

Is NLP relevant to people working in the NHS today? asks Michael Beale.

improving communication

■ **Neuro linguistic programming (NLP) originated 30 years ago from the study of the attitude and strategies of individuals who were successful in helping others change. In this article I pose – and answer – some key questions about the potential of NLP in the NHS today.**

why is it relevant to the NHS?

NLP is about thinking and communication skills. In more detail it's about the attitudes that lead to success and modelling successful performance.

These in turn lead to techniques which anyone can use to improve their performance in a particular context. It's a very powerful way of improving one to one communication.

It's potentially useful in the NHS both in direct interaction between NHS professionals and their patients and within the NHS organisation itself. Within the NHS itself it is particularly relevant to individuals leading change, coaching performance and undergoing career change themselves.

how is NLP different from other communication approaches?

NLP training starts from a different position than most other communications training. It's about what works and how to replicate it.

The focus in NLP is the reaction and feedback from the person you are communicating with; if you listen to them carefully and notice how they react you are in a better position to both influence and learn from them.

This may seem trivial and obvious – but it's not always the way we've been taught. In fact there is often an inverse relationship between the amount of traditional education someone has received and the skill they show in communicating.

how does NLP help those leading change, coaching and undergoing career change themselves?

NLP originated from the study of the attitude and strategies of individuals who were successful in helping others change. Its core competencies are about communication and change and giving people the mental resources to cope with change. It gives practitioners the basic skills that enable them to use current 'best practice' change and coaching models more effectively.

are there any downsides to NLP?

NLP is about change. Virginia Satir, one of the original models from which NLP was developed, claimed that human beings were driven to create familiarity above almost everything else. Exploring personal change can be the exact opposite of this and a genuinely challenging process.

That is why NLP training is particularly recommended for individuals leading change in others and for individuals who are being subjected to external change. It may not be appropriate or welcomed by others.

Also, NLP is not a universal panacea; it's an enabler – a set of approaches, attitudes

and techniques. The results will depend on who uses them and the context in which they are used. For example in a major change project it's normally considered key that you manage people, process and technology. NLP will significantly help with managing people – and the project; however, you still need the focus on process and technology.

how has NLP evolved over the last 30 years?

NLP has continued to grow and evolve from its personal development roots 30 years ago and has influenced many 'communication intensive' activities from counselling to almost every form of coaching to business performance and business change.

One of the most interesting developments is the development of NLP approaches in managing big change projects. At board level it can help in the creation of a clear vision and communicating the changes. At management level it can help in further communicating changes and ensuring the right communication channels are in place and at operational level give people the confidence that they are in fact being listened to.

However, the greatest change has not been in NLP itself but in the external environment. The rapid changes in social structure, technology, trade, jobs and public expectation have created a growing demand for approaches that facilitate change. NLP is one approach that fills this demand and has stood the test of time. ■

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