Improved Communication:

Using Neuro-Linguistic Programming Clues to Get Results

By Karen B. Smith, MBA, PMP

Introduction

It has been said that it's good to have an open mind, especially when so much richness can be gained. Not the "richness" that comes with winning the lottery, but keeping an open mind to catch clues that will help you every single day… personally and professionally.

You may or may not have heard about neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), but it's a connection between the neurological processes (neuro), language (linguistic), and behavioral patterns that have been learned through experience (programming) and can be organized to achieve specific goals in life. This type of wiring helps us to communicate, even when we haven't said a word. However, what comes out is a scream to those who are perceptive. An important aspect of NLP is sensory acuity: our ability to notice by seeing, hearing and feeling the result of any behavior. The better our observation, the better we will be able to decide upon a different behavior that will bring us nearer to our goal. You then have to be prepared to change what you are doing in response to what you notice, again with an eye on your outcome.

I first encountered NLP in the late 1980s. At the time, some people thought NLP was manipulative; others did not. I personally believe that when it is used ethically, it can help you connect and build rapport with others.

Here are a few "context" clues to notice at your next cocktail party, a great testing ground for building rapport. Does your conversation revolve around:

- Pleasure or Pain? Some people act in a way that seeks to increase pleasure, while others seek to decrease pain.

- Matching or Mismatching? Some people sort in terms of what things they have in common, while others notice differences.

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1

- Possibility or Necessity? Some people are motivated by what is necessary rather than by what is possible.

- Past, Present, or Future? Some people dwell on the past, others on the future, and others seem to live only for the present.

In terms of context, just noticing this behavior will help shape how you can interact more effectively with others and communicate with them on their terms.

Working with Context Clues

Once you've noticed these clues, how can you apply them?

Pleasure or Pain

The concept of pleasure or pain means that we all act in a way that seeks to increase pleasure or decrease pain. We have different perceptions of these, of course, and one person will delight in what another dislikes. Some people have a greater tendency to move towards something they want, while others are more likely to move away from things they don't want. Each "driver" can be highly motivating and bring similar results, although positive motivation tends to be the stronger motivator. Additionally, people with the same dominant tendency tend to enjoy rapport and communicate well with each other.

Applying the Principle
An applicant once interviewed for an open position I had posted. When I asked her why she was interested in the position, she replied she'd like a fresh start (yes – this actually happened during one of my interviews for a mid-level marketer). Of course, I probed deeper into why she wanted a fresh start, e.g., what was she "running" from, by asking her additional questions. She could have answered it several ways to overcome my objections, but in the end, she knew that she said the wrong thing at the wrong time. In this situation, I was looking for a candidate who wanted to work with my company on the projects listed in the job description. Again, positive motivation tends to be the stronger motivator.

Matching or Mismatching

With matching or mismatching, one person will spot a common trend, while the other notices an exception. A matcher will tend to generalize, while a mismatcher usually focuses on specifics. On the occasions when you just do not hit it off with a person, the reason might be the way in which each of you sees the world. If you don't recognize this trait for what it is, you too can easily write off a person as ignorant, belligerent, negative or nitpicking.

Applying the Principle

As part of your organization's development team, let's say that you are tasked to compare product features of your product versus a close competitor's. If you are a "matching" person, you'd see all the things that the products had in common in general, e.g., provides the customer with X, is available online, 24/7 support, etc. If you were a "mismatching" person, you would possibly notice that the 24/7 support is in five languages, but that the product provides the customer with fewer features than your own. However, it does provide the customer with the most important feature, which is protecting personal data from cybercrime, while the rest of the features are deemed fluff. In this case of building a new or enhanced product, you may very well want a person who is detailed and notices the differences explicitly.

Another example may be when you debrief a project, e.g., post mortem, to help forge more efficient projects in the future. A matching person may notice the overall flow and point out that certain things should remain in the next project plan. A mismatching person may provide feedback on what not to do in the next project. As long as there is balance, both matching and mismatching feedback are helpful for future projects.

Possibility or Necessity

Regarding context around possibility or necessity, some people do things because they have to, rather than because they want to or because they see the possibilities in a course of action. Others are open to new possibilities and choices, and welcome the unknown. Each has strengths to offer in different kinds of jobs or situations. You will probably expect an auditor or quality controller, or perhaps an airline pilot, to do what must be done and stick to the rule book. A more creative job or leadership role will demand a mind that is open to new possibilities.

Applying the Principle

Several examples of possibility or necessity come to mind, including Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, the US Airways captain who safely landed his aircraft in the Hudson River. With so little time to think through landing and protecting the lives of all onboard, he went into his rule book and knew what was "necessary" via a checklist. However, your CEO or Human Resources VP may be great examples of what is "possible", by way of developing strategies that stretch the imagination and making hiring decisions that require people-nurturing and development for those who have the intent and see the potential to make the strategy come alive.

Past, Present and Future

With past, present and future context, some people dwell on the past, others on the future, and others seem to live only for the present. A highly goal-oriented person who has clear objectives will usually think in terms of where they are going and the sort of experiences that will result. A visual person can imagine an experience in advance of it happening, so that it almost becomes the reality. In a very similar way, another person will be able to recall

memories so vividly that in effect they carry their past around with them, which influences every current behavior. In management, such a person would be less able to cope with change or to grasp opportunities.

A clear representation of both past and future will usually mean a person is very time conscious, and for example, they may make for a reliable timekeeper. A person whose timeline is less distinct will live more in the present and may easily overlook appointments, or simply not appreciate the importance of keeping to a schedule.

The time dimension seems to be a major factor in leadership. The orthodox role of leadership usually includes creating a vision. Many would-be leaders have difficulty communicating their vision of the future to colleagues, who may neither think visually nor have a strong future timeline. However, by matching to a sensory preference, rapport can be established with ease.

Applying the Principle

If you are tasked with pulling a team together for a key project, say developing a new customer delivery process, you would probably consider a diverse team to ensure that appropriate ideas are considered in a timely fashion and that group think does not occur. Having mindset and knowledge from the past to know how the future may be impacted is important, but so is knowing what the customer wants going forward. Since most, if not all projects, are on a time crunch, having a balanced person round out the team will help to ensure the grand visions and sins of the past don't bog down the timeline.

A person who lives mainly in the present will be attracted to immediate or short-term outcomes, regardless of the economic or other logical sense. They just can't (or don't) represent a distant future in their minds.

Putting the Clues to Good Use

Now you can begin to see that "noticing" the clues is just the start to building rapport and understanding how the different contexts (and outlook) are necessary for a particular role or scenario. An exceptional manager, project manager, front-line employee, marketer, CXO, daughter, brother or spouse must listen and watch what is going on with their stakeholders, customers, Board of Directors or family and respond appropriately to help shape the desired outcome.

Sending the Correct Clues

Watching for and reading clues is only the beginning. To be truly adept at achieving desired outcomes, you will need to manage the clues that you are sending to the people with whom you engage. Let me illustrate with a personal example.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to visit a spa in Arizona – which at one point was one of Oprah Winfrey's top spas to visit around the world. I signed up for the "Equine Experience," thinking that I would be "playing" around with horses. When I arrived with a few fellow spa-goers, the ranch hand told us that he'd teach us how to clean the horse's hoof. My first thought was, "Really?"

Sure enough, the ranch hand began showing us how to do this. He said that you'd have to put your hand on the horse to make sure he knows you're there and will, therefore, not crush you against the fence to which he was posted. You are then supposed to go up to his side and, naturally, bend his leg to scrape his hoof clean. The ranch hand made this task look effortless. I thought to myself, "looks simple enough."

I confidently walked up to the horse, placed my hand on his hind side, and then attempted to get him to bend his leg for some good ol' fashioned cleaning. After a minute or two, the ranch hand told me to step away from the horse, and asked me what I was doing. I proudly said that I was showing the horse that I was confidently going to clean his hoof. (Note: My heart was racing. Besides not wanting to be crushed, I didn't want to be the only one who couldn't easily do this task! Where is that "easy" button when you need one?)

The ranch hand asked if I had ever done this before, to show such a display of confidence. I, of course, said that this was new to me, but the good news was that the horse did not know that (yes, – my exact words). He adeptly replied that a horse is one of the most empathetic animals on earth, and he could see right through my "air of confidence."

The ranch hand requested that I rethink my strategy, from one of confidence to one of intent. I needed to express my intent to get the horse to give me his hoof for cleaning.

I got my wits about me, walked back up to the horse with intent and, amazingly, he gave me his hoof.

What does this experience about a horse and a hoof have to do with communication? It articulates the difference between confidence and intent.

Confidence and Intent

Confidence is defined as the "quality or state of being certain." Intent is defined as "an aim or purpose" or "having the mind and will focused on a specific purpose." When trying or learning something new, I learned that you should have the intent to complete that task – whether that's learning a new skill, taking on a new area of responsibility, or just noticing others' body language.

By intending to complete a task – say noticing what you may be "presenting" to others via your own choice of words – you are making a conscious effort. You may not have done this before, but your intent is that the task will be completed. It's all about mindset versus trying to look as though you are experienced.

Think how you might apply this "intent" mindset in your job. While underlying project management skills are learned, practiced, and can be leveraged, each project is unique. Your areas of responsibility are expanding. Technology is changing. Market needs are diverse and in flux. While showing your confident self – even if you are not – may help you to be more confident than if you did not put on this act, intent may be the stronger motivator of the two. You can have intent in unfamiliar situations, but yet there's typically no misinterpretation as there may be with confidence, e.g., she was pretentious.

The purpose of sharing my story is to communicate the need to have intent versus confidence. Confidence will come with practice and experience. Intend to understand and communicate with others effectively. Intend to learn a new skill. Intend to understand what's important to your executive team. Intent will help you come closer to achieving your desired outcome – whether that's to ensure your team works collaboratively towards a mutual goal delivered at a certain time, that you were able to successfully use your new-found skill during a key project, or that you achieved management's expectations.

Intent is the foundation to confidence. Try this mindset and see what (hoof) pops up!

About the Author

Karen B. Smith, MBA and PMP, is an accomplished senior-level marketing professional with demonstrated success in Fortune 250 companies in many industries including technology, hospitality, travel, services, consulting, government and real estate. She has been leading marketing and product management projects for 15+ years and is known for her innovative approaches to resolving large problems by defining them, structuring them and making them into best in class, and resolving unstructured assignments into structured ones with measurable results. Karen holds an MBA from Baylor University, a BBA in marketing from the University of Texas at Arlington and a PMP® certification.

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7