Enhancing and Advancing Neuro Linguistic Programming

A New Anthology of Shared Findings and Learnings
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Once upon a time, not only did the Giants of NLP walk the earth, but they also sang to each other across and around the world. They expanded their fields through sharing articles in journals like NLP World and Anchor Point. They thrived on exploring and applying NLP models and developing new concepts and ideas.

But then one day the publications stopped.

Whilst the NLP Giant population grew, many of the Giants formed their own personal sites and people were welcome to visit if they could find them. Every so often, some of the Giants would walk the earth and meet to share their ideas and developments with the people. Although the Giants shared their ideas, their songs were rarely heard.

Having enjoyed the Giants’ songs, one person missed the joy of the journals and the sharing of giant ideas. And one morning he woke up with a positive intention and a well-formed outcome, determined to hear the Giants sing again. A new journal... with new articles... perhaps a new legacy for NLP. And so, in partnership with the ANLP, Acuity was conceived.

*Acuity* is designed to sit between *Rapport* magazine and the *Current Research in NLP* journal. The aim of *Acuity* is to provide an opportunity for authors and innovators to advance the field of NLP in sharing their findings, learnings and developments: new models, techniques, applications, refinements and new perspectives to old themes.

I wish to thank the panel: Steve Andreas, Robert Dilts, L. Michael Hall, James Lawley, Robert Smith and Lisa Wake for their time and their support. And I wish to thank the contributors without whom the journal would have been an empty experience.

Like some of you, I am an outcome- oriented creature and for years I wanted a journal. Now, with the help of some fantastic people, here you are.

Enjoy, be brilliant and shine on.

Joe Cheal  
Editor of Acuity.
“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts” – a phrase often used in NLP and indeed, Richard Gray even refers to this in his article.

This is certainly the case for Acuity, which makes this a great anthology, because every article is already ‘great’ as a standalone piece. So to have them combined into a collection of insights into NLP and Coaching is truly remarkable and a testament to all who have contributed.

The other thing regularly alluded to is the need for greater collaboration in the field of NLP. Robert Dilts talks about Generative Collaboration and Acuity is definitely an example of that. Acuity was conceived, nurtured and delivered with a true spirit of collaboration, and we had no idea when we started exactly where we would end up, because the small ideas developed into bigger plans, nurtured by a shared enthusiasm and passion for NLP.

I would especially like to thank Joe for his commitment, drive and enthusiasm in creating, co-ordinating and editing Acuity. Thank you to our full review panel, who have embraced this concept with conviction and a commitment that enabled us to take Acuity and transform it into a reality. And as Joe says, thank you to the contributors because of course, without the enormous part they play, there would be no Acuity.

Please do continue to generate informative and innovative articles, so that we can continue to develop a strong body of works for the field of NLP to enjoy.

Karen Moxom
Managing Director
ANLP
NLP Patterns and Principles

Richard M. Gray, Ph.D

There are certain recurring patterns that NLP pays special attention to. These include sensory experience and the 4-tuple, outcomes, rapport and ecology. Some of the others are structural principles that arise from the linguistic roots of NLP. Here we would like to begin with two ideas, recursion and the TOTE model.

Recursion refers to the property of self reference. It is ubiquitous in nature. It appears in the Fibonacci series that orders the growth of plants and spiral shells. This is a recursive number series that grows by adding each number in the series to the sum of itself and the previous number. It is recursive because each number is generated by reaching back to the last two numbers in the series to create the next.

For example: 0+0=0, 0+1=1, 1+1=2, 1+2=3, 2+3=5, 3+5=8, 5+8=13, 8+13=21 … .

This yields the series, 0, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377, 610, and so on. When plotted as spiral it creates the logarithmic spiral found in the nautilus and the snail as well as the whorled pattern of seeds in the sunflower.
Recursion is responsible for the chaotic flow of fluid as dynamic flow patterns feedback on one another. Recursion is also the secret of linguistic diversity. Fractal patterns depend upon this same principle of recursion.

In linguistics, Chomsky showed that the reason we can create a theoretically infinite linguistic capacity from a relatively limited number of sounds is because the system feeds back on itself, it is recursive. Each pattern of syntactic relationships becomes the source of a hierarchy of interrelated patterns that enclose many more details. This feeds directly into the Cognitive linguistic roots of NLP, there are patterns that feed back on themselves.

Piaget spoke about humans as structured and ordered systems in which one level of information builds recursively on another. Structure is the expression of a continuously evolving system in which structure blends seamlessly with system construction. It is recursive. Form and content are seen by Piaget as different levels of analysis within the same structure. He notes: "... there is no "form as such" or "content as such," ... each element ... is always simultaneously form to the content it subsumes and content for some higher form." (Piaget, 1970, p. 35)

One of the important contributions to the basic NLP model was an insight from L. Michael Hall in his 1996 book, Meta States. Here he made the important observation that self-reflection, recursion, is a crucial part of what it means to be human. He noted that part of the richness of what it means to be human is rooted in: 1. our self-reflexive consciousness; our awareness of our awareness and 2. our feelings about our feelings, what he called meta-states. In this ground-breaking work he points to how we can learn to apply feelings to feelings in order to take control of present states.

Hall makes the following statement about the effects of the recursive practice of metastating:

Sometimes a state about a state will negate the first; sometimes it will create a paradox and send a person into a state of confusion; sometimes it will amplify the first state; sometimes it will distort the first state and turn it into something wondrously useful or destructive (fear about fear—paranoia, belief in belief—fanaticism). (1996, p. 44-emphasis in original)

In computer programming (this is Neuro-linguistic PROGRAMMING), one of the most common elements is a loop. The recursive loop cycles though a certain sequence of actions over and over until a certain criterion is reached. When the criterion is reached, the loop ends.
On the most basic level, we see this same pattern in the TOTE model. TOTE is an acronym, it refers to Test, Operate, Test, Exit and is derived from a seminal publication in cognitive linguistics by Miller, Galanter and Pribram (1960), Plans and the Structure of Behaviour.

This book, often called the first book to apply a computer metaphor to human behaviour, set forth the idea that behaviours in complex systems that have no defined end (like do this five times and stop) need to have some guiding process that allows them to know what to do and when to stop doing it. This means that behaviours in living organisms can be usefully compared to a computer program that sets a criterion, operates on the data, and tests to see whether the criterion has been met. If the criterion has not been met, the program loops through again. If the criterion has been met, the program ends.

In the language of NLP we begin with an outcome. The first test in the Test-Operate-Test-Exit strategy is the comparison of our present state to a desired state—an outcome. If they fail to match, we perform some operation in hope of changing percepts, behaviours or the world in the direction of our stated outcome. The second test in the algorithm again compares the present state to the outcome. If the outcome criteria have been met, the process ends; we exit the process. If, however, the outcome has not been met, we loop back through the test-operate procedure until it does (Dilts, 1983; Dilts & Delozier, 2000; Dilts, Grinder, Bandler & Delozier, 1980; Wake, 2010).

In line with what we have already discussed the model begins with an outcome. This suggests that we are aware of our current state or the state of our client and have decided that there is something better or more important than the current condition. This emphasizes the creation of an outcome and sensory awareness.

The operations in this model specify how we can get there from here. You may remember that well-formed outcomes end with a specification of the steps that allow us to get there. In even the simplest model, some behaviour must be specified.

The second test represents calibration. How do we know that the criteria have been met? We look, we listen, we feel, taste and smell. In general, we use sensory based information to compare our outcome against the present time reality. If they match, the process ends. If they do not match, we continue to work.
As the model returns to operations, we find that the organism has the opportunity to modify its behaviour. This allows us to work more effectively. It also allows us to learn from our errors—there is no such thing as failure, only feedback.

The model was originally created as an extension of the behavioural model of the reflex arc. One of its innovative extensions was the addition of room for flexibility. If what we are doing doesn’t work, or hasn’t worked the way we want, we can do something else.

As it appears in NLP, the model usually specifies that testing happens in the sensory modality most relevant to the issue. A carpenter hammering nails might use sight or feel—a hammer hitting a nail off-centre feels very different from one that has hit the nail correctly. If the task is driving down a narrow street, vision, hearing and feeling might all be used. Vision predominates as the feedback mechanism as one determines that the spaces between your car and those parked on the sides is sufficient. Sound and feelings provide the test criteria if the visual test fails and you crash into the parked cars (Dilts et al., 1980; Dilts & Delozier, 2000).

Let’s think about tuning a guitar. The guitar player has a reference note, either memorized or from an external device, like a pitch pipe. In the initial Test he compares the tone of the string; let’s say that it’s the D string, against the reference note. The test either passes or it fails. The tone of the string either matches the reference note or not. If it matches, he exits and moves on to the next string. If it does not match, he does something to the guitar; he turns the peg to change its tone. He then tests again, he plucks the guitar string and, listening, he compares the sound of the guitar to the reference pitch. If it matches the reference tone, he goes on to the next string. If it doesn’t match, he repeats the cycle.

Because vertebrates are wily creatures, the guitarist may change his technique and continuously pluck the string as he turns the peg up and down. Here he has merged the operation and the test into a continuous behaviour. It is still part of the same pattern, test, operate, test, exit but it happens as a smooth sequence. The newbie, turns the peg a few notches at a time and tests the tone at each change. As the process develops, the test is refined to reflect the guitarist’s growing experience of the relationship between the tone of the string and the cranks of the peg. Feedback (recursion) changes the structure of the operation.

This model can be used to describe simple behaviours, like hitting a nail with a hammer and it can be used to build complex hierarchical models of much more complex behaviours. If we imagine that a basic TOTE can be used to assemble a set of rudimentary skills that are necessary to a larger task, we can imagine that larger and larger tasks can become unified wholes using the same model. Let’s go back to the guitar player.
The guitar player is just learning to play. His first task is simply learning how to hold down a string so that it gives a pleasing tone rather than a thunk or a buzz. He knows how the note should sound; this is his criterion for the first test. He presses down the string with the tip of one finger and plucks the string—his first operation. Listening to the result (test), he can determine whether it is a pleasing note or not. If it is a note, he can try a few more. If it is a thunk or a buzz, he can try making the note again until it sounds better.

Having learned how to hold down the strings so that he can make the guitar sound properly, he may move on to making a chord. He now has two sets of criteria. The first is the visual pattern he has found in the sheet music or the chord book that he is using. The second is whether or not he can make the chord sound good. He operates on the guitar by pressing his fingers over the strings according to the pattern in the book. He may test this first by arranging his fingers on the guitar string and comparing them with the book. If this test matches, he will strum the guitar (Operate) and test again by listening for a nice chord or the deadly thunks and buzzes that tell him to try again. When he has successfully played one chord, he can then go on to learn several others.

When those chords begin to play with a minimum of thunks and buzzes, he can then try stringing those chords together to play a song. In this case, his criteria will expand to include the sheet music for the tune, his internal representation of how the song should sound, and a sense of whether the rhythm and speed of his playing are appropriate. Each of these builds upon the other until he has developed the complete and essentially unified behaviour of playing the song.

Now, it may seem that all of this is about something that is obvious to almost everyone. That is true; however, as we learn to specify how people do things, one step at a time, we learn several things. First we learn to observe their behaviour; a habit that cannot be over emphasized. Second we learn how that behaviour is structured; the small pieces that they had to master in order to gain the skills. Third, by learning how they did it, we can find out how to do, or not do, the behaviour that they display. This is the essence of modeling (Dilts, 1998; Gordon & Dawes, 2005).

One of the keys to learning how to change behaviour is learning how people are able to do what they do when they do it. This is not necessarily why they do it but how. It is a very useful pattern. Richard Bandler has recommended the cultivation of a spirit of curiosity about behaviour, rather than a judgment. ‘Wow, how do you do that?’ is much more useful than, ‘What’s wrong with you’ (Bandler, 1998, 2008)?

When I worked for the federal government doing drug treatment, I became curious about how people changed their minds about doing drugs. How did they develop the skill of
making different choices about whether or not to use drugs? One of the things that I found was that when people had more important or more rewarding things to do—as they understood them—they would often put off using or stop completely.

It appeared that when people had an outcome that was more important than getting high, they would use that as a criterion for how they wanted to feel. They would compare this to the drugged state and their operation was to continue doing the alternate behaviour. As long as the alternate provided a better experience than using drugs (test), they would continue to do that other thing (operational loop). When that other behaviour ceased to be sufficiently rewarding (test) they would exit sobriety and return to substance use (exit).

For one client, the alternate behaviour was motherhood. She was using $300 a day in speedballs (heroin and cocaine). When she discovered that she was pregnant she found that she would feel better if she gave her child a healthy body and lifestyle. Within three days of discovering her pregnancy, she stopped completely. For the next year she found herself quite content (test) to fulfill the role of mother (operate). After a year, motherhood became less rewarding (test) and she exited sobriety (exit).

One client, a mafia lawyer, had an intractable cocaine habit. Nothing worked. I asked him what he needed in order for cocaine to no longer be a problem for him. He eventually replied that if he went back to church, he would no longer need to use. When he finally began attending church he stopped using cocaine in short order. His original criterion seemed to be that his life could continue as it was, as long as he was not committed to the church: no church (test) continue to use cocaine (operate). But when he returned to church (test), he had to stop using cocaine (exit).

As we consider the structure of plans and behaviours, we come to the conclusion that NLP is implicitly systems theoretical, that is, it is built on the principle that larger elements of behaviour are built of smaller chunks as an organized whole. However, that assembly is not just additive, it is emergent.

The emergent property of a complex system is a whole whose properties could not be predicted from the parts. In NLP we regularly note that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This is important because even though we talk about the fine grained structure of behaviour, as the parts come together we find something much more than we would have expected. In NLP this is often called streamlining.

There are several formulations of systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968; Fidler, 1982; Gray, 1996; Piaget, 1970). All of them reflect some of the same basic ideas. The most common of these are: emergence, centration, transformation and self regulation.
Emergence is the concept that complex systems are composed of subsystems that retain their own character and function as they subserve the whole. Our guitar player learned how to press the strings, make the chords and play the song. As the behaviour streamlined, all of these parts coalesced into a coherent whole. None of them lost their character, function or value, but all were merged into the larger skill of musical expertise. In systems, any part can become the centre of function for the whole as long as the function of that part is crucial to the system. This is the principle of centration. Steve Andreas (2004) calls this heterarchy and gives the example of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). In the American armed forces, rank is absolute, it has nothing to do with expertise; it is hierarchical. In the IDF, the soldier with the essential level of expertise takes command for the situation where her skill is paramount. When that crisis ends, normal order is restored.

Our guitar player can invoke any of the systemic skills as the centre of his attention, whenever he needs to. As he learns a new chord or a new riff, making individual notes one at a time may become the centre. In another context, whole chords may dominate while in others, entire songs will be the centre of his attention.

In organisms, perceptions and actions are controlled by needs and desires. At any moment, one sensory system, dominated by one need, may determine what the action criteria are in that context. The most salient outcome determines the choice of behaviour. Sometimes we refer to these centres as parts because we can characterize them as having a mind of their own.

Systems are dynamic, they transform and change but all of those changes are determined by the capacities of the individual. This is the principle of transformation. Living systems change and people change over time. The only people who do not change are dead people. In NLP we understand that, apart from actual physical and developmental deficits, a human being can become anything that they imagine.

Our guitar player can use his skills in various contexts and with various constraints. He can change the style of his playing from blues to samba to folk. He can even play his guitar behind his head. Having learned the guitar, he may transfer those skills to the bass guitar whose four strings share the same tuning as his guitar. He might even transfer his skills to the colour coded strings of a harp; once he knows the colour code, he can find the same chords and notes on that instrument as he does on the guitar.

Complex systems also have the property of self regulation. This means that people remain people, horses remain horses and you remain who you are. Even when we make radical changes in beliefs and behaviours, the characteristics that define you continue to operate.
We see this in NLP as the unconscious tends to correct ecologically unsound behaviours that have no strong compulsive elements. When a behaviour has not been practiced so as to become automatic and it is not associated with significant external reinforcement, it will often fade away leaving the original structure of personality and behaviour intact. Behaviours that resonate with the deep structure of the individual are easily assimilated and can quickly become part of the individual’s standard behavioural repertoire. For this reason, once more, ecology is a major consideration in any kind of change work. In general, we continue to be who we are.

**Review**

- Patterns in living systems are often recursive, by feeding back onto their own structure, they generate new levels of meaning as hierarchies.
- Meta-stating is the NLP process of applying one feeling to another feeling or process and paying attention to the result—how you feel about the feeling or behaviour.
- The TOTE model was the first computer metaphor applied to human behaviour. It represents a strategy for controlling behaviour by monitoring actions upon the environment (internal or external) to determine whether the operations (actions) were successful.
- TOTE is an acronym that stands for Test, Operate, Test, Exit. It represents a looping structure that sets a criterion for change (Test) that is distinct from present conditions (present state vs desired state). It then performs some action or operation upon the environment to move the present condition towards the desired state (Operate). It then compares the newly changed condition to the criterion (Test). If the criterion has been met, that is if the present state now matches the desired state, the behavioural loop ends (Exit). If the criterion has not been met, the process continues with further operations and tests until it does.
- The TOTE model lies at the heart of much of what is done in NLP. It is the explicit core of modeling.
- TOTEs are often built up into systems in order to create more complex behaviours. These more complex behaviours coalesce into streamlined behaviours and represent more than the sum of their parts.
- NLP is implicitly systems theoretical. That is, it applies the principles of General Systems theory as originally formulated by Bertalanffy in the 1960s.
- The systems principals are: 1. emergence—the whole is more than the sum of its parts; 2. centration—any subsystem can become the controlling centre of the system depending on the present-time needs of the system; 3.
Transformation—complex systems are dynamic and they change over time and in accordance with circumstances; 4. Self regulation—systems retain their identity independent of the changes they go through.

- In NLP, these principles appear as follows: 1. Emergence—in all change there is a difference that makes a difference, one transformation that can reconfigure the entire system; 2. Centration—most behaviours are constrained by ecology, in any context any resource may become the centre of the system (e.g. shifting perceptual preferences); 3. Transformation—more choices are generally better than fewer choices, the organism with the most options controls the conversation; 4. Self regulation—change can only go so far, you will always remain who you are; this is an expression of deep ecology.

**Exercises**

Consider the emotion of anger. Think of a time when you were angry. Now, meta-state the anger by applying happiness to the anger. Be happy that you were angry. Notice how that changes your anger. Apply the following emotions to anger: joy, peace, sadness, anger, surprise, curiosity. Note how your response changes with each example.

Consider each of the following emotions joy, peace, sadness, anger, surprise, curiosity. Go through them one at a time and apply the list above (joy, peace, sadness, anger, surprise, curiosity) to each one. Note how each change impacts you.

Think of a skill that you have acquired. Think back to how you learned that skill. What were the constituent parts that you had to learn before you could perform that behaviour adequately? How did you use the TOTE strategy to build each of them? Specify the criteria you used and the tests (what you were paying attention to) that you used to learn each behaviour as well as those you used to assemble the larger behaviour. Were there times when the behaviours became automatic? When were they?

Interview someone about a skill that they have. Ask them to name the composite skills that were necessary to create the larger capacity. Ask them to describe the sequence of observations and behaviours (the TOTEs) that they used to learn the smaller and the larger skills. Test to see if you can get enough information so that you could do the same thing.
Biography

Richard M Gray, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, NJ. Before his move to academia, Dr. Gray served for more than 20 years in the US Probation Department, Brooklyn, NY. He is the creator of the Brooklyn Program, an NLP-based substance abuse program which operated for seven years in the Federal Probation System. In recognition of that work, he was co-recipient of the 2004 Neuro-linguistic Programming World Community Award. Dr. Gray is the author of Archetypal Explorations (Routledge, 1996), Transforming Futures: The Brooklyn Program Facilitators Manual (Lulu, 2003) and About Addictions: Notes from Psychology, Neuroscience and NLP (Lulu, 2008). He is a regular presenter at national and international addictions conferences and a recognized expert in Neuro-Linguistic Programming. He received his BA in Psychology from Central College, Pella, IA; MA in Sociology from Fordham University, Bronx, NY; and Ph.D. in Psychology from the Union Institute, Cincinnati, OH. He also earned a certificate in Forensic Psychology at New York University in 2002. Dr. Gray is a Certified Master Practitioner of Neuro-linguistic Programming and a Certified Ericksonian Hypnotist. Richard is a member of the American Psychological Association, the Federal Probation Officers Association, the Canadian Association of NLP, the Institute for the Advanced Study of Health and the NLP Research and Recognition Project.

References


‘If only God would give us a sign’

The Role of Meta-Comments

Penny Tompkins and James Lawley

Cartoon reproduced with kind permission of Allan Hirsh,


David Grove, the originator of Clean Language, was an astute observer of his therapy clients. He was the first to alert us to the importance of clients' comments which do not follow on from the previous statement and which appear incongruous. Grove called these comments non sequiturs. We extracted the non sequiturs from a number of verbatim client transcripts. We noticed that most of these remarks were a more or less thinly disguised comment about what was happening for the client in the previous moment – hence we called them meta-comments.
We define a ‘meta-comment’ as a verbal or nonverbal expression which refers to what has just been experienced. These self-reflections range from the fully conscious and explicit to the completely unconscious and implicit.

Apparently Michael Palin used the term ‘meta comment’ when he was part of Monty Python’s Flying Circus. The Pythons used them to comic effect when an actor would refer to the situation their character was in. For example in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, following Sir Galahad’s discovery of the Castle Anthrax, Dingo is telling the sad tale of her life:

"Oh, wicked, bad, naughty, evil Zoot! She is a bad person and must pay the penalty...

... she turns to the camera:

"Do you think this scene should have been cut? We were so worried when the boys were writing it, but now, we're glad. It's better than some of the previous scenes, I think..."

This is analogous to when clients meta-comment. They interrupt what they are doing to pass a judgment, reflect on their knowledge, give notification of a change, or in some other way reveal something about the current state of their inner world. To understand meta-comments you need to extract them from the flow of normal speech and recognise that the client is commenting on their in-the-moment experience. Because they are embedded in the client’s narratives, meta-comments are somewhat hidden and easily ignored. But to ignore them is to miss out on some of the most important signposts for how best to proceed with facilitating this particular client at this particular moment.

The following example is from a client who was struggling to come to terms with her new role as a mother.

It’s got a new quality about it. It’s a very new thing. It’s ... What I’m finding out with the mother role which I love, and it is true I have somehow taken to it naturally, I’m aware that what’s creeping in is this sort of more negative side where I will more easily lose myself, the bit that I do know is me which comes through when I feel free, which is quite interesting. And before it goes too far where ... I don’t want to become in some ways like my mother did, which was really putting her life on hold. And giving in to exhaustion. And I can, I know I have that in me to do. And eventually I think, you know, that’s what killed her, you know with the cancer, the stuff just ate her up. So ... I am strong. I am quite a strong person and I ... that works against me sometimes, because I will do things to exhaustion. And then I collapse. There’s a negative aspect which comes through as resentment. Because I can be so resentful as well because I can take on things but I’m not, I’m no saint. You know, I will go, ‘oh, what about me?’.
Did you notice any meta-comments? What alerted you to them? What did they point to? And what would you ask as a result?

Penny noted “which is quite interesting” was a meta-comment on “the bit that I do know is me which comes through when I feel free”. The meta-comment indicated that the client’s attention was attracted enough by what she had just said and thought for her to interrupt her narrative and pass comment. As a result of this signposting Penny used Clean Language to ask:

And what about me? And there’s a bit that you know is me that comes through when you feel free. And when you feel free and you know that bit is me, where is that bit?

In case you are interested, the client replied:

On my shoulder, sort of here [right hand gestures to right shoulder]. Like a conscience, but not a conscience. Yes, it’s a knowing, yeah it’s a knowing. That’s interesting. It’s funny identifying a place because now I can remember when I have ... m-m-m, now that’s interesting. I’ve, I’ve, I’ve heard this before but not known the locality of it.

Below are some more examples of client’s meta-comments:

This is important.
That’s a new option.
There must be a place that knows.
I realise I need to decide which way to go.
God knows.
No, that’s not what I meant. [self-correcting]
Do I want to go there?
That’s a hard question.
Oh look, there’s no green in the rainbow.
Does that make sense?
Phew, I’ve gone all hot.
I know I shouldn’t say this but ...
... so anyway ...
It’s obvious that ....
It just occurred to me ...
I can’t believe I just said that.
Now let me see ...
[A tap of a watch]
[A hand over the mouth]

The key to understanding the role played by meta-comments is to model what the client has had to do with their attention or perception to have made this particular comment.
Meta-comments indicate a momentary shift in perspective (and possibly perceiver) from a more descriptive narrative to a statement with a degree of self-reflection.

Because we are remarkably consistent beings and we cannot not be ourselves, the structure of what we do in the micro (seconds) is often isomorphic with what happens in the macro (days, months, years). In this way meta-comments in the session can be seen as fractals – vignettes that when scaled up retain a similar organisation to how we experience our 'real life'.

From a facilitator's viewpoint, meta comments can be considered as orientation pointers and as messages from the 'wisdom in the system'. In broad terms they can be taken as a directive to:

- Continue attending to the current perception (to stay put)
- Attend to something else
- Not attend to something
- Change your way of facilitating (e.g. slow down, speed up, etc.)

Since meta-comments are about the client’s relationship with their interior landscape they often reveal something about the degree of significance or insignificance the client attaches to a part of their experience.

**Why 'Meta'?**

The notion of 'meta' and 'levels of communication' was extensively discussed and utilised by the groups that formed around Gregory Bateson at Stanford University in the 1950s and at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto, California in the 1960s. Strangely, although Bateson regularly mentions meta-communication, metalogues and metalinguistic messages in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, we could not find the term 'meta-comment' in the book.

Robert Dilts and Judith DeLozier have attempted to clarify the plethora of meta-this and meta-that in their *Encyclopedia of Systemic NLP* [pp. 718-720]:

The term *meta* is a Greek word meaning ‘over’, ‘between’ or ‘above’. In English it is also used to mean ‘about’. A ‘meta model’, for example, is a model about other models.

‘Metacognition’ is the awareness of one’s own cognitive processes, i.e. cognition about cognition.
'Meta messages' are messages about other messages, which provide frames or context markers that influence the meaning of those messages. Meta messages are typically nonverbal and give emphasis or provide cues for how to interpret a verbal message.

'Meta communication' is communication about communication. For instance, a meta communication is often a verbal statement that sets a framework around a communication situation in the form of rules, guidelines and expectations. A study of the communication patterns of effective leaders revealed that almost half of the leaders’ communication was actually meta communication.

It is important to distinguish meta communication from meta messages. Meta communication is a more macro level process from sending a meta message. A meta message operates as a kind of subtext that emphasizes certain aspects of a message. If a person says, “YOU weren’t respecting the rules” it marks the communication as directed to the ‘who’. Saying “You weren’t respecting the RULES” shifts the emphasis of the message to the ‘what’. Meta communication, on the other hand, would be saying something like, “Let’s talk about what the rules are, and why we have them.”

Meta-comments are another member of the above family of Meta’s. They can involve metacognition, and they can be a meta message or a meta communication. Typically they are short and interspersed within ordinary speech. If they go on for too long they cease to be 'meta' and become a comment in their own right. Their primary function seems to be a communication to self and secondarily a communication to someone else. It is like the person is externalising their internal dialogue without realising it.

Meta-States

Meta-comments signal a momentary shift to a meta-perspective. L. Michael Hall’s model of Meta-States covers a similar but wider territory than is relevant to this article:

In a Meta-State, conscious awareness reflects back onto itself (i.e. self-reflective consciousness). Thinking-about-thinking then generates thoughts/feelings at higher logical levels so that we experience states-about-states. Rather than referring to something "out there" in the world, Meta-States refer to something about some previous thought, emotion, concept, understanding, Kantian category, etc. In this way we layer thought upon thought. [2000, p.4]

Examples of meta-states are: Worry about worrying; reasoning about our reasoning; anger at self for being too emotional; etc. While working with meta-states opens up all sorts of possibilities, we have found great value in simply regarding a meta-comment as a pointer to what is happening for a client and a guide for how to work with their process.
Congruence/Incongruence

Because all forms of meta-communication, -messages, -states and -comments operate at a different level to that which they are referring to, they can be perceived by the facilitator as either congruent or incongruent. While incongruence can be considered as evidence that the client is operating with incompatible behaviours, desires, values or beliefs, from a systemic perspective if you go to a high enough level you’ll find that a functioning system is always internally congruent. If you cannot see the congruence in what they are saying and doing that’s a signal that there is more for you to model.

Categories of Meta-Comments

In everyday conversation meta-comments rarely become the topic of conversation and an inexperienced listener will barely be aware they have been said. It’s like the viewers of a videoed basketball match who are so intent on counting the number of passes they don’t notice a man in a gorilla suit run onto the court. However, once you start to look for these particular gorillas you’ll see them everywhere.

To model the way clients use meta-comments we took the first 20 minutes of eight verbatim transcripts each with a different therapy client and picked out all the meta-comments. This resulted in over 120 different examples (excluding repetitions). On average that’s one meta-comment every 45 seconds. We categorised these examples into the following broad headings:

WAYS OF KNOWING
- The first thing that comes to mind is ....
- I’m guessing it must be just a kind of ...  
- I’m imagining ...

COMPARISON
- Scale  
- Judgment/Preference  
- Change/Persistence  
- It’s a big deal for me.
- That’s odd.
- Actually in some ways that’s new.

TIMEFRAME
- At the moment ...
- I’m at the stage where...
- I feel that’s the end of it.

LANGUAGING
- Let me rephrase that.
- I can’t verbalise it.
- The question is ...

CATEGORIES OF EXPERIENCE
- That’s the pattern.
- I’ve no new ideas.
Pattern-level comments

There is an additional category of meta-comment that rarely occurs in the first 20 minutes of a client's first session but which warrants special attention. These are comments at a pattern-level of organisation:

That’s like my whole life.
I’m back to square one.
I can’t stop running round in circles.
How long am I going to complain about this?
I realise it’s never going to work.
Here I go again.
It’s the same problem in a different guise.

Comments like these are especially important because they mark out that the client is perceiving at a pattern level. With skilful choice of questions you can facilitate them to stay at that level. By transcending and including the multitude of lower-level components and examples they are working strategically. And when the pattern changes the effects will filter down so they think, feel and behave differently across a range of contexts – some of which may never have been mentioned.

Common signals for meta-comments

Careful observation suggests that there are behaviours that often mark out a meta-comment from other language:
The person's body often moves slightly backwards or upwards.
There is a change in their tonality.
There is a discontinuity in the flow of their sentences.
The comment has an 'about-ness' to it.

You may also notice a subtle internal sense that something different – a kind of mismatch – has just happened. This will be you noticing that the client's meta-comment has changed the frame for a second or two. With practice you can sensitise yourself to notice these cues and increase your ability to choose whether or not to respond to the meta-comment. To develop these skills we recommend you review a transcript, highlighting the meta-comments only. One indicator of a meta-comment is to consider whether the client's description makes sense without that comment. If you were to remove all of the meta-comments from a transcript and hand it to someone else they wouldn't know anything was missing. This, however, does not mean they are unimportant.

**Working with meta-comments**

Most of the time you can just note a client's meta-comment and use it to update your model of their model of the world. This will help you attend to what the client is attending to, and be a guide to where it would be useful for the client's attention to go next.

Hearing a client meta-comment can alert you to consider: What just happened? How did they do the shift? What happened just before the shift?. By 'reverse engineering' what the client has likely had to do with their attention you can get an embodied sense of how their thinking is organised in that moment.

Occasionally, however, you may decide to utilise the meta-comment more directly.

David Grove suggested that meta-comments have "a short half-life". They decay quickly and soon disappear from the client's awareness unless they are attended to. So if you are going to refer to them you need to do so immediately after they have happened. Below is a simplified framework for doing this

1. Notice/recognise the meta-comment.

2. Model the comment in relation to the current organisation of the client's interior landscape and context of the session.

3. Consider whether to:
i. Utilise the comment directly
ii. Follow the direction suggested by the meta-comment
iii. Deliberately not follow the direction implied by the meta-comment.

4. If you decide to pursue one of the options in 3, we recommend you first check that your intention to utilise the meta-comment relates to their desired outcome. Then you can choose how you are going to do this. For example, using Clean Language, you could respond to a client who says:

Client: I’ve just realised I need to decide which way to go.

Facilitator:
i: And what kind of ‘realised’ is that ‘realised’?
ii: And then what happens?
iii: And where could the ‘need to decide’ come from?

Ways Meta-Comments can be utilised

Once you have decided you are going to make use of a meta-comment you have lots of choice about how to do that. Below we list some examples to give you a flavour of how we use Clean Language to utilise verbal and nonverbal meta-comments.

Any meta-comment
- Repeat only the meta-comment and pause.
- Or ask: And is there anything else about that [client’s meta-comment]?

"There’s something else I can’t quite grasp."
- Do nothing, and wait to see what happens.
- Or ask: And then what happens?

"I’m trying to do this in bits."
- And how many bits?
- And what kind of trying is that trying?

"Both elements are important."
- Make sure that both elements are explored.
- Or ask: And how do you know both elements are important?

"I know this pattern."
- And when you know this pattern then what happens?
- And given you know this pattern, what would you like to have happen?

"If I’m honest ..."
- And what happens just before you’re honest?
- And where does being honest come from?
"[Laugh] I’ve been here before."
- And what kind of [laugh] is that [laugh]?
- And what could that [laugh] know?
- And where could [laugh] come from?

"I kind of know that I want something, but [sits back] I don’t know what I want."
- And what’s the difference between [indicate them sitting forward] and [indicate them sitting back]?
- And whereabouts is that know that you want something?

A meta-comment that suggests something new just happened.
- Interrupt and ask: And what just happened?

When there are a lot of meta-comments
- Repeat back a list of their meta-comments and ask: And is there anything else about all that?
- And what happens just before you [list a few meta-comments]?

Attending to their own meta-comments is likely be an unusual experience for a client. While it can encourage them to become even more adept at self-reflection and open up areas that were out of their awareness, if overdone clients are liable to become self-conscious. Therefore you need to be selective and to calibrate how useful the client’s responses to your questions are to them – given their desired outcome.

**Conclusion**

People meta-comment more frequently than you might expect. In our small survey clients averaged more than one per minute. While some people habitually comment on what is going on, others rarely do – but when they do it usually signals something significant has just happened. Despite their frequency and significance meta-comments are all but ignored by most facilitators. In so doing vital information about the current status of the client’s model of the world can be missed.

In this paper we have identified several ways to make use of meta-comments, the most common being:

- Utilising the logic of the meta-comment
- Directing attention to the meta-comment itself
- Moving time back or forward using the meta-comment as a marker
Note, our way of utilising a client’s meta-comments needs to be distinguished from the technique used by some schools of therapy where the therapist meta-comments on a client’s behaviour, often their non-verbal behaviour.

On reflection, perhaps the most significant kinds of meta-comments are those that indicate the client is operating at a pattern level or that something has just changed. When you detect one of these cues we recommend that you put on hold anything else you were thinking of doing and keep the client attending to the pattern or the change.

Finally, while you can utilise any particular meta-comment, we suggest their main value is to keep you informed about what is happening for the client, and to point to how you can support the next step in their unfolding process.

Biography

Penny Tompkins and James Lawley have both been UKCP registered neurolinguistic psychotherapists since 1993. They are also supervisors, coaches in business, and certified NLP trainers. They co-authored Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling and a training DVD, A Strange and Strong Sensation. They are the founders of The Developing Company and creators of Symbolic Modelling which uses the Clean Language of David Grove. They can be contacted through their web site: www.cleanlanguage.co.uk

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The Role of Moods in NLP

By Joe Cheal MSc

Moods, as background experiences, are rarely referenced within the NLP literature. This article explores how research on moods from the ‘emotional intelligence’ literature relates to what is already available within NLP. There are also some suggestions for interventions we might use to work through problematic moods and to transition to more resourceful moods.

Moods and Their Effect

Emotions come and emotions go, but moods seem to linger longer. According to Paul Eckman (2004), whilst emotions will tend to be fleeting, lasting for seconds or perhaps minutes, moods tend to be longer term (e.g. hours and days). Moods could be described as medium-term background feelings that set a context for our short-term emotions. The background mood acts like a filter on our emotions, making it easier to feel certain things and less easy to feel other things, for example, when in an irritable mood, we tend towards the emotion of anger. In acting like a filter, perhaps the purpose of mood is to keep us in a ready state, with faster access to particular emotions and physiological reactions. A mood of nervousness, for example, might be useful in a threatening context as it helps to heighten the individual’s awareness.

Not only does mood seem to prime us for the corresponding emotion, it may also encourage us to look for things that match the mood and experience internal dialogue that reinforces the mood. For example, if we are feeling irritable, we are perhaps more likely to notice things in the ‘outside world’ that annoy us and tell ourselves how irritating things are. Hence we have a looping self fulfilling prophecy that will be ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ depending on the individuals’ subjective experience:
The fact that mood changes over time must surely indicate that the loop can be interrupted and replaced by another loop on a regular basis. This could be due to a physiological, emotional and/or cognitive interruption generated internally, externally or both (e.g. Goleman 1996).

**Is Mood Like a State?**

From an NLP perspective, although we do not usually use the terms 'emotions' and 'moods', we do refer to 'states'. In everyday usage, a state tends to refer to a condition of mind or feeling, i.e. a state may well simply be an emotion. In NLP usage, however, a ‘state’ or ‘state of mind’ refers to a more multi channel experience, complete with our internal sensory representations (e.g. visual, auditory and kinaesthetic). Robert Dilts (2000, p1300) defines a state as “a gestalt of the neurological processes (mind and body) within an individual at any given time... An individual’s state filters or affects the final result or interpretation of his or her experience.”

What are the connections and/or differences between state and mood? Linguistically, we talk about being 'in a state' and being 'in a mood' as if using the metaphor of state and mood as a container of some kind. We are less likely to talk about being 'in' an emotion however, and more likely to say we are 'having' an emotion. This gives the impression on a metaphor level that we are holding the emotion rather than it holding us. Whilst this is not necessarily conclusive or absolute, it does give us a linguistic differentiation between mood and emotion and connection between mood and state.
The NLP version of a state would usually include emotion but does it include mood? On the one hand it would appear so, since mood would be part of the 'gestalt of the neurological processes'. However, a state will only capture a 'snap-shot' of the ongoing background mood as it is experienced at that moment in time. We might say that a mood is not the same as a state but, like an emotion, it is part of a state.

If emotion is part of a state and mood primes emotion, surely mood would also prime us for particular corresponding states, making it easier to access some states and less easy to access others? If someone is experiencing a mood of happiness, it would seem easier to access a joyous state.

**Is Mood a Meta State?**

According to Hall (2008,p388) a meta-state is “a mental or emotional state of awareness about another state” and so may include feelings, thoughts, evaluations, judgements, beliefs and values about that state. Whereas a state is a primary experience, a meta-state will sit at a higher logical level, being a state about a state.

Since mood appears to prime, inform and govern our emotion, might we argue that mood sits at a higher logical level than emotion? Does experiencing happiness, for example, sit at a higher logical level than feeling happy?

Drawing from the work of Robert Dilts, Hall (2001,p82) separates out five criteria for logical levels:

1) There is a *hierarchy* of experience.
2) Higher levels organise and control information on lower levels
3) Higher levels will necessarily affect lower levels
4) Lower levels will not necessarily affect higher levels (although it is possible)
5) Higher levels encompass and impact more than lower levels.

Perhaps the first two points are debatable. By saying that mood is background to emotion's foreground are we talking about a hierarchy? Can we really say that moods organise and control emotions? Points 3 and 4 seem closer to the relationship between emotion and mood, although it would seem plausible that someone could have a cheerful feeling during a 'down' mood. We might say that mood acts a kind of 'magnetic' influence on emotion but is not necessarily an absolute force. With regard to point 5, can we say that mood is more encompassing and has more impact on us than emotion? Perhaps, if viewed over a long period of time, but emotions (as foreground experience) would seem to be stronger at a specific moment in time.
Is mood a meta-state? It would appear not. As well as only loosely fitting some of the criteria for being a higher logical level, if a mood is not the same as a state, it cannot really be defined as a state about a state. As suggested previously, it may be more helpful to say that mood can be part of a state or a meta-state.

Whether mood is simply part of a state, a meta-state or something else entirely, if we accept that mood primes us for corresponding emotions, an intervention may be short lived if it changes only a person’s state but does not change the background mood. If transitioning into a more resourceful mood primes us for more resourceful emotions and states, then it would seem beneficial to consider some 'mood management' ideas and interventions.

**Getting out of the Mood: Changing States?**

Most NLP interventions follow a similar pattern of eliciting the problem state and context, breaking state, eliciting an outcome state and resources and then associating the resources to the problem state (Overdurf & Silverthorn 2009). Because mood can last hours and days, it may not fit specific contexts (although the trigger for a change in mood might if it were possible to find it). Often, a mood is problematic because the person is 'in' it and they don’t want to be in it. They are already associated to their problem state/mood and need to get out.

Goleman (1996) suggests that mood can change as a result of physiological, emotional and/or cognitive interruptions generated internally, externally or both. If a mood can be interrupted might a 'break state' be enough? Maybe if it is significant or strong enough. If remembering what we had for breakfast isn’t strong enough to change our background mood, perhaps jumping up and down making a noise like a gorilla might be. It will no doubt depend on the intensity and ‘depth’ of the mood. It is also feasible that whilst states can be interrupted and changed through a ‘break state’, moods could revert back if the ongoing conditions (e.g. context, environment) remain the same.

As well as interrupting or ‘breaking’ the mood, the key perhaps is in determining a replacement mood that is more resourceful. What mood would they like to be in? As soon as we have helped someone out of their mood, this would then seem the appropriate point to help associate them into a new desired mood. NLP is an outcome oriented process and working with mood is no different. In focussing on their desired outcome (i.e. what they want) as opposed to the problem (i.e. what they don’t want), the person is likely to begin accessing the desired mood.
The following approaches are aimed at getting the person 'out' of their problematic mood with a view to associating them into a resourceful mood.

### Getting Meta to the Mood: 'Meta-moods' and 'Meta-states'

According to Mayer & Gaschke (1988), a 'meta-mood' concerns someone's thoughts and feelings about their moods. Mayer and Gaschke, authors in the field of Emotional Intelligence, also refer to meta-moods as meta-experience or reflective experience of mood. As reflective experiences, meta-moods could be thoughts or feelings about moods. An individual might feel irritable and then get annoyed with themselves for feeling irritable and the annoyance here would be considered a meta-mood. Alternatively, someone may feel irritable and then reflect on the cause of that irritability and this would also be considered a meta-mood.

Mayer & Gaschke (1988, p106) divide meta-mood experiences into three cognitions that:

1. monitor mood (eg. ‘I know exactly how I’m feeling’),
2. evaluate it (eg. ‘I’m ashamed of how I’m feeling’),
3. try to change it (eg. ‘I’m thinking good thoughts to cheer myself up’).

They suggest however (p110) that “mood-change experience is relatively rare in comparison with mood monitoring and evaluation. This makes a kind of sense: If simply deciding to cheer up always worked, sad moods would easily disappear and sad people would be rare.”

Within their definition, Mayer and Gaschke do not appear to account for meta-moods as being ‘moods about moods’, which is a more probable interpretation from an NLP perspective. It could be argued that Mayer and Gaschke’s 'meta-mood' is really a meta-state about mood.

Hall (2001, p14) discusses what he has called the Meta States Model and this model “proposes that we have states about our states, and that many of the feeling states that trouble us are the result of tangling ourselves in these recursive loops.” For example, we feel annoyed about feeling stupid about feeling anxious. It is important here to ‘detangle’ the meta levels rather than thinking of them as the same. The point of understanding meta-levels is to be able separate an issue out and to work through it at the appropriate level.

As with anything involving a meta-level or meta-state, the meta-mood will sit at a higher logical level to the original mood. This means that working at the level of meta-mood may help us to manage the mood itself more easily and effectively. Sometimes, trying to
resolve or change a mood from within (or at the same level as the mood) is a less-than-easy task. Mayer and Gaschke (1988, p102) argue that a meta-mood as a “regulatory process is potentially important because, unlike mood, it may be directly under the individual’s control and may directly modulate mood itself.”

In going meta to mood, an interesting intervention may be to elicit the submodalities (see Bandler & MacDonald 1989) of the mood and then make changes. For example, what would happen if we were to map across the submodalities of cheerfulness to our current situation? The challenge is to get to the background mood itself rather than just the foreground state. Perhaps Mayer and Gaschke’s concept of meta-moods may be helpful to us here. Changing a mood is going to be significantly easier when first disassociated (even just cognitively) from that mood. I have also found that it is possible for people to access the submodalities of a desired mood through being in second or third perceptual position (i.e. disassociated). If working with a client, Fred, this can be done by asking: “And how does the Fred who is cheerful see the world? Colour or black and white...etc”. Even when a person cannot access the mood directly, they seem to be able to elicit the submodalities of the mood from a disassociated position. Interestingly, I have found that in the process of eliciting the desired mood, people often begin to associate into it.

Reframing

As a meta-state, thinking (and talking) about a problematic mood will tend to have an impact. What we think and say is likely to affect our emotions and moods, especially over a period of time. How our moods are affected will depend on the manner of internal or external dialogue. Thinking and talking with a focus on the mood as a problem may perpetuate the mood. Alternatively, finding meaning, understanding or purpose in the mood and situation may help us shift to feeling more resourceful and in control.

The NLP technique of reframing may be invaluable here in helping someone gain a resourceful meta-perspective to their mood and current situation. In countering depressive moods, Goleman (1996, p72) suggests that: “Two strategies are particularly effective in the battle. One is to learn to challenge the thoughts at the centre of rumination – to question their validity and think of more positive alternatives. The other is to purposely schedule pleasant, distracting events.” He later adds (p74) that: “One of the most potent... antidotes to depression is seeing things differently, or cognitive reframing.”

In Cognitive Therapy, there is a process called a 'Thought Record' which involves writing down one’s experience in order to get a meta perspective and reframe that experience (Greenberger & Padesky, 1995). The 'Thought Record' involves writing down:
the context, a label for the mood/feeling and a rating of its intensity (%), associated thoughts, evidence for 'hot' thoughts (generalisations), counter-evidence, an alternative/balanced thought and then another rating (%). It would appear that the purpose of this process is to challenge the thoughts and generalisations supporting the mood with counter-evidence and then encouraging a new more resourceful generalisation.

Some more traditional therapies and counselling processes seek to find the cause/why/reason behind a problem. In this way, it is argued, the client can gain insights into the problem and feel better (or perhaps more in control). Huy (2002) cites knowing the cause of discomfort as a strategy for handling emotions as it “has been found to reduce anxiety levels and panic attacks among patients because it mitigates their fear of losing control.”

Hall (2001, p73) suggests: “Certainly understanding causes, processes, contributing factors, sources, etc. sometimes plays a therapeutic role in our minds-and-emotions. If in response to the why, we respond with greater insight and ability to take effective action, then the why question can work creatively and resourcefully... Sometimes awareness does bring about relief and even transformation.”. But he goes on to caution: “Yet it does not always do so. Perhaps, not even usually. More typically, the exploration of the why creates more of a problem-focus so that it increasingly solidifies us in our problem or negative state... it locates a person even more solidly inside the very frames-of-reference that create the problem.”

Whilst in NLP we tend to steer away from asking 'why', we do sometimes reframe to seek the 'positive intention' of a situation. It would appear that this frame can help people to make sense of their situation and move from being 'at effect' to being 'at cause'.

**Changing and Denominalising our Language**

In understanding our language around moods and emotions, is it more helpful to an individual to use the verb ‘to feel’ instead of ‘to be’ – for example “I feel sad” as opposed to “I am sad”? It seems like our language encourages us to experience emotions and moods as a complex equivalence at the level of our identity (e.g. “I am sad” means “I = sad”). In addition, our language encourages us to turn emotions and moods into things rather than processes. In order to help denominalise an emotion or mood, might we use the term ‘feeling’ instead of ‘feel’. Or might we have a feeling or be having a feeling? I have a feeling of sadness? What is the verb form of sad? Perhaps we need some more vocabulary around emotions and moods to help ‘verb-alise’ and express them effectively!
With regards to mood, we also use the phrase “I am in a mood” as if the mood is a container of some sort. No wonder we sometimes feel we cannot escape it. Might we say: “I am going through a mood” instead? And perhaps in order to speed that process up we might consider the ‘drop through’ technique (e.g. Bodenhamer & Hall 1997), which tends to lead the person through problematic states into a stronger more resourceful place.

**Associating into Resourceful Moods**


Since mood is a part of a state, mood change could be achieved through state change. The key is in a longer term focus, so that the person does not fall back into the old mood when the resourceful state has passed.

Having identified a resourceful mood, you could use Dilts’ Logical Levels model (Dilts 1990) for a framework of questions:

- When and where do you experience this resourceful mood?
- What is it like to be in this mood?
- What do you feel and do when you are in this mood? What do you say to yourself?
- What are you capable of? What interests you?
- What is true for you? What is important to you?
- Who are you?
- Who else do you think of?

As the person answers the questions, listen out for ‘hot’ words that seem to be associated with the desired mood. Help them to associate to the resourceful mood (e.g. happiness): “And you know what it’s like to be in that place of happiness now, don’t you?” Use their ‘hot’ words back to them, with any submodality changes you have elicited e.g. “And so things are brighter and you’re feeling lifted and light.” In this resourceful place, have them come up with things they could do and perhaps places they could go to maintain their new desired mood. If they are aware of what triggered the old mood, you could use their new mood/state to collapse the anchor (as long as their new resourceful mood and state is strong), e.g. “and how do you feel about that [trigger] now?”
Conclusion

Whilst moods are not currently central within the NLP field, they appear to have a significant impact on our well-being. This is, in part, because they prime us for associated emotions and states, and also because they are longer term experiences. Perhaps a focus on mood interventions may prove to help us experience more resourceful states more of the time.

Biography

Joe Cheal has been working with NLP since 1993. As well as being a master trainer of NLP, he holds an MSc in Organisational Development and NLT, a degree in Philosophy and Psychology, and diplomas in Coaching and in Ericksonian Hypnotherapy, Psychotherapy and NLP. He is also a licensed EI practitioner.

Joe is a partner in the GWiz Learning Partnership (www.gwiztraining.com), working as a Management & Organisational Development Specialist.

References

The Four Pillars and Coaching

Dr Angus I McLeod

The four pillars of NLP (McDermott 2006) are: rapport, (sensory) acuity, flexibility & outcome (thinking)? What have these to do with coaching? Well, it may be interesting to investigate coaching from these perspective and see what falls out from that learning journey?

**Rapport**

Rapport is ‘the unconscious sharing of patterns of thinking, feeling and speaking. The reason it is vital in all coaching methodologies is that when people are in rapport they respond more easily to each other’ (Linder-Pelz 2010). Surely then, there must be a significant level of rapport if the coachee/individual is going to engage in a coaching conversation? Let me provide some context for this.

1-2-1 coaching has been differentiated (Lawton-Smith 2007) as ‘always working from the coachee’s agenda to arrive at solutions and answers which are very individual and subjective’. It is also asserted (Merlevede 2004) that ‘the notion of contract refers to getting a clear outcome for the coaching or mentoring, and although essential in the coaching context, it is desirable, rather, in mentoring one’.

In stark contrast to the 1-2-1 coaching situation, during informal coaching (for example in managing people at work) the shared agenda is typically absent. Instead, the manager/coach may make assumptions about the willingness of the coachee to engage on a similar type of learning journey, but without an explicit and mutually agreed agenda. However, the coach (in either of these two settings, whether formal 1-2-1 or informal) will question the coachee’s understanding, their thinking processes and their experiencing of their world.

If the coachee/individual is going to permit you to facilitate them on this journey, then surely there must be a significant level of rapport for that ‘permission’ to occur? Some people might consider rapport to be measurable - simply a set of observable behaviours. If this is so, then we will observe behavioural ‘interactivity’ including a demonstrable
willingness in the coachee to explore thinking (as a result of questioning by their coach). The coachee may also appear to relax and to make natural movements, free from intellectual control. We can probably guess that the observable behaviours of rapport derive from higher, mutual values and these mutual values are likely to include shared trust\(^5\) (Bateson 1972, Dilts 1994).

In practice, in informal settings, there is a dance of rapport-building that is tested by the questions posed.

The zone model\(^6\) (Rohnke 1995) describes the stretch or learning that occurs in human development. As coaches, we have to find the balance between the appropriate (and developing) level of stretch for the coachee. The stretch is needed in order to challenge thinking and to make the interventions worthwhile (i.e. significant for the coachee) without reaching the panic situation. In practice, in the UK anyway, we find that many coaches are if anything rather tame when it comes to challenging their coachee. Does that matter? Unless it is a professional engagement, then probably it does not matter. In a professional 1-2-1 setting though, coachees have a right to expect challenge to a far higher degree than the coachee can possibly self-challenge – or why bother with professional coaching anyway?
The Trust Building figure (McLeod 2007) shows a relationship between rapport in a coaching relationship over time. The left-hand side shows a certain level of rapport in the coachee from initial contact, stemming I believe, from ‘assumed’ trust. This initial level of rapport must vary depending upon the initial dynamic between the coach and coachee. This dynamic will be influenced by many factors including experience and prejudice. During coaching we might expect an increasing level of rapport to be established (with time) as shown by the curve. From time to time there may be changes as the dance of rapport is supported and challenged; as the coachee moves more or less from comfort to stretch and back again. This journey may be tested by the depth of questioning that takes place. Provided both parties come through those ‘testing’ episodes feeling better for the experience, the trust-building continues to improve.

As we see from the Panic Zone of Rohnke, there is a danger then that trust (and the qualities of rapport) may be damaged if the shift to more challenging questions is unwelcome generally, or specifically unwelcome due to a diminishing quality in the dynamic. This is illustrated on the Trust Building curve by freefall, a rapid downturn in rapport. The result of that in the coaching session should be obvious in the coachee, viz: at extremes, to suffusion of blood into the peripheral tissues, alternatively to the exact opposite (blanching) coupled with raised muscular tension, to angry outburst and a swift exit!

In every situation where the outcome of a challenging intervention may have wounded the quality of the dynamic, it is imperative that the coach deals with that quality of the
dynamic before attempting to coach through any alternate thread\textsuperscript{8} (McLeod 2003). In other words, the mutual generation and building of trust must be attended to proactively by the coach even if the dance of rapport building is not smooth.

For a coach/manager to operate successfully in developing rapid rapport and trust, the key factors or qualities needed are sure to include the coach’s principles, the level of development of their humanity and their sensory acuity. Coaching ‘tools’ of course, are of tertiary importance. More about that later.

The first level of assumed rapport in a coachee may in part be patterned, as asserted above. The pattern will be based on a multifactorial set of experiences and conditioning. It may be worthwhile then to pause briefly and turn our attention to psychological patterns. Patterns, along with ‘limiting beliefs’ are great areas for coaches to demonstrate the advantage of professional coaching versus self-coaching. The human brain is hard-wired to develop repeatable, automatic patterns that may become unmonitored by an individual. The whole field of pattern recognition\textsuperscript{9} is predicated on the patterned processes of the mind leading to learned responses that are either conscious or unconscious. If a pattern is to be perceived \textsuperscript{10}, or made conscious, ‘then there must be someone to notice the pattern’s existence’ (Lawley 2000). This perceiver may be the individual or an observer. From a coaching perspective, the coach (observer) is asking pertinent questions to help a coachee to self-awareness about their patterns.

At one level the existence of automatic patterns is enormously efficient. In contrast, when we try to ‘think about how we think’ (Double Loop learning\textsuperscript{11}, Dilts 2003), we must slow down. At another level, the predisposition to patterns is a major flaw in humans – that is, when the patterns become obsolete and dysfunctional to the individual. Coaching skills offer a unique and major service to people who may need to get conscious about such dysfunctional and dated patterns. A coach who does not attend to such challenges and does not give honest feedback may be regarded as not really doing their job.

\textit{Acuity: Insight & Intuition Checks}

Sensory acuity can be expected to build upon experience and if that is so, then the process of learning can also be patterned – this learning is more or less conscious. For those wishing to use NLP approaches to getting more conscious about their acuity, I recommend Bandler\textsuperscript{12} (1988).

Insight is regarded (Eysenck 1990) as various types of processes of conscious analysis with numerous researchers offering models in explanation. All the processes appear to involve
mindful discrimination, for example: comparison, sorting or relating to the past. Peter Bluckert (2006) offers coaches a useful set of ‘psychological understandings and insight’ or psychological dimensions as follows:

- Recognises when unfinished situations in (coaches) may be affecting their current performance
- Identifies patterns, themes and issues that may be being re-enacted in the past
- Distinguishes feelings, thoughts and reactions evoked by others from those deriving from self
- Can identify psychological complexity
- Has some awareness of pathology
- Can differentiate between coaching and therapeutic issues
- Identifies issues and material to bring to supervision.

Intuition (Reber, 1995) however, is ‘a mode of understanding or knowing characterized as a direct and immediate and occurring without conscious thought or judgement.’ The author recommends the view that, intuition ‘is a response to subtle cues and relationships apprehended implicitly, unconsciously.’ Intuition could be considered, as an unconscious process, to be close to ‘gut feeling’ (Sadler, 2007) in that judgements may have no explicable relationship to the world outside the coach’s head.

Sensory acuity can be expected to be wildly inaccurate on occasion and hence a ‘mind read’ rather than based on sensory information: crossed arms can mean ‘I am cold’ or, ‘my bladder is full’ rather than, ‘I found that question rather challenging, thank you!’ And please, do not start me on eye-cues. These sometimes create mistrust and even anger in the general public, ‘I’ve always hated that NLP eyeball bullshit. Talk about over-analyzing everything’ and, ‘That NLP eye cue shit is total bullshit.’ While there is support for eye-cues (Bolstad 2002), Diamantopoulos (2008) avers that there are conceptual and methodological issues with current research. The public objections are perhaps more likely to reflect mistrust of what they may reasonably regard as intrusive and manipulative practices.

So, insight is driven by processing but cognitively advised by experience. And intuition is spontaneously arising (possibly from experiential learning, but out of conscious knowing). If both insight and intuition have both inherent weaknesses and strengths, how do we know when we are right? Whether you work logically using (conscious attention to) sensory acuity or whether you work intuitively (or both), then we all need to check our
assumptions with the coachee before developing a new thread of interventions. Only in that way can we be sure to be right.

**Flexibility**

The management model shown (McLeod 2007) gives a relationship between an individual’s ‘independence’ (in respect to their manager/coach; (y-axis)) and their personal level of development as an individual (x-axis). As the individual progresses (within any context) their needs for being ‘managed’ reduces over time.

What we have seen in establishing coaching cultures in organisations, is that managers can shift their style, in the majority of working situations, to one that is weighted towards the right-hand side of the curve. In other words, the manager/coach can, invariably, use facilitation/coaching interventions with most of the people most of the time, unless the situation is urgent. If an individual/coachee has not enough experience, knowledge or context to understand the coaching question (kindly see the figure) then the manager moves from 1. (Facilitation/coaching/leadership) to 2. (Mentoring) and so offers some ideas, examples (i.e. context) to help. If these still produce psychological inertia, the manager moves to 3. (Information/support).

Here then, is a model for coaching & leadership that suggests that as managers and coaches we are mostly better to operate with people on the basis that they are more able than we gave them credit for up until now.

In organisations, ‘coaching behaviours’ lead to cultures that develop their people faster - we know that (McLeod 2010) 21, having taken 360° measures of observable behaviours/performance both before and after these learning journeys towards the ‘Coaching Organisation’. The other great advantage of this technology, is that managers who are practicing with new coaching-skills, get to use those skills from minute one of every day – they then up-skill faster than their colleagues who are looking back over their day to gauge where they might have used coaching interventions (if they had thought of it at the time)!

This process of moving from coaching, mentoring and support (which can include direction of course) requires flexibility and this is the same flexibility that is needed by professional 1-2-1 coaches to suit the needs of their coaches, in the moment.
There are many other needs for flexibility in coaching where the coach must move fluidly between coaching, mentoring and information/support. One of the most interesting and productive of these is the advanced skill of moving from:

- questions that generate quick, logic thinking and responses,

to:

- challenging questions that create self-reflective experiences where the coachee is silent, and where the psychological and emotional journey/experience is almost all that is conscious, and where bodily physiology is otherwise slowed down.

In this trance-like state, the coachee does not move, breathing is slow and shallow, eyes are middle-distance focussed (for minimal external, visual stimulation). From this space, the most cathartic coaching experiences may arise. By cathartic, we mean major leaps of understanding, perception and motivation (or all three). David Grove said of trance \(^\text{22}\), ‘trance is often the prerequisite in finding the answer’ and, ‘clients alter their state in going somewhere to get that answer. That somewhere, is where we want to leave them…’. These advanced coaching skills are not essential to high-quality coaching. Indeed, Grove considered trance states inessential to the use of Clean Language, but the ability to induce these productive states demarks the difference between large ‘C’ and small ‘c’ coaches \(^\text{23}\).

There are a myriad of skills that help achieve and maintain these trance states including ‘clean language \(^\text{24}\)’, reflective language (McLeod 2003) and more advanced examples such as ‘trailing-off’, but more about these and others, another time!

**Outcome Thinking**

Professional coaching is always framed by goals/targets and, ‘emphasizes generative change, concentrating on defining and achieving specific goals’ (Dilts 2003). Dilts also highlights the essential ‘double-loop’ learning which he describes as simultaneous outcomes of both learning ‘what to do’ and ‘how to do it’.

What the coach observes are issues and/or goals and these are then translated by the coachee into achievable, sustainable, learning opportunities. A good coach then, is not just coaching single issues and goals, but they are helping the coachee to embed and contextualize their learning to be applied in different upcoming scenarios \(^\text{25}\); hence the word ‘sustainable’.

From a semantic standpoint, it may be useful to make distinctions between goal/target and outcomes. In coaching, the coachee’s main target or goal is often framed by one or more
other outcomes derived from value-judgements and values (most typically). Their declared target or goal may, however, align or clash with those outcomes. (I take the point that the target/goal may also be described as an outcome, but for clarity, am making a temporary distinction).

Let me give the example of an individual in career-coaching who declared an intention (target/goal) to be a helicopter pilot in the paramedic sector. When the other outcomes were looked at more roundly, these included a desire in the coachee to ‘work with others in teams and to socialize with colleagues’. The individual also wished to work in a certain geographical area due to commitments to his sport. Having researched opportunities for pilots in the area, he found that the pilots generally had very little interaction with on-call medics at all and so his outcomes would be unlikely to be met, nor within his span of control.

Skills

I started this article averring that key qualities of the performance coach include principles, developed humanity and sensory acuity. I also rely massively on intuition but I am doubtful whether this is necessary to coach to a high standard of effectiveness. I also stated that these three key qualities are more important than tools and this supports and extends the view of coaching’s granddad, Tim Gallwey (2002).

We know many managers who are superb coaches without any formal training in coaching, NLP or facilitation skills. Yes, a number of traits can be identified in their work, but many of these managers often have no discernable toolkit from any discipline that I am familiar with (including EI, TA, Gestalt, counselling etc). In other words, their coaching brilliance arises from their inherent nature as developed, caring, adult humans.

One of the other insights about differentiators of great coaches compared to the rest of the coaching community is the quality of questioning. One feature stands out and I am grateful to James Lawley (2009) for modelling from master-class videos and hence identifying this quality: as he says, from modelling any number of coaches, the master-coach was consistently very different from all the others that he modelled in the quality of the questioning. And that quality? That, every question was posed wholly for the benefit of the coachee. This insight offers all coaches and managers a new and key learning about top-level coaching. We can all grow and improve what we do as managers and coaches by reframing the purpose of our questioning and making sure that these are for the enlightenment of the coachee and not for ourselves.
Conclusion

Any perspective on coaching raises useful calibration and context - NLP is no exception. The four pillars of NLP are all necessary adjuncts to best practice in coaching whether NLP trained or not, but care needs to be taken in the understanding of rapport. Good coaches will be risking rapport and developing trust in the dynamic by inviting the coachee to new levels of stretch. In that journey, the quality of rapport may by temporarily risked and in any case, whatever the outcome of that intervention, the coach must be prepared to deal with issues in the dynamic before returning to other coaching threads.

We can use insights arising from acuity including intuition but are advised always to check with the coachee that our assumptions are useful to them.

There are key differentiators between coaches and great coaches. One of these is the ability to take coachees to productive trance states from where cathartic leaps of learning can occur. Another key differentiator lies in questioning, where the great coach is asking questions only for the enlightenment of the coachee and not to inform themselves.

Biography

Dr. Angus McLeod is Visiting Professor of Coaching at Birmingham City University Business School and author of many papers & books on coaching, NLP and leadership. Books include, Performance Coaching and Me, Myself, My Team (both Crown House), Self-coaching Leadership (John Wiley) and Performance Coaching Toolkit (McGraw-Hill/OU, 2010). Prof. McLeod designed both (distance-learning) performance coaching diploma courses at Newcastle College with over 15,000 students to date. He researches and supervises academic research in the UK. Angus facilitates master-classes in coaching, trains managers and he coaches 1-2-1., all internationally.

Angus is part of Angus McLeod Associates, a company that trains managers in the use of coaching skills to use in their day-to-day managing styles. www.angusmcleod.com.

References

14. Bluckert used the term ‘client’ which in private practice is often used instead of the term ‘coachee’; in professional coaching settings, ‘client’ typically means the buyer of coaching services.
22. Reported by Lawley & Tompkins (2003; p. 81).
24. Invented by David Grove and elegantly modelled by Lawley and Tompkins (Lawley 2000).
25. Future pacing
7+2 Keys To Becoming A World-Class Coach

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D.

- What makes a person world-class as a coach?
- Are there any secrets for becoming a world-class coach?
- What are the prerequisites of knowledge and skill that secures a coach’s success?
- What are 7 keys to becoming a world-class coach yourself or for finding one?
- What does the Meta-Coach training system offer that facilitates becoming world-class?
- What’s involved in becoming a highly effective coach with a successful practice and building a first-class reputation?

In 1999 Coaching became the second fastest growing industry in the world behind I.T. People at all levels of business, industry, government, media, and entrepreneurship have discovered the power of having a professional coach to facilitate their success. Coaching has become a revolution in business as a managerial tool and as a way to truly empower people to use their brains and talents. No longer is coaching reserved just for top athletes, Fortune 500 CEOs, or Presidents. Today ordinary men and woman are now achieving tremendous personal growth, taking their performances to new levels of achievement, and experiencing greater personal and career success via unleashing new peoples as they experience Coaching.

Now there is a downside to all of this. The downside is that there many unqualified and poorly skilled people who are hanging up coaching signs. This is flooding the market with low quality “coaching” which is, in turn, threatening to sabotage the field and undermine the value and uniqueness of coaching. There is good news. In a market-driven industry, the good news is that those who are truly skilled, who have the world-class qualities of an effective coach, and who operate from a solid coaching methodology—they will rise to the top of the field. They will be the ones to make a difference.

- What’s the difference between a mediocre coach and one who is truly productive, effective, and professional— one who is a world-class coach?
How can we learn from expert coaches around the world and take our coaching skills and practice to a new level?

**KEY #1:**

**A WORLD-CLASS COACH KNOWS THE HEART OF COACHING AND CLEARLY DISTINGUISHES THE COACHING BOUNDARIES**

In order for coaching, as a field and movement, to become a profession in its own right, it has to have clear distinctions between itself and the other helping fields of therapy, training, consulting, mentoring, and hypnotherapy. Without such distinctions, coaching becomes just a step-child of these fields. But with the clear distinctions, a coach will know his or her boundaries and be able to know when to refer.

**Personal Questions if you want to be a World-Class Coach:**

- Do you know how coaching differs from the other modalities?
- Are you able to draw a clear line between them and know when and how to refer as well as why?
- How does coaching differ from consulting, mentoring, training, and therapy?
- What training and level of expertise do you have in facilitating a coaching conversation?
- How will you handle clients who need something other than self-actualization facilitation?

**The Key Helping Modalities:**

- The core competency in *consulting* is giving advice and expertise in knowledge and
skill.

- The core competency in mentoring is guiding from experience.
- The core competency in training is teaching and drilling in new skills.
- The core competency in counseling and therapy is solving problem, healing hurts, resolving traumas and building up ego-strength so the person gets up to average and becomes “okay.”

KEY #2:

WORLD-CLASS COACHING IS CENTERED IN A COGNITIVE METHODOLOGY

Coaching, as a collaborative and creative partnership, needs to be more than just a “flying by the seat of the pants” process. It needs to be more than just a “grab bag of tricks” from self-help books and seminars. Coaching needs to have a systemic framework based on the best knowledge in the cognitive-behavioural sciences. The world-class coach will know what to do, when, with whom, how, and why. To do that a person needs a psychological model that enables understanding of human development, consciousness, communication, learning, change, and self-actualization.

Why? Well, first and foremost because that’s what coaching is all about—communicating and co-creating with a client a compelling future and facilitating the change for learning to mobilize resources that will unleash the client’s potentials for actualizing his or herself best talents. What then is coaching?

Personal Questions if you want to be a World-Class Coach:

- Do you have a systematic coaching methodology? What is it?
- Is your methodology based in the cognitive-behavioural sciences?
- Do you know how to use it so that you know what to do when with whom and why?
- Is your coaching methodology for healthy and self-actualizing people or does it come from the field of therapy?
- Can you answer the question in specific detail: “How do you know what to do, when, with whom, how, and why?”

KEY #3:

WORLD-CLASS COACHING COMMUNICATES TO EVOKE STATES.

At the heart of coaching is a conversation, a dialogue that gets to the heart of things. As a special kind of communication, the coach must be highly skilled and professional as a communicator. This involves competency equally with both the verbal and non-verbal
dimensions, with knowing how to ask questions, explore words, comment on gestures, calibrate to states and physiological responses, and much more.

Appreciating the complexity of communication, a world-class coach continually works on the foundational skills and competencies of communication. In NLP the Meta-Model provides 22 distinctions in language for creating precision while the Milton model allows you to use language to induce resourceful states that solidify new learnings and decisions.¹ A distinctive feature of NLP is that it is about neuro-linguistics and not merely linguistics—it deals with how language affects people emotionally as it evokes states.

**Personal questions if you want to be a world-class coach:**

- What model of communication do you use?
- Is it grounded in the cognitive behavioural sciences?
- How do you respond when the response you get isn’t the response you wanted?

**WHAT COACHING IS AND THE META-COACHING MODELS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coaching</th>
<th>Meta-Coaching Models²</th>
<th>Psychologies</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Communication</td>
<td>The NLP Communication Model</td>
<td>Cognitive-Behavioural</td>
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<td>2) Self / Meta-Communication Reflexivity</td>
<td>The Meta-States Model³</td>
<td>Cognitive, Meta-Cognitive</td>
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<td>3) Change and Learning</td>
<td>The Axes of Change model⁴</td>
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<td>4) Implementation</td>
<td>The Benchmarking Model⁵</td>
<td>Cognitive, Sports Psy</td>
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<td>5) Systems</td>
<td>The Matrix Model⁶</td>
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<td>6) Self-Actualization</td>
<td>Self-Actualization Matrix</td>
<td>Systems</td>
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<td>Self-Actualization Quadrants⁷</td>
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<td>Self-Actualization Model</td>
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<td>7) Facilitation</td>
<td>The Facilitation Model</td>
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**KEY #4:**

**WORLD-CLASS COACHING STEPS BACK TO THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF AWARENESS**

Coaching doesn’t just involve communication, it involves the unique human kind of consciousness and communicating—self-reflexive consciousness and meta-communication skills. This is where the Meta-States Model offers you so much for coaching as a profession. To be world-class as a coach, you have to apply the principles of coaching to
yourself. This creates the power of personal congruency. And in a profession like coaching, *credibility* is critical to your success. It’s critical for marketing and positioning, it is critical for being winsome and influential as a business person. And given that most coaching clients come through word-of-mouth marketing and referrals, the coach’s personal congruence, professionalism, reputation, and ethics is central to a successful practice.

Because coaching is a very personal and experiential discipline, a world-class coach knows coaching from the inside out having experienced it and has a coach for his or her on-going development. This demonstrates the importance of congruence or “walking the talk” for the professional coach.

*Personal questions if you want to be a world-class coach:*

- Do you engage in self-coaching practices? When and how?
- Are you part of some larger community of coaches, the ICF, the MCF, etc.?
- Who coaches you? Do you have a coach? Who holds you accountable?
- Do you run an ethical and professional coaching practice?
- What are you working on in terms of unleashing more of your potentials?
- How well do you apply the coaching values and principles in your own life?
- What personal successes do you have in achieving your own outcomes?

**KEY #5**

**WORLD-CLASS COACHING FACILITATES GENERATIVE CHANGE NOT THERAPEUTIC CHANGE.**

*Coaching is about change, it’s about facilitating generative change at numerous levels and stages. As an effective change agent, a coach needs to know the levels of change, the dance of change, the process of facilitating generative change, and have a change model that’s not based on therapy. There are numerous kinds of coaching and coaching skills based upon the kind of coaching that one takes on:*

1) *Performance Coaching:*

   Enhancing skills and behaviours.

2) *Developmental Coaching:*

   Evolutionary change to beliefs, values and identity.

3) *Transformational Coaching:*
Revolutionary change in purpose, direction and meaning.

**Personal questions if you want to be a world-class coach:**

- What are the levels, dimensions, and stages of change?
- What change model do you use in coaching?
- How skilled are you as a change agent?
- What skills have you developed for facilitating change?
- What’s the difference between a therapy change model of change and a non-therapy change model? Why is that important?
- Do you have the skills for detecting where a person is in the change process and for coaching someone through that level?

Bateson’s “levels of learning / change” offers a model for *the levels* of change. Do you know those levels? The Axes of Change model offers a non-therapeutic change model, actually the only one in the field of coaching. For coaches, this distinguishes the field of coaching from therapy and uses the premises of coaching to govern the operation of generative change.

In the field of coaching today, every coaching school that we have examined uses old therapy assumptions and change models. How can we tell? For one thing, every model assumes clients will resist change, think of change are “hard” and “painful,” and will almost inevitably relapse. Those statements are more true for people who need therapy and untrue for people who have moved beyond the deficiency needs into the growth or self-actualizing needs. Unlike the change-resisters, they are change-embracers. They don’t fear change, they long for it, plan for it, and desire it.

**KEY #6:**

**WORLD-CLASS COACHING FACILITATES THE SELF-ACTUALIZATION OF CLIENTS.**

Because coaching is about *generative* change rather than *remedial* change, it is based upon and expresses Self-Actualization Psychology. This psychology addresses those who have move beyond the deficiency needs on Maslow’s hierarchy. Because coaching is for healthy people who want to realize or actualize their full potential, an effective coach knows and operates from a self-actualization model that provides insight about how to facilitate that kind of change and development.
Personal questions if you want to be a world-class coach:

- What kind of psychology is your coaching based on?
- Is it grounded in Self-Actualizing Psychology for unleashing potentials of healthy people?
- If so, how do you think of that and communicate it to clients?
- Do you ever do therapy and calling it “coaching?”
- What’s the difference in self-actualization and traditional psychology?
- What are the premises of Self-Actualization Psychology?

Maslow shifted the psychology paradigm from a psychology of pathology to one of studying healthy self-actualizing people. People who operate from a higher or meta-needs—the needs of those who are seeking to express and actualize their potentials, rather than satisfy deficiencies, are those who are best suited for coaching.

**Lower Needs:**

1) Survival Needs
2) Safety and Security       Deficiency Needs
3) Love and Affection
4) Self-Regard, Self-Esteem

**Higher Needs:**

5) Self-Actualization       Being Needs (Growth, Expressive)

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

### The Lower Needs

- Based in biology and genetics
- Instinct-like in being more determined
- When in deficiency state, felt strongly and dominating states
- Desire homeostasis
- Removal of challenges and changes
- Drive goes away, satisfied
- **Deficiency motivation**
- Purpose: to reduce need, create homeostasis
- Post gratification forgetting
- Satisfied directly with specific gratifications
- Few if any preconditions
- Satisfied mostly by self, individually
- Individualistic
- These drives move us to Comfort
- More independent of others

### The Higher Needs

- Based in psychology and semantics
- Governed by our cognitive understandings and beliefs
- Not motivated by deficiency, felt strongly as expression of growth
- Desire disequilibrium
- Embrace challenges and changes
- Drives grows, expands, amplifies
- **Abundance / Expression motivation**
- Non-purposeful: end value, not means to an end
- Memorable peak experience
- Satisfied mostly indirectly
- Preconditions for gratification
- Satisfied mostly in relationships with others
- Social, relational, Altruistic
- These drives move us to Challenge
- Dependent on others, communication
KEY #7

WORLD-CLASS COACHES WORK SYSTEMICALLY WITH THE MIND-BODY-EMOTIONAL STATES OF CLIENTS.

Coaching, of all fields and professions, is about systems and about working systemically and holistically with the mind-body-emotion system. It’s for this reason that coaching so often focuses on the wheel of life and work/life balance, and taking an integrative approach to mind-and-emotions, the hard and soft skills, etc.

If coaching by definition works with the human mind-body system, then an effective and world-class coach will think and interact systemically. For this the Matrix model gives the meta-coach a real advantage. The Matrix model combines cognitive-behavioural psychology with developmental psychology to identify both the process and the content matrices that govern and determine our sense of reality. It also enables a coach to know how to “follow the client’s energy” as his or her mind-body-emotion system operates with its feedback and feed forward loops.

Using the Meta-States Model, *The Matrix Model* was developed to provide even more structure about how we create layers upon layers of meaning which elicit our emotional states. From there we create specific content that we carry with us everywhere we go, content about our mappings of ourselves, our capacities, our relationships and sense of others, time, and the many universes of meaning that are out there.

*Personal questions if you want to be a world-class coach:*

- What does it mean to think and work systemically as a coach?
- What systems model embraces the entire mind-body-emotion system that you work with?
- How do you think about working with the feedback loop of information coming
into the mind-body system and up the levels?

- How do you recognize or work with the feed forward loop of information transforming into the energy of emotions, language, and behaviour?

**KEY #8:**

**A WORLD-CLASS COACH CONTINUES TO DEVELOP, IMPROVE, AND BENCHMARK HIS OR HER SKILL COMPETENCIES IN COACHING.**

While on the outside, *coaching* may look like an easy and simple thing, just talking and asking questions, it is not as easy as it looks. High quality skills of listening, questioning, supporting, inducing states, giving and receiving feedback, along with many other coaching skills can be quite demanding. A professional coach will have taken coach specific training and been accredited in his or her development of the coaching competencies. In the Meta-Coach training system we have used *a benchmarking process* to specify precise behavioural measures and scale some 26 coaching skills which we then use to measure a person’s actual competency.\(^{11}\)

To facilitate the highest quality of skills, in Neuro-Semantics we use the Mind-to-Muscle pattern to close the knowing-doing gap as well as the Benchmarking Model for both a tool in working with businesses and to apply to our coaching skills.\(^{12}\)

*Personal questions if you want to be a world-class coach:*

- Do you have the competency of the core coaching skills to be effective?
- Have you achieved competency in specific core coaching skills?
- How do you know you are competent in facilitating change?
- Where are you as a coach on the competency scale with any given skill? How do you know?
- Do you know how to benchmark intangible skills so you can give concrete and specific behaviours to the skill?
- How many skills can you demonstrate a benchmarked competency to?

**KEY #9:**

**WORLD-CLASS COACHING RUNS A FINANCIALLY PROFITABLE BUSINESS**

Coaching is first and foremost about the skills of communicating, working with change, a client’s mind-body-emotion system, and facilitating self-actualization, yet it is also about *the business* of running a coaching practice. To be effective in the marketplace, a coach has
to market and sell him or herself, put on the business hat and create a viable office, and take care of the administrative tasks, billing, office environment, etc. A common occupational hazard of people entering this field is that while they are strong on their “people skills,” their business skills suck. In Meta-Coaching, we encourage coaches to complete a *Matrix Business Plan* and both coach to it and be coach to it so as to unleash the coach’s potentials for increasing one’s business intelligence.

**Personal questions to facilitate your successful practice:**

- Do you have a business plan for your coaching niche, market, speciality, practice, etc.?
- Could you get a loan from a bank with your current Business Plan? Is it well-developed?
- Does it fit with who you are and excite you to make it happen?
- What coaching do you need to receive to create a practical and achievable business plan?

**Summary**

Coaching is about success. First, it is about empowering clients to become more successful in their personal, business, financial, and relational lives. It’s about mobilizing resources to unleash untapped potentials. For that reason, one of the best sources of credibility and personal confidence is to apply to self to receive coaching about how to coach effectively and how to run a successful practice. Second, it is about the coach’s own success.

In *the Meta-Coaching System®* we work to this outcome—empowering coaches to be successful themselves and to live in a network of coaching relationships that continually support their own growth and development.

**Biography**

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D., researcher and modeler of psychological excellence, developer of *Meta-States Model, the Matrix Model, Self-Actualization models* and co-creator of the International Society of Neuro-Semantics (with Dr. Bob Bodenhamer) and both the *Meta-Coach System* and the *Meta-Coach Foundation* (MCF) (with Michelle Duval).

Michael has been writing a series of Meta-Coaching books: *Volume I: Coaching Change, Volume II: Coaching Conversations; Vol. III: Unleashed! Vol. IV: Self-
References

1. To see the 21 distinctions of the Meta-Model, see Hall, L. Michael. (2001). Communication Magic (2001), previously titled, The Secrets of Magic (1997). Richard Bandler asked me to write this book, at first it was going to be co-authored for the 25th anniversary of the Meta-Model. Richard wanted me to track the development of the Meta-Model over the years.


5. The Benchmarking Model will be in the book, Benchmarking (due in 2011).


8. ICF stands for International Coach Federation, MCF stands for the Meta-Coach Foundation, a non-profit organization located in Australia.


10. The source for The Wheel of Life is unknown, it was and continued to be used in a great many books on Life Coaching.
11. In the Training Manual for *Coaching Mastery*, Module III of Meta-Coaching we have 26 Coaching Skills benchmarked.


**KEYS FOR WORLD-CLASS COACHING**

A world-class Coach —

#1. Knows the heart of coaching and its boundaries

#2. Is centred in a cognitive-behavioural methodology

#3. Communicates effective in evoking states

#4. Steps back to work with reflexive awareness

#5. Facilitates generative change, not therapeutic

#6. Facilitates self-actualization in clients

#7. Works systemically with mind-body-emotional states

#8. Keeps developing high skill competency in coaching

#9. Runs a profitable business practice as a coach
The “How” Behind “The Secret”

Dr Richard Bolstad

The Biggest Mistake In The History Of Personal Development?

In many ways, the NLP students who attend my certification courses are a lot better prepared than students twenty years ago. But in the last four years, a small percentage of them demonstrate a child-like naivety that I did not see two decades ago. This small group resist investigating the “structure of success” and insist that success has no structure. They maintain that any questions which leave them feeling uncertain or uncomfortable about their success are best not asked. They consider systematically modelled processes to be a distraction from the one true source of success – a model called simply “The Secret”.

In this article I want to examine a personal development model (The Secret) with many superficial similarities to NLP. I want to give some of the reasons why I consider it the biggest mistake in the history of personal development since the invention of organised religion. And I want to urge its replacement by well-researched techniques modelled from those who actually demonstrate a real ability to “manifest their dreams”.

The Secret of Jack Canfield’s Success?

The film “The Secret” was released in 2006. The secret referred to in the film’s title is the “Law of Attraction” – that over time you will attract whatever you put your attention on (positive or negative). The level of joy you experience as you focus on something lets you know what kind of reality you are creating. The original DVD of “The Secret” is focused on the teachings of Esther and Jerry Hicks, who since 1986 have, they say, channelled a group of spiritual teachers collectively called Abraham.

As thousands of people worldwide grab on to “The Secret” as the final answer to success, new research shows that the more people believe in such a “law of attraction” the less they achieve. In this article I will show you how this happens, because the Secret aligns with one of the two key traits of high achievers (their focus on the positive) and contradicts the other (their focus on consciously planning action).
Firstly, what does “The Secret” tell you to do to put this “Law of Attraction” into practice? In the film, “Chicken Soup For The Soul” co-author Jack Canfield summarizes the film’s message like this: “Decide what you want, believe you can have it, believe you deserve it, and believe it’s possible for you. And then close your eyes every day for several minutes and visualise having what you already want and feeling the feelings of already having it. Come out of that and focus on what you’re grateful for already and really enjoy it, OK. And then go into your day and release it to the universe and TRUST that the universe will figure out HOW to manifest it.” He gives the example of his own first great goal – to earn $100,000 in the next year, set at a time when he was earning about $8,000 a year.

Canfield says that after he started visualising his goal “... all of a sudden I was in the shower and I was about four weeks into it, and I had a $100,000 idea. It just came straight into my head. I had a book I had written, and I said “If I can sell 400,000 copies of my book at a quarter each, that’d be $100,000.... And then, I saw the national enquirer at the supermarket. I’d seen that millions of times and it was just background, and all of a sudden it jumped out at me as foreground and I thought “Wow, if readers knew about my book, certainly 400,000 people would go out and buy it.” And about six weeks later I gave a talk at Hunter College in New York to 600 or so teachers, and this lady comes up to me at the end and she says “That was a great talk and I’d like to interview you. Let me give you my card.” I said “Who do you write for?” and she said “I’m a freelancer but I sell most of my stuff to the National Enquirer.”

It sounds a lot like an NLP-style visualization process. It’s a wonderful and inspiring story. But a quick glance at Jack Canfield’s own life makes it clear that it is not the full explanation of his own success. Jack Canfield has a BA from Harvard, a Masters degree from the University of Massachusetts and training as a university teacher, a workshop facilitator, and a psychotherapist. His company Self Esteem Seminars trains educators and corporate leaders. Canfield has co-authored over 35 “Chicken Soup For The Soul” books since 1992 and says the first two books in that series alone took him two years each to produce. The authors talk in their preface to the second book (Canfield and Hansen, 1993, page xi) about needing a holiday “to unwind from the pressures of writing and speaking.” and about valuing the emotional support they got “to persevere through what seemed like a totally overwhelming and never-ending task.” Jack Canfield had written the book – a job that “seemed like a totally overwhelming and never-ending task” already. He was both trained as a teacher and an accomplished writer and he was willing to put in the extra time promoting his book at presentations and writing about his book... and writing the follow-ups. When he urges us, on the DVD “The Secret” to let the universe solve the “How”, his statement needs to be read in this light. NLP has studied the “how” of success in a number of fields. High achievers frequently do not know themselves “how” they get
results, but that does not mean there is no “how” or that great results somehow magically “fall from the sky”. They certainly didn’t for Jack Canfield.

Virginia Satir, the first expert studied by the developers of NLP, said in her foreword to the first ever NLP book, “The Structure of Magic” (Bandler and Grinder, 1975): “Looking back, I see that, although I was aware that change was happening, I was unaware of the specific elements that went into the transaction which made change possible…. I do something, I feel it, I see it, my gut responds to it – that is a subjective experience. When I do it with someone else their eyes, ears, body sense these things. What Richard Bandler and John Grinder have done is to watch the process of change over a time and to distill from it the patterns of the how process.” (Satir, in Bandler and Grinder, 1975, p. viii).

The history of NLP is the history of discovering the “how” that makes success happen behind the apparent magic of intuition and synchronicity. Robert Dilts emphasises that in successful creativity, the “dreamer” state is followed by a “realist” state and then a “critic” state (Dilts, Epstein and Dilts, 1991). Since 1993, Professor K. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University has conducted scores of studies and collated research from round the world about this question. He examined such fields as business success, medical practice, sports, musical aptitude and chess playing (Ericsson, 2003, 2004). His first major conclusion is that nobody is great without sustained work. It’s nice to believe that if you find the field where you’re naturally gifted, you’ll be great from day one, but it doesn’t seem to happen. There’s no research evidence of top world class performance without approximately ten years experience or practice. The more hours put into that experience, the higher the success. That includes the apparent exceptions – people such as golfer Tiger Woods (whose father had him practicing golf since he was 3 years old).

“The Greatest people In History”

So how did the producers of “The Secret” get the idea that the “how” doesn’t need figuring out? There are three types of people quoted in Rhonda Byrne’s book as experts in The Secret, from whom she learned “The Secret”. They are:

• Exponents of “New Thought”, a movement that began in the late 19th century, continued through the early 20th century, and produced a number of writers of “think yourself rich” books.
• The people those writers claimed to model; historical figures who were actually highly successful including inventors, philosophers and scientists.
• The living “teachers” of The Secret, who appear on the DVD.
Byrne explains at the start of her book that she was first introduced to The Secret in 2004, when her daughter Hayley gave her a copy of Wallace D. Wattles’ book “The Science of Getting Rich”, originally published in 1910. In her book and DVD, Byrne mentions several other people from the “New Thought” movement of that time, a period which gave the world its first wave of “get rich quick” books. Byrne goes on to claim, “I began tracing The Secret back through history. I couldn’t believe all the people who knew this. They were the greatest people in history: Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Hugo, Beethoven, Lincoln, Emerson, Edison, Einstein.” (Byrne, 2006, p. ix).

Journalist Karen Kelly has checked out this history of The Secret a little more carefully. She identifies Wallace Wattles as one of a series of wandering speakers and writers advocating “The Secret” in early twentieth century America, often under the name “New Thought”. Wallace Wattles himself never attained the success that his teachings promise though. Wallace Wattles, explains his daughter Florence, was poor and fearful of poverty most of his life, and in his last years, his family survived on the meager earnings that his lectures on “The Secret” gave them. He was also physically very frail, and he died in 1911, just one year after publishing his book “The Science of Getting Rich”.

Wattles is not such an inspiring personal example, perhaps. But maybe those “greatest people in history” were really the masters of using the secret, and Wattles and his fellow writers were merely the publicists. Unfortunately, Karen Kelly’s research shows that most of these successful scientists, industrialists and philosophers openly ridiculed “The Secret”. Here are a few examples.

- Byrne quotes Winston Churchill as a master of The Secret because he said “You create your own universe as you go along.” (Byrne, 2006, p 36). Actually, Kelly points out, that quote is taken out of context. Churchill was making fun of “The Secret”. The context is this (quoted in Kelly, 2007, p 172) “You create your own universe as you go along. The stronger your imagination the more variegated your universe. When you leave off dreaming, the universe ceases to exist. These amusing mental acrobatics are all right to play with. They are perfectly harmless and perfectly useless.”

- Byrne quotes Einstein as saying “Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life’s coming attractions.” (Byrne, 2006, p 91). Kelly checked with several experts on Einstein’s quotations and found that this quote may be attributed to him, but he never said it. In fact, in 1936 he replied to a question about whether he believed in prayer by saying “Scientific research is based on the idea that everything that takes place is determined by laws of nature, and therefore this holds for the actions of people. For this reason, a research scientist will hardly be inclined to believe that events could be influenced by a prayer, ie by a wish addressed to a Supernatural Being.” (Kelly, 2007, p 176).
• Inventor Thomas Edison is listed as one of The Secret’s masters by Byrne. Kelly counters with Edison’s famous quote “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.”, and his own simple explanation of what caused his success “I work 18 hours daily – have been doing this for 45 years. This is double the usual amount men do.” (Kelly, 2007, p 169).

The third group of people quoted in “The Secret” are the living teachers that Byrne sought out, whose professions are mostly “metaphysician” and “author”. Physicist Fred Alan Wolf is an exception. As a bona fide scientist, he is used in the DVD to add scientific credibility to “The Secret”, and quoted in the book explaining the notion in quantum physics that “mind is actually shaping the very thing that is perceived.” (Byrne, 2006, p 21). He has since complained that most of what he said was edited out of the film, and that “I did not say the law of attraction is based on physics. There is absolutely nothing in physics that says just because you desire something you will attract it into your life.” (in Kelly, 2007, p 101-102).

Medical doctor Ben Johnson is also quoted repeatedly in the film. He expresses grave concerns about the way his ideas are presented there, and criticises the “… be all and end all idea that all we have to do is think, ask, believe and whatever we want will fall out of the sky. No matter how much positive thought or warm and fuzzy stuff we put out, you cannot discount the rule of three: it takes three times as long, costs three times as much, and requires three times as much energy to get anywhere you want to go.” (in Kelly, 2007, p 53-54).

Best-selling author John Gray, also quoted in the film, expresses strong disagreement with Byrne’s claims, for example the idea that you can eat MacDonald’s fast food and lose weight if you think positively about the Big Mac. He says “There is legitimate criticism of that idea. When people eat bad food, they should feel bad. Another version of her weight-loss line of thinking is that if you shoot someone, have a positive thought in your head while you are doing it, so it won’t be a bad thing. Obviously it is. And putting bad food in your body is like shooting yourself.” (in Kelly, 2007, p 29).

It seems that no-one has really been keeping “The Secret” secret for thousands of years. In general, the people that Byrne suggested have been keeping it secret, as well as the people she featured in her film, just didn’t believe in it. The person whose book inspired the whole concept for Rhonda Byrnes was physically unwell and economically impoverished. There is plenty of evidence to prove that our clients’ expectations and hopes, while they don’t create everything, can radically alter their results. This in itself is miraculous, magical, and makes life a delight. How this works is the subject of the rest of this article.
However there is no sense in, and no need to claim that all our clients’ results are generated by their expectations, let alone to claim that this is the one truth that accounts for the advances of human history.

The Real Secrets of Success

Successful goal-setting, as we generally use it in NLP, is a process designed to produce action, not to replace action. The “Secret” is based on a completely different understanding of how goal-setting works. The purpose of goal-setting is to motivate you to actually achieve what you want in life. It is not to motivate you to avoid problems, and it is not to distract you so you avoid thinking about the problems. It is to motivate you to act! Recently, there has been some dramatic new research about what enables goals to work. This research suggests that the two most common unsuccessful choices people make in goal-setting are:

1) Paying attention to what they don’t want all the time, instead of what they do want.
2) Fantasising about having achieved what they want, instead of planning action.

Unsuccessful Choice 1: Focus on the Problem. This part of the research supports an idea accepted by the secret. Focusing on problems and what we don’t want is paying attention to the past. It feels very different to focusing on the goal, outcome or solution to those problems, and it has very different, and less useful, results. In 2000, Dr Denise Beike and Deirdre Slavik at the University of Arkansas conducted an interesting study of what they called “counterfactual” thoughts. These are thoughts about what has gone “wrong”, along with what they could have done differently. Dr. Beike enlisted two groups of University of Arkansas students to record their thoughts each day in a diary in order to "look at counterfactual thoughts as they occur in people’s day-to-day lives.” In the first group, graduate students recorded their counterfactual thoughts, their mood, and their motivation to change their behaviour as a result of their thoughts. After recording two thoughts per day for 14 days, the students reported that negative thoughts depressed their mood but increased their motivation to change their behaviour. They believed that the negative thoughts were painful but would help them in the long term.

To test out this hope, the researchers then enlisted a group of students to keep similar diaries for 21 days, to determine if any actual change in behaviour would result from counterfactual thinking. Three weeks after completing their diaries the undergraduate students were asked to review their diary data and indicate whether their counterfactual thinking actually caused any change in behaviour. "No self-perceived change in behaviour
was noted,” Dr. Beike told Reuters Health. Counterfactual thoughts about negative events in everyday life cause us to feel that we "should have done better or more," Dr. Beike said. "These thoughts make us feel bad, which motivates us to sit around and to feel sorry for ourselves." So what does work? The study found that "credit-taking thoughts”, in which individuals reflect on success and congratulate themselves, serve to reinforce appropriate behaviour and help people "feel more in control of themselves and their circumstances." (Slavik, 2003).

So far, the research seems to agree with the Secret. And in one area of life, this is often the deciding factor. The body, being fully under control by your mind, is actually one place where visualising IS action, and therefore produces results. This is due to what psychologists call the ideo-motor and ideo-sensory responses of the body (ideas are inevitably linked in the body to actions and sensory experiences). Harvard University psychologist Ellen Langer, has done considerable research on the effect of imagination inside your body. In February 2007, Langer reported the results of another fascinating study of health results and expectations (Crum and Langer, p 165-171, 2007). Langer studied 84 housekeepers working in seven different Boston hotels. The women in four of these hotels had their health pretested and were told that their job cleaning 15 rooms a day was providing healthy exercise which met all the requirements for an active lifestyle. The women in the other four hotels were merely pretested. After four weeks, the women in the second group had the same health statistics. The women who believed that their lifestyle was healthy had on average lost two pounds of body weight, reduced their body mass index by 0.35 and dropped their systolic blood pressure by 10 points. It is likely that these improvements continued further over the following months.

An at cause (“proactive”) style of coping with stress is associated with enhanced activity by the body’s immune cells (Goodkin et alia, 1992). That is to say, when someone is in a state where they feel in charge of their life, and as if they are making choices about their future, a check of their immune cells (T lymphocytes to be exact) will show that these cells are more actively protecting the body from infection, and eliminating cancer cells. In fact, people who adopt a more “optimistic” approach to life live 19% longer, according to a 30 year study at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota (Maruta, Colligan, Malinchoc, and Offord, 2000). Mayo clinic doctor Toshihiko Maruta says “It confirmed our common-sense belief. It tells us that mind and body are linked and that attitude has an impact on the final outcome, death.” However the fact that your thinking influences your body does not mean that thinking can replace action in more general terms.
Unsuccessful Choice 2: Fantasise About The Solution. The rest of the research on goalsetting tells a very different story to the Secret. Although focusing on the problem you have had does not lead to success, neither does merely fantasising about the future success. Lien Pham and Shelley Taylor at the University of California did a study where a group of students were asked to visualise themselves getting high grades in a mid-term exam that was coming up soon. They were taught to form clear visual images and imagine how good it will feel, and to repeat this for several minutes each day. A control group was also followed up, and the study times of each student as well as their grades in the exam were monitored. The group who were visualising should, according to proponents of “The Secret” DVD and the “Law of Attraction”, have a clear advantage. Actually, they did much less study, and consequently got much lower marks in the exam (Pham and Taylor, 1999).

This result is very consistent. There are now a large number of research studies showing that “The secret” or “The law of attraction” (visualising your outcome and then letting go and trusting that the universe will provide it) impedes success. Gabrielle Oettingen at the University of Pennsylvania has done a number of studies showing the same result. In one study, women in a weight-reduction program were asked to describe what would happen if they were offered a tempting situation with food. The more positive their fantasies of how well they would cope with these situations, the less work they did on weight reduction. A year later, those women who consistently fantasised positive results lost on average 12 kilos less than those who anticipated negative challenges and thus put in more effort (Oettingen and Wadden, 1991). Oettingen followed up final year students to find out how much they fantasised getting their dream job after leaving university. The students who fantasised more reported two years later that they did less searching for jobs, had fewer offers of jobs, and had significantly smaller salaries than their classmates (Oettingen and Mayer, 2002). In another study she investigated a group of students who had a secret romantic attraction, a crush, on another student. She asked them to imagine what would happen if they were to accidentally find themselves alone with that person. The more vivid and positive the fantasies they made, the less likely they were to take any action and to be any closer to a relationship with the person 5 months later. The result is consistent in career success, in love and attraction, and in dealing with addictions and health challenges (Oettingen, Pak and Schnetter, 2001; Oettingen, 2000; Oettingen and Gollwitzer, 2002).

Richard Wiseman (2009, p 88-93) did a very large study showing the same result. He tracked 5000 people who had some significant goal they wanted to achieve (everything from starting a new relationship to beginning a new career, from stopping smoking to gaining a qualification. He followed people up over the next year, and found firstly that only 10% ever achieved their goal. Dramatic and consistent differences in the
psychological techniques they used made those 10% stand out from the rest. Those who failed tended either to think about all the bad things that would happen or continue to happen if they did not reach their goal (what NLP calls away from motivation, and what other research calls counterfactual thought) or to fantasise about achieving their goal and how great life would be. They also tried to achieve their goal by willpower and attempts to suppress “unhelpful thoughts”. Finally, they spent time thinking about role models who had achieved their goal, often putting pictures of the role model on their fridge or other prominent places, to remind them to fantasise. These techniques did not work! And the most successful people did not waste their time doing them.

Wiseman warns that visualising what it will be like to have achieved your goal has become a popular tactic. “This type of exercise has been promoted by the self-help industry for years, with claims that it can help people lose weight, stop smoking, find their perfect partner, and enjoy increased career success. Unfortunately, a large body of research now suggests that although it might make you feel good, the technique is, at best, ineffective.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 84). This is because, as Wiseman notes, whether you achieve your goals is primarily a question of motivation; of getting yourself to do certain things. Fantasising that everything has already been done reduces motivation.

**Goal-setting**

The complete inventory of successful strategies that Richard Wiseman’s research found fits neatly into my NLP-based SPECIFY model for outcome or goal setting (Bolstad, 2002).

**Sensory Specific:** Firstly, the most successful people did imagine achieving their goal, and were able to list concrete, specific benefits they would get from it, rather than just say that they would “feel happy”. They had what Wiseman calls “an objective checklist of benefits” and made these “as concrete as possible”, often by writing them down. He notes “… although many people said they aimed to enjoy life more, it was the successful people who explained how they intended to spend two evenings each week with friends and visit one new country each year.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 91-93)

**Positive:** Secondly, they described their goal positively. Wiseman says “For example, when asked to list the benefits of getting a new job, successful participants might reflect on finding more fulfilling and well-paid employment, whereas their unsuccessful counterparts might focus on a failure leaving them trapped and unhappy.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 92)
Ecological: That’s about as far as the research results coincide with the “Secret”. For example, one surprising result of the research by both Gabrielle Oettingen and Richard Wiseman is that it pays to think about challenges you may face in achieving your goal (even though that may feel unpleasant at the time). After thinking about the positive benefits of achieving their goal, the most successful participants would “spend another few moments reflecting on the type of barriers and problems they are likely to encounter if they attempt to fulfil their ambition…. focusing on what they would do if they encountered the difficulty.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 101) Oettingen trained people to do this process, which she calls “doublethink” and NLP would call checking “ecology”. She was able to increase their success dramatically just with this step.

Choice Increasing and Celebrated: Related to this NLP concept of ecology is the fact that successful goal-setters made sure that they felt as if their progress was bringing them rewards rather than limiting their choices and creating work. They did this most of all because “As part of their planning, successful participants ensured that each of their sub-goals had a reward attached to it” so that it “gave them something to look forward to and provided a sense of achievement.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 93)

Initiated by Self: Successful goal-setters have a plan. They do not leave their goal up to “the law of attraction” or to someone else who will save them. Wiseman notes “Whereas successful and unsuccessful participants might have stated that their aim was to find a new job, it was the successful people who quickly went on to describe how they intended to rewrite their CV in week one, and then apply for one new job every two weeks for the next six months.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 91)

First Step Identified: Wiseman found that it was particularly important to break the goal down into small steps and manage one step at a time. “Successful participants broke their overall goal into a series of sub-goals, and thereby created a step-by-step process that helped remove the fear and hesitation often associated with trying to achieve a major life change.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 90-91)

Your Resources Identified: In NLP we encourage people to identify both internal and external resources. Wiseman’s research studied only external resources, most especially friends, colleagues and family. “Successful participants were far more likely than others to tell their friends, family and colleagues about their goals…. Telling others about your aims helps you achieve them, in part, because friends and family often provide much needed support when the going gets tough.” (Wiseman, 2009, p 91)
Summarising

Since the release of the film “The Secret” in 2006, it has become popular to believe that success in any field can be obtained simply by visualizing having what you want, and then trusting that the universe will create it. Contrary to the claims of the film, there is little evidence that high achievers from politics, business, science and philosophy have held onto this belief, and scientists quoted in the film have explicitly stated that this interpretation of their statements is erroneous. The writer whose book inspired the film was impoverished throughout his sadly short life. Such visualizing does have effects on internal body processes, but by itself does not, from the research, adequately assist people to achieve success in other areas of life where external action is required. In the last 5 years there has been research on how goal-setting works, and some consistent conclusions have emerged:

1) The two activities most strongly correlated with failure to achieve stated goals are a) focusing on past problems, and b) fantasizing that one has already achieved success. The secret recognizes the first danger but not the second one.

2) A number of mental processes are strongly associated with goal achievement, and most of these are not referred to in the Secret. They can be summarized with the mnemonic SPECIFY:
   - Sensory Specific measurable and detailed descriptions of the desired result.
   - Positive description language
   - Ecological checking of challenges and undesired side effects of goal achievement and preparation to manage these issues.
   - Choice enhancement and Celebration of successful steps on the path.
   - Initiation of real world action by the person themselves.
   - First and subsequent smaller steps planned towards the final goal.
   - Your resources identified, including others whose encouragement will support action.

Biography

Dr Richard Bolstad is an NLP Trainer and author who teaches on several continents each year. His book “Transforming Communication” is a text used in many degree courses and his book “RESOLVE” gives a broader description of a research-based approach to NLP.
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Appendix: Setting A “Well-formed” Outcome – A Research Based Worksheet

1. Sensory Specific
(a) “What date do you intend to have this outcome by?”
(b) “Put yourself in the situation of having it. Step into your body at that time. What do you see, what do you hear, what do you feel when you have it?”

2. Positive Language
This question need only be asked if the person says “I DON’T want…” or “I want it NOT to be like…” at any time. In that case, ask: “If you don’t have that [i.e. the thing they don’t want], what is it that you will have instead?”

3. Ecological
(a) “What will you gain if you have this outcome?” “What will you lose if you have this outcome?” (If there are things which they would regret losing, ask “How can you create new ways to get what is important to you AND reach this goal?”)
(b) “What situations do you want this outcome in?” “Are there any life situations do you not want it to affect?”

4. Choice Increases and is Celebrated
(a) “How can this outcome increase your life choices?”
(b) “How will you celebrate the improvements it brings?”

5. Initiated By Self
“What do you personally need to do to achieve this?”

6. First Step Identified
“What is a first small step which you could take in the next 24 hours?”

7. Your Resources Identified
“What resources do you have to help you achieve this outcome?” (This includes external resources such as time, money, and people to support you. Even more importantly, it includes internal resources such as the feeling of confidence from past experiences where you achieved goals which had a similar challenge). “Who will you tell about this goal?”
“For a field based on a Communication Model and that seeks to make “the structure of experience” explicit, NLP can only thrive when there are journals that provide open, respectful, and professional exchanges by those who lead the way in creating a collaborative community. And that’s why I’m delighted to see Joe Cheal and ANLP lead out in the creation of Acuity.”

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D.
Developer of the Meta-States Model

“It is with a great sense of ‘at last!’ that I welcome the publication of Acuity. For a good while now there has been a piece missing in the jigsaw that is NLP. Acuity fills the gap, and it does so in many ways. It motivates authors from around the world to write illuminating in-depth articles. It brings together a range of diverse topics thereby giving the reader an opportunity to make unexpected associations. And by publishing high-quality reviewed papers it serves to raise the game of the whole field. Congratulations to Joe Cheal and the Association for NLP for making a contribution that, like a butterfly’s wings, might just start a flurry of co-inspiration - long may it last.”

James Lawley
co-author, Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling