

# NLP FOR COACHES

*Integrated Thinking for Performance*



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### Integrated Thinking

When human beings are at their best, they respond to the world using a wonderful multiplicity of systems and senses. Although we are often most conscious of one sense or thought as we respond to the world, the situations in which we are thoroughly engaged with the world require and reward us for using all our senses, experiences, and creativity at once. We are neurologically programmed to work our best through integrated thinking: the ability to respond to the world within all the systems of which we are part using all the systems that are part of us<sup>1</sup>.

As successful practitioners define and develop the field of business coaching, it is becoming clear that the best practises will require conscious competence in integrated thinking. The best coaches will work to become more aware of the integrated patterns of response they use to facilitate change for clients and the integrated patterns they use to develop themselves as professionals and to develop their businesses. Coaching is different than many professions because the same skill set is useful in practicing and in building a practise; this puts a special onus on coaches to maintain a double vision. Coaches need to be able to simultaneously track their performance with a given client and the changes and development that occur within themselves as a result of that performance. Integrated thinking provides a methodology for holding both representations at the same time without confusing or blurring them.

Think for a moment of a typical coaching conversation. The purpose of the conversation is to facilitate change in the client. The coach is the “expert” or “consultant” who is to provide a helpful, “objective” response so that the client can achieve his/her “objectives.” The ambiguity is purposeful: objectives are tangible manifestations of intent and the coach’s point of view is supposed to exist on the same tangible, measurable plane as the results desired by the client. Yet as the conversation progresses, inevitably the coach is less or more than ob-

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald M. Edelman, **Wider than the Sky: the phenomenal gift of consciousness.** (Yale University Press, 2004).

jective. S/he learns, responds, and changes. What is needed is a process that allows the coach to simultaneously provide the stability required by the coaching contract while growing the coaching relationship and noticing changes in the coach himself/herself.

Integrated thinking involves making a conscious choice to move attention through multiple streams of information. The brain is continually processing multiple streams of information simultaneously; outside of conscious awareness there is no such thing as linear thinking. Neurological processes continually monitor physical processes (like breathing), ongoing sensory experience, and relationships between what is noticed and what exists in memory. When necessary, we become aware of these formerly unconscious processes. We think about breathing when we choke; we think about a sudden silence or suddenly recognize a piece of a puzzle we are trying to solve. We naturally and fluidly move information between “front of mind” conscious awareness and the “back of mind” processes that handle multiple streams of information without conscious attention.<sup>2</sup>

When we practise integrated thinking, we give conscious attention to the kind of patterns of response that characterize “back of the mind” processes. This allows us to move more information more quickly between non-linear, multiple-channel processes and slower, more stable conscious processes. Integrated thinking teaches us to replicate the kind of intuition that notices the single change that will have the most impact or to ask exactly the right question at the right moment.

Although it is customary for us to separate out the activities of change, learning and communication, our experience of the three is that they are inevitably and usefully interwoven. Think of a particular business challenge you have engaged. As you do, notice what changed as a result of the challenge. Ask yourself what you learned from the experience. And notice that both your response to these questions and the experience itself involved your ability to match language to both your experience and your intent. Integrated thinking suggests that anything that influences the way we learn will also influence our ability to communicate and the direction and degree of change we experience. Living successfully means understanding the integration of change and learning in a way that directs these processes towards the goals that we consciously form and accept.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is a set of practises that have been developed over more than 30 years to facilitate integrated thinking. Fundamentally, NLP offers exercises and ways of understanding that integrate the learning we do through sensory awareness with

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown, **The Hypnotic Brain: Hypnotherapy and Social Communication**. Yale University Press, 1991.

the learning we do through language in order to direct change in ourselves and in the impact we have on the world around us.

## What is Neuro-Linguistic Programming?

Neuro-linguistic programming is a set of practises that facilitate effective goal-setting, communication, and change management. Fundamentally, it is a set of best-practises based on close and creative observation of models of excellence in effecting change in other people. Its earliest developers, John Grinder and Richard Bandler, were brash young iconoclasts looking for a way to replicate behaviours and transfer them to other people. They wanted to challenge conventional thinking across a range of endeavours and find ways to effect change in themselves and others that were rapid, elegant, and productive.<sup>3</sup>

In the decades since it was first developed, NLP has spread around the globe and across multiple fields where it is useful to set well-developed goals and achieve them by connecting more effectively with other people. It remains a set of practises rather than a coherent theory and tends not to fit easily into existing categories. It takes insights from fields that include neurology, psychology, linguistics, literature and philosophy and encourages practitioners to judge these insights by their usefulness. Like any methodology for learning and communicating (including coaching), it is difficult to quantify.

Essentially, NLP works from the understanding that human learning occurs in three ways simultaneously: through sensory experience, through language, and through the combination of both thoughts and sensations into patterns. NLP practises encourage people to apply integrated thinking to situations in the past (because changing how one thinks about the past changes how one reacts in the future), present and future (because the future can be experienced imaginatively before it happens). Moving easily between conscious and unconscious processes and through time, NLP facilitates rapid pattern recognition and manipulation. In other words, it teaches people to think using all their capabilities at once, to think the way that gifted learners think.<sup>4</sup>

NLP works with three forces that flow through the human psyche to nurture both satisfaction and high performance: the need to set goals that satisfy our sense of who we are; the urge to gather and derive meaning from information; and the drive to connect with other human beings. Integrated thinking allows each of these forces to act effectively and produc-

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<sup>3</sup> Bandler and Grinder co-authored the seminal works: **Frogs into Princes** (1971), **The Structure of Magic, Vols. I & II** (1975 & 1976), and others. See also John Grinder's **Turtles All the Way Down** (1987).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Peter Gzowski, "Portrait of a Prodigy" in **Saturday Night**, 1980.

tively on an individual or organization. When an individual is conscious of the need to set goals using all of his/her sensory abilities, skills, experience, reasoning and language, that individual is more likely to recognize the patterns internally and externally that support that outcome. S/he has a template for success. The forces that both keep us together and energize us move most freely through the channels created by integration.

## The Benefits of NLP for Coaches

Neuro-linguistic programming enables coaches to better notice and replicate unconscious competence in working with clients and developing themselves and their practises. The same practises that enable coaches to move fluidly between conscious and unconscious competence (sometimes called tacit knowledge) are used to allow individuals being coached to recognize and build on their strengths so that their best accomplishments become their typical accomplishments. In the pages that follow, we will look briefly at the ways in which NLP leads coaches to set better outcomes, gather better information, and facilitate the internal and external change that makes outcomes into realities.

An NLP-based model of coaching is unique in that:

1. it offers a practical methodology for separating the experience of the coach from the experience of the person being coached and from the coaching process at any given moment
2. the model of NLP allows coaches to move competencies and knowledge from back of the mind (unconscious) into front of the mind (conscious) awareness so that they may be developed, replicated and communicated
3. the practises and perceptions fostered by NLP are particularly useful in areas that are commonly held to be essential to a successful coaching practise: notably how to build a functional trust quickly; how to negotiate productive contracts with both individuals and clients; and how to ask penetrating questions.

Each of these points corresponds to one of the forces that drive human accomplishment. The first builds the integrity of the coach by allowing him/her to thoroughly “walk the talk” as s/he becomes increasingly aware of congruence in every element of the coaching process. This congruence pulls strengths, skills and outcomes into alignment. The second depends on calibration: the detailed interaction between experience and observation that allows us to notice difference in details, become aware of the relationship between detail and pattern, and assign meaning to what we notice. The third is the application of the other two through

the process of making connections between internal experience and the external world of relationship and action.

Coaches essentially require three core competencies: the ability to set outcomes and to enable others to set outcomes; the ability to gather and make meaning from information about their clients; and the ability to facilitate directed changes in their clients and in themselves. These core competencies allow coaches to develop their own practises, to provide effective coaching, and to teach their methodologies so that they can be replicated by others. Each of the core competencies is supported when a coach becomes more consciously expert in integrated thinking.<sup>5</sup>

Learning and practicing NLP exercises and strategies allows a coach to develop this expertise. In particular, coaches who study NLP will find themselves with a range of tools that allow them to build better outcomes for themselves, their individual clients, and the groups they lead or facilitate. They will be more aware of the multiple channels through which they currently receive and communicate information and have more choice about how to gather and make meaning from information. They will also be more aware and more effective in using patterns of communication to shape and effect change in themselves and others.

## Integrated Thinking for Achievable Outcomes

Throughout human history, our best thinkers have explored the tension between our desire for goals that we know we can achieve and our desire for goals that will challenge us and require more than we think we have to give. Coaches face this tension as they set outcomes for their own practises; they face it as they negotiate contracts with clients; they face it as they guide individuals to form appropriate outcomes for themselves. Integrated thinking provides the only tools adequate to deal with paradox and move towards success that is both achievable and sustainable. It is only when our personal, professional and community goals are in alignment that we can reach for our fullest potential and these goals can only be shaped through the use of multiple strengths and channels of thinking.

NLP provides exercises in integrated thinking that allow us to shape and test outcomes using our fullest experience of the world. These exercises begin with the necessity to form outcomes in positive terms that can be given sensory correlates. For example, think about a goal like “I want to manage my people better.” This is only a baby step away from the negative frame “I don’t want to have the problems I’m having now.” In order to transform it into

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<sup>5</sup> A few good treatments of NLP and Coaching include: Sue Knight, **NLP at Work**, 2002; Joseph O’Connor, **Coaching with NLP**, 2004 and Ian McDermott, **The NLP Coach**, 2002.

something workable, you could begin with analysis. Integrated thinking would begin instead with sensory correlates that are developed in response to the question: “What will you be seeing, hearing, and feeling when you are managing people better?” Until we know the sensory correlates for a goal, we are unlikely to recognize it when we achieve it. As you begin to see and hear and feel the sensations associated with your goal, you build a template that ensures you will recognize what you want when you get it.

The second contribution of integrated thinking towards setting productive outcomes is what NLP calls an ‘ecology’ check. In the ecology check, an individual begins to map the impact of an outcome on all the systems in which that individual participates. Internally, this might mean that a career outcome cannot compromise personal values. Externally, it means that the consequences of an outcome for one’s family, department, business, or community will be acceptable. In a very real sense, this is a price check: achievement comes at a cost and we need to know that we are getting good value before we pay the price.

Fully integrated outcomes are also integrated in time: this begins with moving into the future to notice the sensory correlates and consequences of achieving an outcome. It continues with renewing or revisiting outcomes periodically, so that an outcome becomes associated with our movement through time even as it becomes more fully developed in sensory and ecological terms.

The implications of this process for the contracting phase of coaching are clear. We often set outcomes either in abstract or quantifiable terms. The disciplined use of sensory correlates and ecology checks ensures such outcomes are both recognizable and acceptable on multiple levels and in multiple dimensions. In contracting with individuals, these strategies provide the coach with greater flexibility and clarity in setting the terms for success. In contracting with corporate clients, they give the coach new ways to define their responsibilities to the organization paying for the coaching and to the individual participating in it. In both instances, sensory correlates and ecology checks uncover issues before they become obstacles.

## Processing Information through Multiple Channels

The human brain has no “off” switch. We use all of our senses all of the time to record massive amounts of information and compare it to the information we have already processed. We store and access memories, process experience through language and without language, and notice and respond to subtle changes in expression or rhythm and we do all of this while we are “thinking” about other things. We always process things outside awareness (back of mind thinking) and in awareness (front of mind thinking) simultaneously, whether or not we are clever or successful. What is more, we thrive on this abundance of processing: our brains

function best when many different centres are engaged at once to handle the same task. Our brains are equipped to handle linear, logical thinking and to include it in integrated processing that works with more speed making finer distinctions than are possible in consciousness alone.

NLP offers exercises that allow information to move more freely and purposefully between the back of the mind and the front of the mind. Practitioners become able to recognize in consciousness what they have noticed and recognized as meaningful using back of mind processes. Equally, they gain facility in putting things “on the back burner” and trusting to the rich, non-linear processes of the back of the mind to produce conclusions that can later be traced and justified (if necessary) in consciousness. This movement occurs primarily through pattern recognition and is manifest as increased sensory acuity, the ability to gather information from different perceptual positions, and the conscious use of and response to patterned language.

Practically speaking, NLP allows coaches to develop more acuity in noticing and assigning meaning to changes in their clients. Calibration is the NLP term for the ability to “read” changes in the way someone looks, sounds or moves. For example, one of the early activities associated with NLP was the ability to read eye patterns: to draw conclusions about what someone was thinking based on the movement of his/her eyes. While the formulas generally associated with eye patterns are wrong almost as often as they are right, science has now substantiated that we are able to notice subtle changes in the muscle movements of the face and to accurately assign meaning to the resulting facial expressions. The non-voluntary movements of the upper half of the face are the most accurate register of facial expression and attention to this area can result in the ability to notice even subtle or fleeting changes that convey meaning about how someone is thinking or feeling. NLP games and exercises give coaches the opportunity to practise calibration using facial expression, body language, rhythms, voice and language patterns.

The keystone of effective coaching is the ability to enter imaginatively into the experience of another human being for the purpose of adding new perspective and resources. This ability can be developed and refined through increased precision in both defining and imagining perceptual positions. Increased sensory acuity heightens one’s awareness of responding to a given situation with the full resources and integrity available. Visually, this means seeing as clearly as possible through one’s own eyes. Yet we all have blind spots, and so we know that however clearly we see, we miss aspects of a situation that might be crucial. In order to gain as much information as possible, we have to imaginatively enter into alternative positions and check our blind spots. We also have to imaginatively enter into the experience of anyone we want to influence; we can only make changes within their models of their world if we can recognize those models with a degree of precision.

What does it mean to enter into another's experience? Since much of that experience goes on in the back of the mind and is not linguistically based, we can have access to huge amounts of information by adopting the same back of mind qualities (physiology, vocal qualities, breathing and rhythms) as the person whose experience we seek to enter. As their experience becomes our experience, we trigger the same centres of the brain that they are using and stimulate back of mind processes similar to those they may be using. NLP games and exercises encourage participants to become aware of the ease with which they can synchronize their rhythms and gestures with someone else in order to gain access to more of that person's experience. Moving deliberately in and out of this experience begins to allow a coach to identify blind spots (the client's and the coach's) and to identify leverage points for change.

Shakespeare said that "all the world's a stage" and many people have agreed that each of us is an actor in the play of our own life. We are more than this, however; we are also playwrights, and this metaphor gives us access to another perceptual position that is necessary particularly if we are to have influence on other people in a way that directs change towards our outcomes. We need to be able to fully enter into our own experience, to enter into the experience of the person we are coaching, and to step outside of both experiences in order to appreciate the relationships between them, and between them and the systems of which each are part. This is the playwright's position as s/he creates the patterns in which characters interact. We cannot entirely write parts for other people, of course, but we can use this position to observe the impact we have on them and the changes in our behaviour that will prompt desired changes in their behaviour. We often think of this as being an objective observer. This is true only to the extent that the playwright can be objective about the play s/he is shaping. It is most useful to think of it as the position in which we see both patterns of relationship and the parts we play in those patterns.

One way that we often move naturally into this shaping observer position (called third position in NLP jargon) is through language. As the playwright metaphor suggests, we use language to shape relationships from outside those relationships: in other words, language stands outside experience and observes it and language also shapes experience. Through NLP, coaches can become more aware of the way language conveys influence through patterns and integrated thinking. Not only do words carry denotations; they carry a variety of associations and relationships that often have much more impact than the dictionary meanings suggest. Sometimes even the sounds of words can be critical in establishing connections and synchronizing rhythms between people who are interested in making connections. NLP allows practitioners to understand how language carries both logical thought and integrated thinking and therefore both represents and influences the experience of both the communicator and the receiver.

It is important to recognize that none of this is new to coaching or to the practises of influence that human beings have developed over thousands of years. NLP does not create new approaches; it mirrors and makes use of the best practises used by the most successful influencers. Within individual experience, it connects with the times when an individual has been most influential or most successful and provides a methodology for replicating those experiences more often, more reliably, and in more situations.

## Directing Change Towards Outcomes

Influence happens: it is an action as real and tangible as throwing a baseball or sending an email. While the connection between the intent to act and the action itself is as mysterious as it always has been, it is also inevitable and practical and well within the compass of integrated thinking. When we know what we want and we are able to calibrate other people and systems, then we are able to direct change towards our well-formed outcomes. We do not need to create change; change is inevitable. We do need to shape the flow of change so that it carries us in the right direction. We do this by noticing and shaping useful patterns, by developing connections with other people, and by imagining the future and working backwards from results to necessary first steps.

What is a pattern? The word integrates the idea of a model to be followed with that of a design that is constructed or noticed. If we know enough of a pattern, we are able to predict what comes next, to place elements appropriately within the pattern, and to replicate the pattern. NLP uses the concept of patterned response to demonstrate how change can happen quickly; one change in any pattern changes the entire pattern. It takes only a very small shift to take parallel lines and move one just enough so that the lines will ultimately intersect. At the same time, once we know a pattern, we are able to model ourselves or our behaviours on that pattern; we can replicate patterns in different contexts or transfer them to other people. Within the structures provided by the pattern, there are only limited possibilities and these limits give the pattern both stability and direction.

Fundamentally, the NLP concept of framing is a way of talking about how we decide which pattern to see as we look at a particular piece of information. Framing is the act of creating a relationship between an outcome and the context in which that outcome must be achieved. Put another way, framing establishes what is the figure and what the ground in a given situation. Chocolate is different than plutonium because they fit into different frames, because the frames that include chocolate are likely to align with one set of meanings and those that include plutonium an entirely different set of meanings. More commonly, however, we are confronted by choice: a bicycle can fit into a frame of “too poor to travel by car” or into a frame of “childhood freedom” or into a frame of “making sound choices for the planet.” The frame we give to the act of riding the bicycle will impact what it

means to us and to anyone who chooses to enter the frame we have set in order to connect with our experience. Framing is natural, inconspicuous, and tremendously powerful.

Frequently, profound change is possible simply by reframing behaviours or situations. When someone understands that they have entered a different frame, have stepped into a different story, are playing by a new set of rules, that person is free to engage fully in the new frame and expect different results than were possible in the past. This expectation can give rise to a new set of behaviours and attitudes. In order to effectively frame or reframe with a client, coaches need both to recognize the client's current frames and to be able to offer new frames that are sufficiently the same as to be accepted and sufficiently different as to offer new possibilities. When such a frame can be found, it will make much of classical conditioning redundant; the client will engage both front and back of mind processes in the new frame and so will make choices that support that frame and the direction in which it points.

Such effective reframing depends on the willingness of the client to step into the new frame. This, in turn, depends on the ability of the coach to develop agreement with the client on multiple levels. NLP, like many of the social sciences, continues to discover new ways and new levels on which people connect. The most obvious are those that are available to the senses: agreement begins with shared movement, gestures, expressions, breathing patterns, and vocal qualities. Agreement is also built through language; through the matching of jargon, tonality, sentence structures and form and also through the matching of patterns of specificity or generalization and of sensory correlates. When agreement is developed and maintained through these relatively mechanical means, it can grow to include more intellectual forms of agreement. If the sensory correlates of agreement are not present, any intellectual agreement will remain un-integrated and ineffective. It is, therefore, critical that any change professional not only understand but continually practise and refine the ability to develop the physiology and language of agreement.

Finally, NLP suggests that there is value not only in inviting someone to walk through a frame with you, but to look back from the other side and notice how a situation looks and sounds and feels from a viewpoint in the future. This is the time when positive change becomes inevitable: the patterns that produce it are so compelling seen from the future that the front and back of mind processes work flawlessly to bring it into being. If, on the other hand, a change is seen to be less than entirely positive, this is an opportunity to shift the frame, recognizing that change that is not seen as positive is easily shifted into other kinds of change (directed or circumstantial). The ability to 'check one's work' is pivotal in an NLP model of change and provides coaches with important practise in maintaining agreement frames established in the contracting phase while responding effectively to new information or circumstances during the term of the contract.