



Coaching for school improvement with NLP

What is neuro-linguistic programming, and how can it benefit your school? **Katie Paxton-Doggett** investigates the increasingly popular coaching tool, and explains how by operating on the basic level of thought, action and communication, NLP raises standards and improves staff confidence.

Coaching has become an extremely important development tool in schools. Traditionally, coaching took place within the establishment with a member of the senior leadership team or between peers. Although this is still widely used, coaching using an external facilitator has become increasingly important, and many headteachers claim it's a tool that should be used within a wider school improvement context.

Underlying much modern coaching practice is neuro-linguistic programming or NLP (see box 'Neuro-linguistic programming').

Roger Terry is an experienced master NLP trainer and coach and author of 'NLP for Teachers'. He believes that NLP is not exclusive, but is an extremely good model underpinning all modern business and executive coaching. Where NLP differs from many traditional approaches is that rather than simply moving a person



Neuro-linguistic programming

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) was created by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in California in the 1970s.

The approach is based on the connection between the neurological processes (neuro), language (linguistic) and behavioural patterns learned through experience (programming), which exist in the whole mind-body system that is a person.



Bandler and Grindler investigated what made highly effective people successful, both in terms of their external behaviour and language, but also the internal mental processes that they employ. They asserted that by 'modelling' these processes, it was possible for anyone to achieve the same successes.

NLP techniques can be used to help with problems such as phobias, depression and habits. However, its use in coaching aids both self-development and wider developments in businesses and schools.

towards new goals, it works on a more fundamental level by exploring the interaction of thoughts (neuro), verbal and non-verbal communication (linguistic) and patterns of behaviour and emotional responses (programming). By using the methodology and techniques of NLP in coaching, thinking and behaviour are changed and different results produced. NLP is frequently referred to as the 'instruction manual for your mind'.

Visualisation

NLP coaches employ a range of techniques to engage and 'upgrade the operating system' of the brain. Visualisation techniques can be manipulated to change deeply held beliefs and have proved to be very powerful. Hypnotist Paul McKenna who trained with NLP guru Bandler has produced a range of self-help books based on the principles including 'Stop smoking without gaining weight', 'I can make you happy' and 'Hypnotic gastric band'. His book 'I can make you thin' has been called 'the best-selling weight loss book in British history'.

Anne Thompson, a certified trainer and master practitioner of NLP, works extensively with visualisation techniques. She says: 'We work on a vision of what a person wants to do. We then make that visualisation as compelling as it can be and look at it as if it is a movie. This motivates the unconscious to find ways to realise the goal.'

She often works with people whose confidence has been knocked as a result of some experience or who do not feel competent in their career. Anne's approach involves getting people motivated by setting small, clear steps which they can work through and gain confidence.

However, Anne's approach does not use the SMART goals criteria (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-bound). She explains: 'I encourage people to look at all the options even those that don't look possible. There is no point in being 'realistic' – this often hasn't worked in the past. Roger Bannister would never have run the four-minute mile if he had listened to those who said it was impossible. A lot of people are scared to dream. I find out what they have been doing and what they really want to do.'

Language

The use of language is central to NLP. Language expresses both unconscious and conscious thought and gives meaning to sensory experience. NLP can be used to 'reframe' old, established ways of thinking and seeing the world to create belief changes that stick. By changing the language, it is possible to transform self-limiting beliefs into positive motivations which can free an individual's potential to new opportunities.

Too often, education talks about 'failing schools' or the declining standards. How much more powerful could aspirational wording be? Although deep down we often know that we are capable, the nagging voice saying 'I can't do it' serves as a protective function to stop us from straying from our comfort zone. If we don't try, then we can't fail.

Roger Terry explains how the use of language and precise questioning is central to NLP:

'The first improvement you'll make, which is one that affects not only your career but also all of the interactions in your life, is understanding how your wording choices affect your own motivations and those of the people around you. You'll discover how simple words like 'if', 'but' and 'try' hold hidden meaning and serve to confuse and blur communication, and how you can scrub the negative use of these words from your communication vocabulary.'



Liz Robinson, headteacher of Surrey Square Primary School in London, agrees and feels that basic NLP language techniques can be used in classroom management to produce a big impact. She says: 'The use of the word 'try' presupposes the possibility of failure. If something is not achievable, it is better to talk about it and to be honest.'

In fact, Surrey Square has gone a stage further – to reframe the thinking so that failure is seen as a learning opportunity. The learning culture of the school has undergone a dramatic shift. Pupils talk about ‘juicy mistakes’ which are made by lots of people and give an opportunity to learn. The ‘give it a go’ club in each class is happy to try their best, recognising that the worst that can happen is that they get it wrong and, in any case, they can learn from that.

School improvement adviser, Marie Neave, also employs the precise NLP questioning techniques to get out of a circle of negativity where a situation is repeated with poor outcomes. She feels that the focus is on asking the right questions without giving the answers. A key question would be ‘How can you see this school as good and what will it look like?’

Simple techniques

In her previous role in Bromley, Marie used NLP techniques extensively where she found the results to be ‘absolutely amazing’. In 2010, she rolled out a programme for around 50 staff working with extremely vulnerable young people to undertake the four-day diploma programme. A particular focus was how staff react to challenging situations such as mental health issues or violence. Following training, exclusions, which had been a huge cause for concern, were reduced to zero.

Simple techniques such as moving left and right arms to calm students quickly had a profound effect in practice. Marie described one deputy headteacher who had undertaken the training but had been sceptical. Afterwards he used the techniques

very effectively in one-to-one situations with volatile young men to calm them down. She said: ‘It was practical stuff and he could not believe the transformation.’

The NLP approach is very scientific according to Marie who thinks it is important to understand how the brain operates, especially the teenage brain. She explains: ‘A teen will take 45 minutes to cool down so there is no point in trying to talk to them if the situation is too hot.’

Liz agrees: ‘There is no point in being rational if someone is in a highly charged state. The only thing to do is to calm them down. But you have to be in a good state to do that.’ The school has a script to run if there is a volatile situation when a member of staff needs to call someone else in without losing face. As Liz says: ‘We all have moments where we are not ok, but we have to take responsibility for our own state and act upon that.’

Marie used knitting in Bromley with disruptive pupils who had difficulty focusing in class. In challenging lessons such as maths, pupils were encouraged to knit, which engaged both the right and left side of the brain. She gave an example of a young carer with a very distressing situation at home, who had found knitting particularly beneficial, so much so that he was able to begin to regulate his own moods. He got so much out of it that he put a DVD together to show the rest of school.



Relationships

NLP gives control of relationships enabling more meaningful interaction at every level. Central to every relationship is the concept of rapport, a deeply embedded pattern which is largely controlled by our unconscious.

Roger explains: Teachers generally have good sensory acuity [the ability to



observe, examine, and interpret the external cues received from other people] and are used to reading pupils all the time. Practice building rapport helps to develop their natural skills so that they can become excellent communicators.'

Although rapport is a basic ability that everyone has from the moment of birth, by learning some simple techniques, it is possible to get into rapport more easily. Roger says: 'The ability to control rapport will allow you to make deep connections with the people in your life and enrich your relationships across the spectrum.'

Anne agrees: 'If you are not in rapport with another person, it doesn't matter how good your message is – those people close down. NLP can teach you to follow another person's physical cues to enhance the connection.'

Roger says: 'We are social creatures and we look for interaction. We look for our own patterns – something that mirrors me. By using matching and mirroring, we can make deep connections'

These techniques are completely natural. When people are in rapport, they synchronously move at the same time in an unconscious pattern. However, NLP teaches how to engage with these skills consciously to build rapport and to keep it going so that it can be used to best effect. It can also be used in a group environment. As Roger points out: 'If you cannot build rapport with a class, then you cannot teach.'

Roger also advocates the use of 'stage anchors' which elicit a Pavlovian response in pupils: 'A teacher has spots in the classroom where they do specific things and they always do them from that position. The unconscious minds of the pupils recognise this and respond accordingly. So, for example, there could be a place in the classroom to facilitate the class, to make them ask questions. This helps with good discipline as it puts the children in the right frame of mind.'

Raising standards and developing confidence

Liz first encountered NLP when she was on the fast track teaching programme. She describes herself as a very practical person who is attracted to NLP because of its intuitive nature. She says: 'NLP was developed over many years by observation of what effective people do.'

Clearly her use of the techniques have been embedded in her very effective leadership. The Ofsted inspection in 2012 found Surrey Square to be good with outstanding features, stating: 'In particular, the leadership provided by the headteacher and deputy headteacher is exemplary.'

Yet Liz does not regard herself as 'doing NLP' – the techniques are very natural and incorporated into her usual behaviour. 'It is quite hardcore to be a headteacher in an

Coaching for wellbeing

There are also other coaching approaches available for those who are not attracted to NLP. Chris Gothard supports headteachers to build their resilience and enhance their well-being. With a background in teaching, pastoral work and counselling, Chris is ideally placed to work with schools and she sees herself as facilitator in a role akin to peer supervision.

Headteachers work in self-selecting groups of between five and ten, most of whom have found their way to Chris through word of mouth. Chris describes it as a 'co-creative' programme with an 'army of activities'. It is a simple idea – as the group get to know each other and gain a deeper understanding of the principles involved, a supportive but challenging environment is created. Once the dynamics of the group work, Chris sees her role as steering a path.

The basic premise is the use of questioning and reflecting back what has been said to encourage deeper consideration of situations. This is an approach that teachers are comfortable with and which they are able to use effectively to identify the barriers to change and move towards their own goals and solutions.

Chris explains: 'We look at the pleasures of the job as well as the challenges, such as conflicts with parents and the demands of Ofsted. In a struggling school, the focus is understandably on the bad things. But it's important to balance these against the good things – the things that brought them into teaching in the first place.'

For headteachers, the coaching group offers an opportunity for them to offload in a confidential and safe environment. Although this provides a uniquely supportive place, coaching is aimed at building leadership capacity and resilience. Chris explains: 'Leadership development takes place in a supportive way – networking builds trust creating challenge from within the group. Headteachers learn how to build resilience in themselves and others and this is essential for wider school improvement.'

For more information on this programme, visit www.working4wellbeing.co.uk.

inner city school,' explains Liz. 'I am a pretty sensitive soul but I have to manage conflict – I have parents threatening me. I use a lot of the techniques for managing my state so that I am in a good place. It's a bit like "thinking positive" but using a much more sophisticated set of tools.'

NLP provides a range of tools and skills that can be used in many different ways according to the specific needs of a school. Roger expands: 'When teachers have got the principles of NLP, they work out creative ways of using it for a really impactful learning experience.'

Research evidence agrees. A report prepared for the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) Education Trust in 2010, 'Neuro-linguistic programming and learning: teacher case studies on the impact of NLP in education', found that schools were reporting wider benefits from using NLP in relation to improving the quality of teaching and learning for students. 'This was not just because of the strategies themselves,' the report explains. "But also because the teachers using them became more effective champions, gaining confidence about their own skill and understanding. A number of participants consistently shared many of the techniques they learned (such as engaging and motivating students, effective communication skills, improved tutoring) with their peers in schools. Work has begun to demonstrate impact in relation to raising standards of achievement as well as on helping schools raise levels of emotional well-being in their staff and pupils.'

Katie Paxton-Doggett is clerk to a number of governing bodies and is dual-qualified as a solicitor and a chartered secretary.

Knowledge trails

1) High-impact coaching tools – Nick Austin and Richard Churches offer a powerful set of tools and tips to support your coaching.

library.teachingtimes.com/articles/slt-high-impact-coaching-tools

2) Rapport: the essential ingredient – Nick Austin and Richard Churches explore what we mean by rapport, and how it benefits teaching and coaching.

library.teachingtimes.com/articles/rapport-the-essential-ingredient