

What does NLP do?

Self-development and change. First you use it to work on yourself to become more the person you really want to be and can be. Also you work on yourself so that you can effectively help others. I do a lot of air travel, and at the beginning of every flight, when you have sat down and put your seat belt on, the staff have you at their mercy and they go through the safety procedures. At this point the frequent fliers stop paying attention and bury themselves in the in flight magazine because they have heard it all before, some of them could probably recite it by heart. However, I always remember one thing about those safety procedures. They tell you that if the cabin loses pressure, oxygen masks drop down and you should put them on (I am amazed how calm the people are in the safety videos; in reality I am sure there would be a lot of screaming and scrabbling about). They say always to put on your own mask before helping anyone else. Why? Because if you don't put your own mask on, you could pass out while you are busy helping someone else. Then you are no good to anyone – yourself or the other person. Self-development is the equivalent to putting your own mask on first. The more you know about yourself, the more you are able to help others.

*NLP is not about fixing other people and neglecting yourself.
Put your own mask on first!*

When you approach change and self-development, you need to be congruent. In other words you need to be determined to succeed and believe in what you are doing.

Congruence means that you are committed to making the change, you do not sabotage yourself.

Secondly, you need to establish rapport, in other words you work within a relationship of trust and mutual influence.

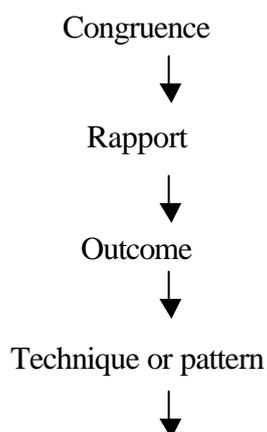
Thirdly, you need to establish what you want to achieve in that change.

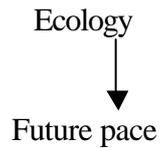
Then you apply one of the many patterns, techniques or combinations of patterns that NLP has developed for change and learning.

The result must be ecological, that is fitting into the wider picture without bad consequences for you or others that might make the result a mixed blessing.

Lastly, you future pace, that is, you mentally rehearse the new change and learning.

This reinforces it and means that you will remember to act differently when the time comes to test what you have learned.





Ecology

Ecology is a concern for the overall system. An ecology check is part of a wider systemic awareness of what you are doing. You shift your focus from the change you are making to how that change fits with the wider system – you widen the boundaries of the system that you are considering. You check that what looks like a good change in one part of a system does not cause problems in other areas. Many personal and organisational changes fail because the system boundary is drawn too narrowly and the ‘side effects’ turn out to be major headaches. An ecology check is like checking a drug for bad side effects even if it cures the illness.

An ecology check as part of an NLP technique ensures that NLP does not become manipulative – your actions do not lead to your gain and the other person’s loss. You also check that the change they make harmonises with the rest of their life and relationships. An ecology check for yourself ensures that you do not manipulate *yourself*, forcing yourself into some course of action that later you will come to regret, or that hurts another person badly.

All actions have consequences, beyond their specific context because we learn and generalise changes to the rest of our lives. Our lives are complex and a change will ripple out like dropping a stone into a still pool. Some changes give stronger ripples than others. Some ripples will wash away; some may disturb the surface far more than you thought. A few may even become tidal waves.

Internal ecology

An internal ecology check is when you check internally with your feelings that a course of action would be a wise one to follow. The ecology of your physical body is shown in your physical health. Your mental ecology is shown by your feelings of congruence or incongruence.

Incongruence is the feeling that the change has consequences that are uncertain (so you need more information), or are negative (so you need to think again).

Incongruence is not bad, but you need to be aware of it and explore why you feel that way.

The questions you need to ask for an internal ecology check are:

‘What are the wider consequences of my action?’

‘What will I lose if I make this change?’

‘What extra would I have to do?’

‘Is it worth it?’

‘What will I gain if I make this change?’

‘What is the price of making this change and am I willing to pay it?’

‘What are the good aspects of the present state?’

‘How can I keep those good aspects, while making the change I want?’

Listen, feel and look carefully for your answers.

A typical incongruent response will be an uneasy feeling, usually in the stomach. A visual incongruence is often a sense of the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle not making sense.

The classic incongruent phrase is, 'Yes...BUT...'

Sometimes when you make an ecology check, the unpleasant consequences may be very clear, and you may need to rethink your outcome. Other times you may get an intuition that all is not well, without being able to say exactly why. This intuition is an unconscious indication that the change is not completely ecological. Always pay attention to your intuitions and feelings of incongruence.

External ecology

Internal ecology shades into external ecology because we are all part of a wider system of relationships, physical, social, work teams and friendships. Internal and external ecology are two different perspectives on the same system. An external ecology check examines how your outcome will affect other significant people in your life.

Make a leap of the imagination and become them.

How will your change affect them?

Does it go against any of their values?

Does this matter?

How would they react?

Ecology checks are part of systemic thinking. Optimising one part of a system, invariably leads to the *whole* system working *less* well than it did. For example, suppose a man decides to become fit and lose weight in a moment of madness on New Year's Eve. He takes up squash, and goes to the gym three times a week, thinking that the more he does, the better it will be. He over exercises, and because his body is unused to the effort, he pulls a muscle and becomes tired and lethargic. Then he can't exercise, becomes depressed, does even less and may end up even less active and even heavier than he was at the year-end (and with a bill for physiotherapy and a subscription to a gym that he has hardly used as well).

Ecology is important in organisations too. A big sales push may result in a leap in sales that will put pressure on the manufacturers to meet the demand. If they are unable to deliver, then this will lead to more dissatisfied customers, a rise in customer complaints and a subsequent loss of business.

Conscious and unconscious mind

*All change first takes place at the unconscious level.
Then we become aware of it.*

NLP has a characteristic approach to conscious and unconscious that is different to most other systems of psychology. In NLP, the conscious refers to everything that is in present moment awareness. The phrase 'the conscious mind' is an abstraction, an easy way of saying what you are aware of at the present moment. We can hold about seven separate pieces of information consciously at any time, so this is limit of what we can hold in our short-term memory. However a lot depends on how we organise

the information. A telephone number may consist of seven digits. You can memorise that as seven digits, but once you take it as a telephone number and remember it as one whole 'chunk', then you can store seven or so telephone numbers in your short-term memory.

'The unconscious' is used in NLP to indicate everything that is not conscious. So the unconscious is a 'container' for many different thoughts, feelings, emotions, resources and possibilities. Some things you could easily become conscious of: sights, sounds, feelings that are there, but you are not paying them any attention. When you switch your attention, they become conscious. For example, there are background sounds at the moment that you were not aware of, in other words were not conscious for you until you heard them. They were there all the time, but were unconscious. Thoughts pass through your consciousness and sometimes seem to hang between the boundary of conscious and unconscious, like when something is 'on the tip of your tongue'.

Some beliefs and values remain unconscious but guide your life without you ever realising how powerful they are. Some parts of your physiology will always remain unconscious – the carbon dioxide concentration in the blood, how your heart beats, what your liver is doing. The more important and life sustaining the function, the more it is likely to be unconscious, (that means the less conscious control you have of it). It would be very awkward if you had to remember consciously to make your heart beat, regulate your digestion, or make your bones regenerate.

The conscious mind is like the rider of a horse, steering and guiding, setting outcomes and deciding directions. These then pass into the unconscious and we start to take actions to achieve them. The unconscious is like the horse that actually does the work in getting to where the rider wants. It is not a good idea to let the horse set the direction. Nor is it a good idea for the rider to try to tell the horse exactly where to put its feet at every stage of the journey. Conscious and unconscious at best form a balanced partnership.

Everyone has all the resources they need to change, or they can create them. However they often think they do not have the resources because they are not conscious of them in the particular context where they need them. Hypnotherapy and trance is a method to utilise the unconscious resources. Some neurophysiological research suggests that it is possible that every experience we ever have is stored somewhere and can be accessed under the right circumstances. We have all had the experience of long forgotten events popping into our minds, triggered by some stray thought.

Some systems of psychology (e.g. psychoanalysis) view the unconscious as a repository of repressed, disruptive material. NLP takes the view that the unconscious is benevolent – as it has all our experiences, we could utilise them to gain wisdom.

NLP has a healthy respect for the unconscious. The easiest place to start however is the conscious – what we are aware of and how we direct our lives. NLP agrees with Buddhism on at least one point - wanting is at the centre of human life, so the best place to begin NLP is with outcomes – formulating, understanding and achieving what you want in life.

Action Plan

1. Pick one of the NLP presuppositions that appeals to you. Now think of one problem or difficult situation you have with another person at

the moment. What would you do if you acted as if that presupposition were true? How would the situation change?

2. Now pick a presupposition that you have the greatest doubts about. Take another difficult situation in your life. What would you do if you acted as if that presupposition were true? How would the situation change?

Watch the Film *The Matrix* on video. If you have already seen it, then watch it again. If you were the protagonist in the film, would you have taken the blue or the red pill? And how do you know you are not in a Matrix for real? (Copyright Joseph O'Connor 2000)