



Metaprograms

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Often described as the 'hard wiring' in the brain, metaprograms work unconsciously within us to filter and shape our perceptions of the information coming to us from the outside world. Knowing how they work, how to recognise them in oneself and in others and developing the flexibility to use that knowledge as part of the way you influence others will help you to become a master communicator. Read on and consider just how you can use the information in this article to help you become even more elegant in your interactions with others

Knowing how to work with metaprograms will significantly increase your effectiveness as a NLPer, no matter what point in your training you are at. And it's really quite simple stuff to master. What we are about here is recognising the operating patterns that individuals have created for themselves so that they can function efficiently. The most important part of doing this well is to spend some time second positioning the people with whom you are interested in interacting or influencing, so that you can understand where they are coming from just as well as you understand your own perspectives on life. Then you will find yourself moving naturally into influencing others by working first from their model of the World rather than your own. You will quickly discover that this is the key to it all. When you understand the patterns of thinking that are driving others, when you can recognise them automatically in everyday conversations you will find the whole area of communication opening out before you ready for you to experiment with and develop ever more elegant and exciting ways of managing your own life and the people who are journeying through it with you.

Human beings, the nervous system, have pattern recognition programmed in. If we didn't recognise patterns it would probably be impossible to cope with the information overload being thrown at us weekly, daily, hourly and minute by minute. And we are clearly, in a World where information is increasing exponentially, able to cope and becoming better at coping exceptionally well in the pattern recognition field. Just think of how complex the average computer game has become and of how easily children - and a few dedicated adults - are able to assimilate what they need and to work with that in managing the information needed to manipulate and play those games successfully.

First Steps. . . .

The metaprograms we work with in NLP are the ones identified by Jung earlier in the 20th century and used as the basis for the Myers Briggs MBTI and 16PF psychometrics. So, if you think you recognise the patterns I describe here, you probably do, and this will make it all the easier for you to understand and use them more quickly than if you had never come across them before - although I hasten to add that I have always found them easy for people to assimilate and make use of for themselves, whatever their level of previous experience.

A Case Study (Suggested to me by a session I did with Chrissie Hall many years ago)

On a management workshop some years ago I set an exercise which asked individuals to 'sell' an object or an idea to a partner who had previously stated that this was one thing in the World which they would never buy.

One salesperson was completely stuck. His partner had stated that he would never buy cigarettes and was so adamant that no matter what he had tried the salesperson had failed for half an hour to get anywhere near a sale.

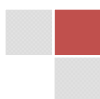
It just happened that sitting opposite the 'buyer' at dinner the previous evening I had noticed that he ran an 'other' rather than a 'self' metaprogram. It was therefore a simple sale to suggest that buying a certain number of cigarettes would ensure the donation of a substantial amount of money to his favourite charity. Of course, he bought the idea, although somewhat reluctantly. Said I had cheated, that it was an underhanded approach. He was right; it was. But I think it made the point.

This is how we sell effectively. By thinking about the buyers' motivation, by giving them a reason to buy the ideas we present and above all by thinking about the value buying our idea will create for them.

And remember, even if we hate the thought of selling and cannot bear to think of ourselves as salespeople, the real truth is that selling is one of the basic skills every one of us is born with, something that, if we thought clearly about what we do, we would notice ourselves doing every day, every time we set about influencing or persuading someone to take on an idea we may have, or to do something with or for us!

Some Basic Metaprograms . . .

There are many different metaprograms and, at some stage, you will notice just how many of them you have been using to influence different people differently. I'm going to suggest a few here which will help you start your own investigations and develop your own training in this area .



Direction Filter

People who answer, as one woman did to me about choosing a car, 'Something small, very fast and deadly.' are likely to be the move Towards type, while those who speak about safety and reliability are usually moving Away From. Yes they want a car, but they want a car that doesn't present a difficulty or a risk.

To my great relief as a regular airline passenger, I discovered during one training programme, that BA engineers, within their job all operate 'Away From', looking at the risks of not getting what they were doing right first time. They are all exceptionally aware of safety and believe that taking risks with lives is stupid. Interestingly, in their private lives they all 'Moved Towards' and did challenging things like jumping off mountains with wings attached and white water rafting. Their metaprograms were truly context driven: one set for the job, the other for their own lives.

Think about the people you know well or work with. I guarantee that you can easily identify where they each sit on the direction continuum, can't you? And you will probably notice that some seem to sit further towards one end while other people are somewhere closer to the middle. It's the same for each of the metaprogram patterns.

What Weakness?

When Jung was considering these patterns he observed that, in his opinion, there was no such thing as a weakness. Every apparent weakness, he said, is only evidence of an overdone strength. And if you think about that, it really does make sense. If you run a strong metaprogram pattern in any part of any continuum you are likely to find a corresponding area at the other end into which you feel it uncomfortable to go.

How would you sell an idea to your colleagues using the Direction Filter? Perhaps words like 'challenging' and 'achieving' work well for those to go Towards, while words like 'safety' and phrases such as, 'can you afford to take the risk' work for people who Move Away from.

Reason Filter

The opposite ends of this continuum are those of us who like Options compared with those of us who must have Procedures. You can hear the differences quite clearly in any conversation. Procedures people use words like should and must while Options people avoid them like the plague. Options people are often blue-sky thinkers who must be able to go where they want to go and in as many ways as possible at any one time. Procedures people like the parameters set for them. They like to feel that there is a pre-set route through any set of circumstances.



Years ago in IBM I came across a man believed by many to be the single most inspiring manager of all time. His current organisation advertises widely in this magazine, so I trust that he recognises himself! The stories about him were apocryphal. Most of them included discussions about new jobs and roles happening in the long lunchtimes he enjoyed spending in the pub with his people. 'What,' he would ask, 'would you really like to be doing in your role at present?' And then when he'd found out, he'd offer the individual that exact job. But he did expect people to make up the rules for themselves and he did expect them to get on with creating and establishing the role they wanted. Above all he expected people to get on with achieving these things quickly. He was anything but a slouch!

When he came in to manage the personal development side of training the training professionals in the department were ecstatic - all but one of them. And that one spent weeks tip-toeing around telling everyone he could trust of how fearful he was for the future and how much he hated this man's leadership style. Why? Because he was real creature of habit. Inspired yes, but with a need for procedural certainty that outweighed anything I have ever seen - before or since. Being told to design and deliver the job of his dreams was the ultimate assignment from hell. What he wanted, nay needed, in order to be able to perform was the absolute certainty of a job description written by someone else, the parameters of success and failure tightly drawn and performance measures set for him up front.

Clearly, this filter will be important when you are leading and managing people. By all means set parameters and clear performance measures for your procedures people. At the same time recognise that if you do that for someone who operates out of options you will be creating a real problem for yourself and them. Give them the opportunity to decide what they will do, offer them lots of options to choose from, and allow them to weave their way around doing many things at once, rather than insisting that they focus only on one.

Frame of Reference Filter

This relates to how people judge the results of their actions - how they are doing as they go through life living it to the full. This filter is about the locus of judgement; where a person gathers the data for making a judgement about the outcome of his or her actions.

The indicators to search for here are whether they go inside themselves, outside to an external authority, or do both, to judge the sort of things they have achieved.

As we mature our frame of reference tends to shift from the external to the internal with an external check. Too strong an external emphasis and we put responsibility on others and remain as vulnerable as we were when we were children; too strong an internal emphasis may prevent us from learning consistently or encourage premature closure on a subject.

Advertising pitches geared to the externally focused typically use celebrities at their core of the campaign. Internally referenced people will usually do their own research and make their own minds up.



When you're managing someone internally focused you can rest assured that they will have internal standards that they work to, and will need little reassurance or interference; the externally referenced, on the other hand, will be looking to you for slaps on the back, reassurance and telling them that they are, indeed, doing a great job.

Convincer Strategies

Convincer strategies are important things to understand when you are in the process of influencing others. If you can 'read' someone else's convincer strategy you will be well ahead of the game.

There are two parts to the convincer strategy. First, which representation system or systems do people use to become convinced of something? Do they have to see it; hear their own internal voice, or have someone tell them; do they have to work with the material, try it on for size; or do they have to have the logic and the facts?

Second, the 'demonstration' filter: what is the time sequence involved in becoming convinced of something?

You, like me, have probably shopped with a range of different people and been amazed at the idiosyncrasies of how they go about it. One of my sisters buys masses of clothes. Does she try them on? Never! She goes into shops, sees things she likes, finds what she believes is her size and departs with her purse several hundred pounds the lighter. It all happens in a trance. And yes, she does make mistakes. Terrible mistakes. But as she's got an 'automatic' visual convincer strategy, it's fairly easy to sell to her, providing that you stock the sort of style she likes.

Other people, probably the majority, have to be convinced a number of times. The average is three times, sometimes in three representational systems. I wonder just how many of us try things on, notice how they look on us, have to feel good in them and like the salesperson to tell us, 'Madam/Sir, it's just you!' before we commit to buying?

You may have the misfortune to work for one of those infuriating bosses who has to be convinced every time, who can never trust that you will do what you say you will do and who checks up on you all the time. If you do, then I'm sure you know from bitter experience exactly how to sell and keep on selling to those people's convincer strategies . . .!

Chunk Size

Vital to communication and learning; this filter relates to how people best receive and incorporate information. We prefer either specific (small size, details) or global (big picture) information. Most of us move from one to the other, so it's also important to discover which the person you're relating to needs to have first. Developing your ability to recognise where you are (in terms of the chunk size) and then move from big picture to the detail and back again easily and comfortably will mean you have real behavioural flexibility and elegance in all your communications and negotiations.



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Relationship Sort

Sometimes referred to as Matching and Mismatching, this is a deletion filter that we use for understanding and for decision making. Some of us, in order to understand new ideas, will look for similarities and match new information with what we already know and do; match pieces of data together. Others will look for the differences first and mismatch us, or the new data with which they are dealing. Some of us do both. But more of us match than mismatch, so it's probably quite important to understand what happens with people who mismatch so that we can match or mismatch them more effectively.

If you're a matcher, then you'll already be building great rapport with your fellow matchers. If you're a mismatcher who does sometimes wonder why people get irritated with you or attempt to ignore your contributions, then read on to understand how your processing works - and perhaps to get some new insights into how you can manage your mismatching to greater effect.

The mismatcher falls into one of two general categories: Polarity Sorters and Counter Example Sorters. The first are the people who, whatever you say, automatically come up with the opposite response from the one you want to generate. How many of us have bred or nurtured children who do this? And how infuriating it can be. The solution? Just get used to suggesting the opposite of what you really want to have happen and you'll deal very effectively with a polarity responder. One warning, this can be somewhat tedious. . .

The Counter Example Sorter is the 'yes, but ..ter', that person who always finds it necessary to generate alternatives to what has been suggested. Typically they will produce yes-but lists with reasons for why what you are proposing will not work. This is a pattern which can be extremely useful when you are working with new ideas and you want to test them out. It's an absolutely crucial element in thinking creatively and innovatively. Any team without a mismatcher is liable to underperform when it needs to find solutions to tough problems.

It can also feel at the receiving end as if you are being personally attacked. Believe me, you are not. The pattern is habitual. It is how that individual learns. What they are doing is searching for enough information to convince themselves of your point of view, and once they have it they will be on your side - totally, body and soul. The best way of leading them is to use either a positive or a negative statement to generate a negative or positive list of counter-examples - and, of course, always recognise the value of and use their apparently negative contributions to your own advantage.

You might also find it interesting to note that Mismatchers really relish change and diversity. If they are extreme in their mismatching response, they may need to change jobs every eighteen months or two years. Doing too many of the same things can become boring after a very short time. Extreme Matchers on the other hand like nothing better than staying in the same, or a similar, job for years and years and years. The current working environment, where everything is changing all the time may not suit them at all.



Time Filter

This filter is about how we store our memories, are oriented to and access them, and how we perceive the continuity of time. Important to know when you are selling an idea.

In terms of orientation, those of us who work from the past may be a little conservative, sometimes artistic, drawing and building on ideas. Jung's 'Feeler' category is often associated with the past. Those of us who work in the present will certainly be doers, maybe athletes, certainly people who like immediate results. Jung's 'Sensors' work in present time. People who spend time in the future may be philosophers, the creators of new ideas and developers. Jung's 'Intuitors' are mainly future focused. Scientists, Jung's 'Thinkers', tend to be atemporal, living outside of time considering things from third position.

The other factor to the Time Filter is how we access time. You will probably know people - you may be one yourself - who have random access to time, who can 'jump' across and between different times easily. For these people time tends not to have any length; they can hold two or more ideas of time simultaneously and once convinced they stay convinced.

Yet other people can only access time sequentially. For them it has an order and to access a specific memory they have to run through every event consecutively to get back to that time. These people can find it hard to remember things and often forget or change their minds. What we need to do to motivate them is to sequence our own thinking and suggestions to align with theirs and then we will find it easy to pace and lead them.

In Conclusion . . .

I trust you've found that what I've said here resonates with your own experience. Good communicators have been using these tools unconsciously forever. What I have found most useful in categorising Metaprograms is that I now have a set of categories that I can refer to at those times when I find I am making slower progress in negotiations than I think is appropriate. Thinking about how people think, what their perceptual filters are and how those filters are affecting their behaviour will deepen and broaden your experience of NLP. Go out and experiment. Listen and tune in to others. You will be amazed at what you can learn.

References:

You might like to consider a new psychometric, 'Thinking Styles' developed by Fiona Beddoes-Jones and to read 'Words that Change Minds' by Shelle Rose Charvet to add to your understanding of this area.

