

UNDERSTANDING

NLP

PRINCIPLES
& PRACTICE

SECOND EDITION

PETER YOUNG

Understanding
NLP
Principles and Practice

Peter Young



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Preface

Changing NLP

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) works by changing the way people perceive and make meaning of the world they live in, how they understand their experience, so that they may intervene effectively. Although NLP is renowned for its rapid and dramatic changes, it also creates subtle changes over the longer term, on all levels of Body, Mind and Spirit.

When it first appeared, NLP offered a radical shake-up of traditional therapy and change techniques. Although some rejected its ground-breaking approach, there were many who welcomed NLP's innovative way of working, and over the last three decades NLP has expanded greatly. New techniques and therapeutic procedures are constantly being developed; the number of training courses and books grows all the time.

Although NLP works well when used by skilled practitioners, there is always room for improvement. The body of knowledge known as NLP has accumulated such a huge amount of material that there is now a need for this to be consolidated. This can be done by generalising, sorting, finding similarities, noticing patterns, and so on. The aim is to find a model or set of principles for change. Generally speaking, the simpler the working principles, the easier it is to apply them in practice. NLP needs a unifying model if it is going to advance, if it is going to be more than the sum total of what a whole host of different practitioners are currently doing. And, therefore, it needs a paradigm or theoretical basis that will streamline it, and enable it to evolve to the next stage. *Understanding NLP* is my attempt to provide such a paradigm for NLP. I present this model in its basic theoretical form in Chapter Two, and provide numerous examples of it in practice

throughout the book. This paradigm will enable NLP to reinvent itself and move forward with a clearer structure, and with increased power to meet its own future requirements. The challenge for NLP practitioners to reframe and reorganise their current understanding, to rethink their own practice, and to become part of the next phase of NLP's development.

NLP is surprising

When someone else seeks your help as a skilled practitioner, and tells you that they are experiencing a limitation in a part of their life, you already know that they have tried to change consciously and have failed. They are requesting that you intervene because you can offer a different point of view, and may therefore see what is hidden from them. To 'intervene' is to deliberately choose to act in a way that will produce a difference, that will assist someone in changing themselves. In a therapeutic context this means with their permission and willing co-operation. Because your intervention gets them to do something they have not thought of doing themselves, it will therefore be unexpected. NLP interventions surprise the other person into perceiving their world differently! Surprise effectively overcomes resistance to change. (The fact is that some people do resist change, because their anticipated discomfort outweighs the possible benefits of actually changing. Change does have its consequences.) If the person does not know what to expect, they cannot resist or defend themselves against it.

When you first do a particular NLP exercise and it delivers a desired change, it is often a profound learning experience. However, with repeated use, the surprise factor may wear off and that particular exercise becomes run-of-the-mill—the so-called Law of Diminishing Returns. Those NLP processes will still work in surprising ways for naive persons, but as the techniques become better known, they are likely to lose some of their potency. From time to time therefore, NLP Practitioners need to update the way in which they think about and use the techniques. And that includes keeping up with the latest ideas, not only in NLP but in other relevant fields.

Being aware of this need for innovation, NLP practitioners can use their creativity to find new ways of surprising people or of reframing their understanding, by developing new techniques or customising existing ones. Otherwise, you could find yourself being outwitted by the ever-smarter people who appear in front of you. The test of how well you understand and can utilise the generative power of NLP thinking is to continue to come up with alternative ways of perceiving reality and novel ways of creating change.

To meet this need, *Understanding NLP: Principles and Practice* will enable you to enrich your understanding of the basic patterns discernable in NLP. This will take you into big chunk generalisations, recognising paradigms which run throughout our civilisation's endeavours to explain what it means to be a human being. This book is a complete revision of the first edition of *Understanding NLP: Metaphors and Patterns of Change*. Since the first edition was published in 2001 my own thinking has moved on, and I have extended and refined many of the ideas which that book explored. This revised edition is more specifically for those people who wish to re-examine their existing knowledge of NLP and enhance their understanding of it. It also offers suggestions of ways forward in developing their own style of doing NLP.

I show how it is possible to bring all the pieces of NLP together using a new paradigm which I call the *Six Perceptual Positions model*. After the groundwork has been laid, this is made explicit in Chapter Eleven. In the process of arriving there, the book takes a critical look at many of the original ideas of NLP, their later modifications, and considers the appropriateness of the models and metaphors used to explain them. It also provides numerous examples of the new paradigm in action. There are guidelines on how to do NLP with a client from the practitioner's or therapist's point of view. As a result, you will be able to gather useful insights about someone else's model of the world, and about how best to intervene in order to help them change in a surprising way.

Because there is now so much NLP material, there is a limit to how much can be included in one book. Therefore a further volume *Understanding NLP: Language and Change* is planned. This continues the exploration of helping people change by explaining

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the linguistic aspects of NLP, guiding you through using the NLP model of language (the 'Meta-model') and demonstrating how different kinds of language are appropriate in different contexts. It also considers the art of using metaphors and telling stories.

*Peter Young
Exeter, May 2004*

Chapter Three

How Change Happens

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)

There are two different types of change: one that occurs within a given system which itself remains unchanged, and one whose occurrence changes the system itself.

Paul Watzlawick: Change

This chapter explores how we manage change and describes some basic principles for achieving it. These ideas will be picked up through the rest of the book, as we see how they manifest in NLP techniques.

When it comes to changing, what people want to know is:

- How can I deal with the changes that happen to me?
- How can I make changes in my life?
- How do I change myself, my behaviour, my habits?
- How can I change other people?
- How can I help other people change?

Finding answers to these questions is what NLP is all about.

You will have arrived at your own answers to these questions from your personal experience of changing. You also have access to the collected wisdom on change gathered over many centuries. However, despite all that knowledge, you only have a set of practical guidelines. There are no guarantees, because it is not possible to know exactly how change works. This is not a matter of incompetence or “just give it time, and we’ll have it sorted”. Despite brain-scanning technology, what happens in the *mind* is not open

to scientific scrutiny. Although we can see the results of learning, in the form of new neural connections, we cannot directly observe learning taking place. This is a fundamental philosophical issue. Put simply, we are part of the system under investigation. To know how it works we would need to ‘stand outside’ of our own minds to observe the processes, and this we cannot do. We can, however, set up favourable conditions for achieving change, although when human beings are involved, we cannot specify exactly what will happen. We can project scenarios into the future as far as we like, but we still do not know what will actually happen. It is wise, therefore, to bear in mind Heraclitus’s dictum to “expect the unexpected”.

Why change?

Sometimes change is thrust upon us. Lives are interrupted, so we take action to put things right again. At other times we have choice. People make changes of their own volition because they want to improve themselves, have more fulfilling lives, achieve their desires, become happier, or balance their various activities. A traditional motivation metaphor refers to carrots and sticks: we change because we imagine something that will give us pleasure—a carrot—and then move towards it; or we do not like the way things are, want to avoid further pain—a stick—and so move away from it.

When you are not getting what you want from life, you act in order to improve your state, to solve problems, to resolve conflicts, or to overcome difficulties. There are times, however, when despite your motivation to change you do not know what to do. This could be through lack of knowledge, or you may already have the appropriate know-how but you do not interpret the present situation in a way which allows you to transfer your knowledge to what appears to be an unfamiliar context. Because you do not recognise the underlying pattern you cannot see how what you know applies. In either case, if you believe that there are no options available, you will feel ‘stuck’, or that possible action has been ‘blocked’ in some way. This also happens when you cannot choose between alternatives. Maybe there are too many choices

open to you and you have no way of making a decision. Or you might imagine the consequences of taking action will be so terrible that you 'freeze' or retreat from taking any action.

One benefit of thinking in terms of the models introduced in the previous chapter is that they offer ways for overcoming blocks of this kind. The basic theory is that change occurs when you shift your attention and change your point of view. Shifting your polarity, reality mode and level can all lead to a different point of view, as each offers an alternative way of perceiving any situation. This then affects your behaviour, as you now understand your reality in a new way. This process is called 'reframing'.

The way you relate to the world depends on your previous knowledge and understanding, and on your particular motivation or intention: are you curious and want to gather information; do you want to become more flexible by learning a new skill? Your attitude or specific need alters the way you perceive the world, and you focus on different qualities or aspects of what is happening. Frames change as you shift the focus of attention. For example, if you want to post a letter, you start noticing post offices or post boxes, which are usually out of your awareness. Reframing is a way of deliberately changing how you perceive things in the same context. For example, when you are driving, instead of seeing other car-drivers as competing with you for road-space, look upon traffic behaviour as a kind of a dance, with its own rhythms, conventions and so on. Reframing often leads to a change in your physiological state; suddenly encountering the unexpected often produces laughter.

Doing something different

People get stuck when they do not believe that, or cannot imagine how change is possible. Their existing beliefs or stories about their world limit their options. This is a consequence of the pull of convergent thinking, the need to 'fix' the world in a more-or-less stable form. However, the restrictive side of 'being certain' is that you reduce your options to one—to stay as you are. You then feel

Chapter Six

Rapport

When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression.

Edgar Allan Poe (1844) The Purloined Letter

Getting on with other people

If you are going to help other people change, then in order to intervene appropriately and effectively in their life, you need to know something of how their model of the world is organised at the levels of body, mind and spirit. Edgar Allan Poe suggests that one way to do this is to copy what you can observe of the other person, because by matching certain characteristics (see Figure 6.1), such as adopting their facial expression or way of moving, you can to some extent enter their world and get a sense of who they are. Having a sense of shared reality is called ‘being in rapport’; the degree of rapport will depend upon the extent to which you match on a number of levels. Getting rapport with someone is not something you do once and then have thereafter; it is a dynamic quality of the relationship and varies continuously. It can be enhanced by increasing the amount of matching, and by ‘pacing’ the other person—moving at the same speed. Rapport is neither good nor bad; there are times when you will need rapport in order to communicate, and times when you need to break rapport in order to cease interacting.

People are naturally moving in and out of rapport with each other all the time. They know when they are in harmony with someone else and when they are not, although they are not usually aware

of doing anything specific. This will also be apparent to an observer. You can tell when people are in rapport because you see them moving, gesturing, communicating in a similar way, as if they are dancing to the same tune. People in rapport match their natural rhythms of movement and breathing, their energy levels, and generally share their way of being with each other. They feel comfortable in the relationship because they are with others who think and act as they do. They have a sense of being mutually acknowledged, know it is OK to be who they are, and are thus more likely to like those people whom they perceive as being like them.

Once you are aware of the qualities of rapport, you will sometimes notice that you are making similar hand movements, or that you are sitting with your legs crossed in the same way. There is no need to draw anyone's attention to it. Just acknowledge your natural ability, and move on.

Having rapport with someone offers you a greater opportunity for influencing them. Influencing is not the same as 'manipulating'. Manipulation would mean using NLP to get other people to do things you want against their will or best interests. Influencing is about wanting to inform, motivate or lead others so that they may influence and change themselves. Influencing builds relationships. Manipulation ignores the other person's interests, and eventually destroys the relationship. If you abuse the power relationship by using NLP techniques manipulatively, then be prepared for the consequences. As soon as someone realises that they have been manipulated, they will feel resentment. They may then go out of their way to avoid you and suggest others do the same. Be professional and consider the ethical issues involved.

Paying attention to other people

In the initial stages of a relationship you can use the information coming in through your senses to match the other person in terms of what you see, hear, and feel: their physiology, behaviour, use of language, how they speak, and level of energy. You may have to

give yourself permission to notice some of these things. Children are often socialised out of observing people closely: “It’s rude to stare”, and thereafter move around the world with averted eyes. You may gain an intimate knowledge of the pavement or the carpet, but you are ignoring the many non-verbal cues that others continually offer you. An NLP training environment is designed to offer a safe place for getting used to looking at other people again.

Exercise 6.1: Sculpting

This exercise gives you a flavour of what it is like to be someone else. Do this with three other willing explorers.

1. In a group of three or four people, person A becomes the model, and person B the modeler. The others, C and D, are there as ‘body sculptors’.

A chooses a positive state, in which they have a sense of ‘going for it’ or ‘really being myself’. A stands in the appropriate posture, which should feel comfortable for them.

The others take a moment to observe how A stands, breathes, where they are tense, where they are free, what they are paying attention to, and so on. Observe A in terms of ‘what you would need to know in order to copy this person’.

2. B then stands next to A and adopts a similar stance. This is a first approximation. The task of the two sculptors is to make B as much like A as possible, by gathering physiological information about A. They feel A’s muscle groups, tension, weight distribution; observe their focus of attention, ‘centre’, energy level, and so on. C and D communicate this to B both in words and by physically moving B’s limbs and adjusting their posture, so that B’s physiology increasingly comes to resemble A’s.

It is common for B to feel initial discomfort. After all, they are taking on an unfamiliar posture. But eventually the integrity of this way of being clicks—it works for B as it does for the person being modelled and it becomes easier to maintain. B finds they are able to ‘settle into it’ and get the sense that this posture is actually worth having. If not, then they need a little more time and to make some slight adjustments, until things ‘fall into place’.

“Peter Young has written the most definitive book on NLP so far.”

**Martin Weaver UKCP Reg
NLP Psychotherapist, Supervisor and Health Consultant**

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This book is for anyone wanting to develop an authentic understanding of NLP and take it to a higher level. Chapters include:

- **Understanding NLP**
- **Patterns of Change**
- **Definitions of NLP**
- **Rapport**
- **The Philosophy and Presuppositions of NLP**
- **Setting Outcomes**
- **Perceptual Positions**
- **Exploring the Metamirror**



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