

Pinpointing Patterns of Getting to Know Yourself and Others in Business: Metaprograms as Perceptual Filters on Communication

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Abstract

This paper aims to extensively use the concept of metaprograms to help professionals enhance their communication skills, build rapport, make positive changes, improve team working to boost performance, work one-to-one as well as with groups, and reach their goals.

On the one hand, used in a business context, it attempts to demonstrate, with clear and practical examples, the advantage of applying metaprograms to the workplace in order to overcome barriers towards success and develop a winning mindset.

On the other hand, the study is an engaging guide of how to motivate and inspire through the language you use to lead people to perform. Listening to their language and asking the appropriate questions help us get clues regarding our interlocutors' metaprograms.

The outcome is to identify the interactants' communicative preferences which can be easily changed to suit any new situation and can be displayed along several dimensions.

Key words: towards-away from, sameness-difference, internal-external, perceptual filters

J.E.L. classification: Z00

1. Introduction

This article reflects the practical capacity I have gained by closely working with business leaders and managers in their struggle to bring about fast change for themselves and their organizations. It facilitates understanding different types of behaviour when assessing a situation, making a decision, running a negotiation, or meeting customer needs. It focuses on the most unconscious filters we have, i.e. the metaprograms, the source of our core motivation and behaviour patterns. The paper shows how we can test out our observations of someone's metaprograms simply by watching and listening carefully. A mismatching of programs in job profiles can cause a relationship to break down or put stress on how people operate in the workplace. The research focuses on how to positively interact with your colleagues and establish better working relationships so as to improve communication skills and create rapport with your team-mates. It provides both business students and professionals with applications of metaprograms headed towards favourite areas such as conducting negotiations, closing deals, making sales, taking them through specific linguistic strategies and techniques used as power tools to take control within the workplace. Thus, trying new things and discovering the drivers of our thinking and behaviour by observing how our unconscious mind is working becomes, in my opinion, the cornerstone of achieving business performance. Moreover, what matters most is our ability to start the changing process with ourselves and then with the people around us. Training our mind for success can be accomplished as long as we avoid being stuck in previous limitations. Further on, dreams become goals we can reach. Consequently, by understanding that people filter information differently, have different beliefs, make different value judgements or decisions, we realize that not only do they have different maps of the world, but they also react in various manners to specific events. The linguistic cues (key words and phrases) provide a clue about what kind of metaprogram pattern is used.

2. Theoretical background

Metaprograms are unconscious filters that people develop, patterns of motivation and working (Cooper, 2008), perceptual filters on the world having a major influence on how we communicate with others and the behaviours we manifest (Ellerton, 2006), deletion filters which form part of the unconscious communication message, predict the "how" of behaviour and facilitate pacing and leading (Molden, 2001), but also patterns of mind, or high-level mindsets, which show us how a person thinks, bringing enormous benefits when applied in areas like selling and marketing, influencing and negotiating (Alder, 2002). In selecting the metaprogram patterns, I will choose the following three metaprograms and their targeted language to explore how we can achieve amazing results in business:

1. Towards / Away-From;
2. Sameness / Difference;
3. Internal / External.

Each metaprogram is examined in detail and includes recommended language to communicate more effectively with each pattern. At work, we often use programs or strategies which function more powerfully for accomplishing certain types of activities than others. We apply certain metaprograms and set well-formed outcomes for just about everything we do: selling products, negotiating contracts, running projects, delegating tasks, agreeing budgets, setting targets, or making organizational changes.

Both Neuro-Linguistic Programming researchers (O'Connor, 2001; Alder, 2002; Cooper, 2008) and business experts (Johnson and Barrall, 2006; Trappe and Tullis, 2006) have identified metaprograms related to problem solving and achieving outcomes:

- *task-oriented* and
- *relationship-oriented* metaprograms.

Let us consider the different types of behaviour suggested by Johnson and Barrall (2006, p.15,78) and make a clear distinction between them:

Team members who are "task-oriented" have the following types of behaviour:

- have drive and like to see results
- are more focused on tasks than on people
- offer to do something practical
- remind people about goals
- push people to make a decision
- delegate actions to people
- see little room for emotion at work

Team members who are "relationship/people-oriented" have these types of behaviour:

- are focused on people and relationships
- your / others' feelings are of the highest importance (ask people what they think and feel!)
- keep people engaged with projects, working together and motivated
- are good at involving and motivating people
- promote effective decision-making
- are cooperative, mild and diplomatic
- listen to others' opinions
- try to avoid friction, seek harmony within the team and reach a decision that everyone can agree with.

Having considered the different workplace metaprograms described above, Pile and Lowe (2006) refer to the kind of language business people in these roles might use.

3. Metaprograms as perceptual filters

Metaprograms are internal filters determining how we sort and chunk our experiences. Specific metaprograms show up in the structure of people's language and the use of certain words. They are filters on our world or orientations that we habitually act on. Other theorists see a close connection between metaprograms and the deeper-rooted values that direct people's perspective on life (Molden and Hutchinson, 2006).

An important aspect in matching a person's metaprogram(s) from the language s/he uses is to pay attention to the person's thinking style in language by constantly suiting his/her metaprograms. According to Cooper (2008, p.112), "Identifying and knowing some key metaprograms that others may have gives you a great advantage in the workplace [...] If you use the other person's language, your audience hears you, understands you, and can be convinced much more easily". Listening to their language patterns, asking the appropriate questions and eliciting the submodalities help us to get clues regarding our interlocutors' metaprograms.

3.1. The "towards-away from" pattern

These two patterns are the opposite ends of the metaprogram spectrum for motivational direction, i.e. a person's motivation between wanting something and wanting to avoid something. The metaprogram pattern "moving towards – moving away from" focuses on the motivation to work 'towards' or 'away from' a stated result.

The pleasure of perceived success motivates a person to "want" something, be *future – oriented* and pulled by a desired goal. To "not want" is "*away-from*" –*oriented* and keeps the person locked into their present state.

By way of illustration, let us compare the responses of Brenda and Colin to the questions:

"What do you want in your career?"

"What would make you feel satisfied about your job?"

Brenda: *I want a job that doesn't involve a lot of time-consuming paperwork. I also wish to prevent repetitive strain injury and I don't want discrimination in the workplace. Oh, and I'm not keen on working overtime.*

Colin: *I want a job with fast promotion, somewhere I can get sent on a lot of training courses and put in charge of big projects. I'm a globetrotter, so something with European connections would be ideal. I feel I'd become a more complete person. And another thing, I like flexitime and status- enhancing perks.*

Brenda has a "move – away" motivational direction, being motivated to avoid unpleasant situations. By contrast, Colin is at the opposite end of the spectrum, stating what he wants.

Job implications

Brenda has the disadvantage of being characterized by a strong "move away" pattern so that she may end up somewhere else that is not suitable for her aspirations. Driven by an avoidance strategy, she may walk around between inappropriate jobs.

On the other hand, Colin is more likely to get a job that suits his preferences, but although he proves to have a "towards" pattern of thinking, the lack of an "away from" pattern in his case could cause him to take a job with some unpleasant elements he hadn't considered.

3.2. The "sameness-difference" pattern

"Sameness" or "difference" is another metaprogram of motivational traits that is effective in business situations like assessing a problem or making a decision. O'Connor and Seymour (2002) also call it the "match – mismatch" pattern pointing out that it is about making comparisons, involving points of similarity and difference. Yet, Molden (2001) sees it from the relationship sort point of view, indicating that these patterns are filters to our understanding and reasoning, "determining the relationships we make when experiencing new data" (Molden 2001, p.128).

How a person reacts to change is described in the four types (patterns) of the sameness / difference metaprogram:

a) *People with a sameness metaprogram* tend to exhibit or prefer:

- the same route to work each day
- repetition
- safety and comfort
- the same job for many years
- administrative (manufacturing) service roles where change is not a feature of the job.

To influence based on someone's preference for sameness, we usually use words and phrases that have meaning to them:

- *as you know, as usual, same as, similar to, in common, as you always do, like before, staying the same, as is, unchanged, identical.*

Examples of influencing language for people liking sameness include:

- - *We guarantee you **the same** quality rented accommodation that you're looking for. We are a company with a worldwide reputation for the quality of its products at **unchanged** prices professional people can afford.*
- - *This job contains **much of what you have been used to** and, in many ways, there are some **striking similarities** between the previous job you have had and the requirements of the new workplace.*

b) *People with a 'sameness with exception' metaprogram prefer gradual change and look for significant change every five to seven years. Words and phrases that motivate these people are mostly comparatives:*

- *better, worse, more, less, fewer.*

In marketing and advertising, people with a 'sameness with exception' pattern respond to promotional material that uses words like:

- *better, improved, advanced, upgraded, enhanced, the same except.*

Examples of influencing language for people with this pattern include:

- - *This new printer is **pretty much the same** as the old one, **except** that it has a more stylish design and easy-to-understand instructions.*
- - *The three digital cameras **are alike in many ways**, but PhotoArt TF2's **unique / special** image quality makes it the best buy for our purposes.*

c) *People with a difference metaprogram tend to emphasize and are motivated by:*

- situations where radical changes need to be introduced
- changing jobs rapidly
- focusing on exceptions
- preference to variety and choice
- creative problem-solving

People with this pattern are mismatchers; they thrive on change in their work environments, identify incongruence and mismatching, are risk-takers, lead by example, look for and demand radical change (if they are the CEO) in their organizations. They expect major change(s) every one to two years.

To influence based on a person's response to *difference*, use words and phrases like:

- *completely different, new, revolutionised, fresh, transform, unique, total change, radical idea, doesn't compare.*

Mismatchers will be attracted to innovative products, advertised as "new" or "different".

Influence using language that suggests the opposite of what you want them to do:

- *You wouldn't like to take part in this workshop, I don't think it's your kind of environment.*
Their reaction is likely to be: *Yes I would, and yes it is.*

d) *People with a 'sameness with exception and difference' metaprogram have a double pattern. They expect major changes every three to four years. Motivating words and phrases would include a combination of the preceding words used for 'sameness with exception' and 'difference' patterns.*

Differences with exception: People with this pattern will tend to change routines regularly and are likely to remain in the same job for between one and three years.

Examples of influencing language for people exhibiting this pattern include:

- *This job **doesn't compare** with your previous one and you will **have a more flexible** work arrangement, but also **more responsibility**.*
- *This new application will **revolutionize** the system and bring **many changes** to the way you work and you will see it meets with **less resistance** from staff (than the old one).*

3.3. The "internal-external" pattern

The internal-external dichotomy determines the *source(s) of feedback* we use to judge our actions (Molden, 2001; Alder, 2002; Cooper, 2008). In business, Human Resources departments have managers who give feedback to teams within performance management systems.

People whose source of motivation is *internal*:

- do not need outside recognition
- rarely ask for advice from other people
- instinctively know when they have done a good job, they can feel it.

They set their own *frame of reference* and can be motivated by phrases like:

- *you know what's best, only you can decide, it's up to you, a suggestion for you, what do you think?, I'll leave you to decide / get on with the job, just let me know if you get stuck, you'll work something out, I'm sure.*

An example of influencing language for internally motivated people includes:

Question: When you have completed a task, how do you know if you have done it well?

Brenda : *I just know. From my experience, I know I've done it well. It's a waste of time getting feedback from people who don't understand what my job involves.*

People whose source of motivation is *external* :

- look for external recognition
- need a "thank you" or "well done" now and again
- like to have a colleague nearby to call upon from time to time to bounce ideas off.

They are motivated by phrases such as :

- *according to the experts, others will think highly of you, you will be recognized for your efforts, the feedback is, results show that, what I've noticed, the word on the street is, statistics show.*

An example of influencing language for externally motivated people includes:

Question: When you have completed a task, how do you know if you have done it well?

Colin: People in my group (my teammates) usually *tell me* how well I'm doing a job. If they don't, I will probably *ask for their opinion*. There's nothing more stressful than a lack of feedback on your performance; indecision simply stops you from making any progress.

Thus, the ideal job for internally referenced people is one in which they can make their own decisions, whereas people running the external pattern are ideal for sales roles, positions in the travel, hotel, and leisure activities, any job where front-line staff work to meet customer needs.

Other similar questions to find out a person's filtering process and prompt a cue would be:

- " How did you decide on your previous supplier?"
- " Did you get any feedback from the last project you were on?"
- " So, you've finished that job, haven't you? How did you do?"

It is worth pointing out that we are not *entirely* internal or *entirely* external. Most people will have a mix of both (20%), with a balanced proportion for the internal orientation (40%) as well as for the external one (40%), according to Rodger Bailey.

Job implications

A level of mental programming that determines how we sort, orient to, and chunk our experiences is such an important part of the workplace. In the organizational environment, our specific strategies for thinking define our internal or external approach to a particular issue.

According to researchers, customer service roles require people who measure themselves against external feedback, appear needy and lack self-sufficiency. 'Internal' people are likely to make good entrepreneurs who judge a job against their own criteria, appear overconfident and are attracted to self-employment.

To *pace* and *lead* both of them, we can match the language structures (patterns) and use appropriate phrases, as in the following examples:

For Brenda: I'm sure you will enjoy the training course. We have a lot of positive impact from our last participants, *but only you can decide* if this is the best course for professional development in this area and a *personal sense of achievement*.

For Colin: I'm sure you will enjoy the training course, but you don't have to take my words for granted; many of our delegates are ready and happy to *give you excellent feedback, practical help and reassurance*.

4. Research methods and material

For this analysis, I have used examples illustrating sets of contrasts seen in close connection with business people's intrinsic values, I have also pointed out that combinations of profiles can produce different behavioural patterns in different people, focusing on the mismatching of programs and job implications. I have concentrated on analyzing specific work relations conversations, career aspirations, job responsibility whose role is to emphasize linguistic patterns with a view to leading the interlocutors in terms of their own maps. The diversity of responses resulted from different patterns of cognitive structures used in conversations. The data provide an accurate description of the three main patterns where language actually flags up the metaprograms people are using in business contexts.

5. Findings

The findings of the study are presented in relation to the usefulness of the metaprograms in business, their impact on a person's behaviour, the common thinking patterns and mental processing that people use in everyday business relationships. Respecting people's model of the world by speaking to them in their language leads to being better heard and understood. The more we know which metaprograms a person works with, the better we can frame our communication. As a result of using metaprograms, I have encountered situations in which managers applied specific techniques in order to bring about a change in their business environment and introduce constructive ways to problem solving situations.

6. Conclusions

Seen retrospectively, this survey of some of the main metaprograms applied to business English refers to people's preferred perceptual positions in relation to context and emotional state. In conversation we will encounter a combination of metaprogram patterns, that is why it is essential to learn to identify one pattern at a time, and eventually experiment with using the words and phrases that target a specific metaprogram pattern to notice how well we communicate with the other person: "The pattern is only a map. Metaprograms are not another way of pigeon-holing people. They are useful guiding patterns" (O'Connor and Seymour 2002, p.156). Patterns change up with time and are context-dependent. For the sake of achieving a clear outcome in communication, Molden (2001) also suggests that "The key is to develop your sensory acuity so that you can notice patterns easily and work in real time with what is happening" (Molden 2001, p.135).

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