

MANAGEMENT & HUMAN RESOURCES

# ACQUIRING EXCELLENCE

What is the basis of excellent behaviour – not in general, but for the individual exemplar of that excellence? An article from James Lawley – a supervising neurolinguistic psychotherapist – who presented a Master Class “NLP modelling” to the members of the Management & Human Resources Club of HEC Alumni.



Many books and articles tell us how to behave excellently but, when studied in detail, most remain abstract. NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) burst onto the personal development scene in the 1970's. Its radical premise is that a specialised form of 'modelling' can go beyond the abstract to identify how people do what they do so well – both in terms of their external behaviour and the internal pattern of state of mind that contribute to exceptional performance.

For example, Robert Dilts' modelling of the creative genius Walt Disney produced a detailed description of the physiology and cognitive patterns required in each of the three phases of Disney's strategy's 'Dreamer, Realist and Critic'.

Furthermore, NLP maintains the models that result from the modelling of excellence can be acquired by others to significantly improve their performance. And beyond that, once these models are acquired, they can be applied across multiple domains – to some degree, excellence is portable.

In the 1990's Penny Tompkins and I applied the principles of NLP modelling to studying a radically innovative psychotherapist, David Grove – best known for developing Clean Language. We got more than we bargained for. Not only did we create a learnable model of Grove's many therapeutic processes, we have discovered a new way of modelling. Symbolic Modelling is now being used all over the planet by coaches, consultants, educationalists, commercial and academic

researchers, health professionals and change managers.

Symbolic Modelling is based on the premise that the only way people can describe their internal experience is through metaphor. We cannot describe subjective experience directly but we can say what it is like. Analogy and metaphor are ways to convey complex and intangible experience in a tangible form – stock markets 'crash', profits are 'squeezed', bottom lines are 'boosted'. If you know what to listen and look for, you will become aware that everyone uses metaphor all the time. Research shows that in everyday discourse people commonly use 4-6 metaphors a minute. That figure surprises because most metaphors are both 'relayed' and 'received' out of our awareness. But they are fundamental to modelling because, if, paradoxically, you take them as a literal description of the speakers experience, you open a doorway into their inner world.

It makes a big difference to how people work whether they regard business as a competition, a war, a family, a farm or a jungle. However, it is not just the explicit metaphors that are packed with information, the unnoticed metaphors reveal as much if not more about the structure and process of a person's thinking and decision-making.

Modelling can be a formal project which can take several months, or an informal conversation lasting 30 minutes. A typical modelling project will go through the following stages:

1. Preparation: specify the purpose and measurable evidence that identifies the top performers (the exemplars)
2. Gather Information: though on-the-job observation and specialised modelling interviews
3. Construct a Model: identify the differences that make the difference and encode them in a minimal process
4. Test: use the criteria of Stage 1 to assess whether results are improved by the use of the model
5. Facilitate Acquisition: design activities for others to use the model to improve their performance.

Stage 5 can supplement or streamline an organisation's existing training programmes; redefine competency criteria; produce a top-performer profile for recruitment and

# NLP MODELLING INVOLVES OBSERVING AND MAPPING THE PROCESSES WHICH UNDERLIE EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ENABLING OTHERS TO ACQUIRE THE 'KNOW-HOW' TO ENACT THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL BEHAVIOURS WHICH RESULT IN EXCELLENCE.

## CASE STUDY

Simon Coles is the CEO of a successful and expanding software company. Simon had remained involved in certain parts of the sales process despite wanting to step back from that role. Training sales recruits in his highly successful selling strategy proved difficult because it was so different from the standard sales text books. During our modelling interview Simon discovered his metaphor for his selling process. It wasn't like any common sales metaphors: a funnel, a ladder, or the 7 steps. For Simon, it was like being in a special forces training exercise where he enters a room with the goal to get to the other side safely and with a good conscience. The room is a completely dark. He knows there are land mines that will blow up if he steps on them and there might be children playing with toys. The first thing he does is to get the light on. He does this by assuming he knows nothing and by asking the prospective customer questions, starting with "Why did you make time for us today?" It is crucial that he approaches with respect, not trying to manipulate in any way. If he finds a big mine, he sticks a flag on it – his company's products are probably not right for this customer. Other mines he respectfully probes and gently defuses. Even though it is a minefield, it is joyful and playful. Laughter is a very important indicator that it is going well. Three months later Simon reported that just showing the film of the interview to two new sales people was "Hugely impactful, so much more than I expected." In fact he has decided that "this is how we're going to encode and pass things on going forward – identify something of interest, have it modelled and record the session. That then goes into our training library." For more information about modelling, visit: <http://lc.cx/ZzzM>



selection; create online practice activities; etc.

To see the full potential of modelling you need to be able to think outside of the box. For example, I modelled improvisational clown trainer, Vivian Gladwell. I didn't want to train clowns but I could see that his unique directing-in-the-moment method would enable me to work with business coaches to improve their responsiveness to their clients.

Likewise I modelled Martin Snodden, a former paramilitary, who served 15 years in a Northern Ireland prison. For the past 20 years Martin has been a leader in facilitating peace and reconciliation in some of the most war-torn and troubled corners of the world. I modelled how Martin was able to work with

and build relationships when trust is at a minimum and with people whose values and beliefs are diametrically opposed to his. It turns out that the model can be generalised to any conflicted relationship including 'warring' teams, colleagues, couples and families.

NLP Modelling is as much a state of mind as it is a technique. It is different to 'understanding' which generally means making sense from your existing standpoint. Modelling is about finding the standpoint of the exemplar, uncovering the structures which keep the excellence repeating so consistently, and coding them in a way that others can acquire. ●



This conference is available in video on the HEC Alumni VOD platform: <http://lc.cx/ZzzQ>