't interfere." But you were not interfering you were helping. It was very clear. Clear to who? Not to the listener unfortunately. This happens in reverse as well. What you understood was not what the other person meant. Or you take a remark personally, and the speaker protests that you have got it all wrong. Perhaps someone has said to you, "It won't take long". You expect him to be finished in an hour, and he was thinking of half a day. There is the joke about the two psychoanalysts meeting in the street. One says to the other, "Good Morning. How are you?" And the other thinks, "I wonder what he meant by that?"

One NLP presupposition sums this up:

The meaning of the communication is the response you get.

There is no such thing as failure in communication - you have succeeded in communicating *something*, it just may not be what you intended. You always communicate something because the receiver has to make some meaning of it. The responses you get give you valuable pointers about what to do next. They are your teachers.

What are the consequences of acting as if this NLP presupposition is true?

You would get curious. Why do you do the things you do? How are misunderstandings possible? And how can they be prevented? Usually by paying attention to the other person's response, rather than mind reading or wishful thinking. You would pick up misunderstandings before going miles out of your way and before they have serious consequences. This is important in business, where managers want to motivate rather than antagonise their colleagues, and where miscommunication about prices and quantities of goods can result in large financial losses. It is important in sales and presentations.

The principle is important in relationships. Have you ever got into an argument and thought 'Oh no, not again?' It all seems horribly familiar, the same old misunderstanding has come up, the argument seems almost scripted. What would you need to do differently, establish or regain rapport and achieve your outcome?

Modeling excellence is not just about learning from your mistakes. Think back to some of your effective communications, where you got the response you wanted. What did you do that worked? Not just the specific actions you took in that particular instance, but how did you think? Were you right first time? Did you have to adjust? If you were right first time how did you decide what to do?

When you think one thing and the response indicates something different, nobody is wrong and nobody is to blame. Assuming responsibility for your communication does not mean always having to say you are sorry. It's not your fault either. No-one is to blame for being human. Blaming rarely promotes learning. There is a widespread approach to communication mistakes that concentrates on finding who was to blame, as if finding a scapegoat solves the problem. When you do not have to blame yourself or others, you become more open to learning, and a sense of wonder. You also become more able to tolerate ambiguity. Faced with a world that is uncomfortably unpredictable, many people become anxious. They want 'yes' or 'no' answers, not 'maybe' and 'perhaps'. Certainty is hard to achieve and the price is usually high. Change is the only thing you can rely on.

The Meaning of the Communication is what I say it is!

What are the consequences of acting in the opposite way - as if the meaning of your communication is fixed to what you say it is? This is a bewildering world. Other people will still make their own meanings of what you say and misunderstandings will multiply. There is a nice story of an Arabian wise man who was lost in the desert, and sees horsemen in the distance. "Bandits!" he thinks, and wheeling his own horse, trots in the opposite direction. Looking around, he sees they are following him, so he rides faster. Five minutes later, they are still gaining on him. He becomes frightened, gallops into a thicket and hides. His pursuers follow him and dismount. He is very relieved to see they are - his friends, who were searching for him. They ask him why on earth is he hiding from them behind a bush miles out of the way.

"It's more complicated than you think," replies the wise man, "I'm here because of you and you are here because of me." Neither was where they wanted to be.

The same principle applies in reverse. You may blame yourself for misunderstanding. A few gifted individuals manage to both have their cake and eat it - if they do not understand then it's the other person's fault, he should have been clearer. If the other person does not understand then it's still his fault, he is being difficult or obtuse and should have done so. They have found an excellent way to make themselves both angry and dissatisfied:

"I'm sure I didn't mean ---" Alice was beginning, but the Red Queen interrupted her impatiently.

"That is just what I complain of! You should have meant! What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning? Even a joke should have a meaning --- and a child is more important than a joke, I hope. You couldn't deny that, even if you tried with both hands."

"I don't deny things with my hands, Alice objected.

"Nobody said you did," said the Red Queen. "I said you couldn't if you tried."

(Through the Looking Glass Lewis Carroll)

Communication with Yourself

What would it mean to act as if the meaning of a communication with yourself is the response you get? It would mean paying attention to the responses you get from your body: your feelings and intuitions

Our bodies respond to a combination of late nights, lack of sleep, overwork and skipped meals by becoming ill. This response is one meaning of the current lifestyle. Acting on this response would mean taking care of ourselves and changing our lifestyle. When we continually ignore our own needs because we think we 'ought' to be able to cope, or someone else tells us we should, our body will respond, sooner or later with pain or illness.

Exploring Relationships

A relationship is two people eliciting responses from each other. If you want a change in response, then you must change your own actions. This will change the meaning for the other person, and the spell is broken. Most of us have a relationship where we think "If only that person would stop acting that way, then everything would be fine." It may be a family member, or a work colleague. Think of a relationship like that if you have one, to explore further.

What do you think it is about their behaviour that is the problem? For example, you may feel they are aggressive, insensitive or fault finding, so you may feel browbeaten, angry or irritated. Label both your own and the other person's behaviour. You might wonder at which logical level you are threatened. Is this an identity issue for you? One that challenges your beliefs and values? Even thinking about this relationship can put you into an unresourceful state. You do not want to carry that into what you do next, so now think of something different. Move, shake off that feeling. In NLP this is called changing state.

Secondly, imagine what the relationship is like from the other person's point of view. This is going to second position. How do they experience your behaviour? What sort of label would they put on it? How do they feel? Shake off that emotional state before continuing.

Now, go outside the relationship, become a detached observer. This is going to third position. A good way to do this is to imagine a stage in front of you. See both of you on stage. See that other person doing what they do. See yourself responding to them.

Shift your question from "How can I change that person's behaviour?" to: "How am I reinforcing or triggering that person's behaviour?"

How else could you respond to him or her? What prompts you to continue doing what you do in this relationship?

When you communicate you are seeking to influence another person, you have an outcome in mind. Deciding what you want is the second pillar of NLP and the subject of the next chapter.