Unblocking the Route to Success: An NLP Analysis

Cristina Mihaela Zamfir
"Ovidius" University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania
cristina_m_zamfir@yahoo.com

Abstract

The scope of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) goes beyond business-specific skills and has led professionals to develop many ways of describing its essence. With healthy patterns of thinking, language and behaviour, NLP offers us the keys to unlocking our own potential and shows us how to use them to overcome barriers to success in the workplace.

Firstly, the paper attempts to provide us with effective strategies/tactics and appropriate language suitable for dealing with problem-solving or handling a conflicting situation.

Secondly, the article defines the concept of outcome as a key pillar for measuring business success. In this respect, reflecting the specifics of an outcome can be managed by means of questioning techniques and the Meta Model.

The findings of my research indicate that flexibility among business people can help them change from an unsatisfactory present state to a desired state and move towards solutions.

Key words: barriers, conflict, questioning, outcome, business NLP
J.E.L. classification: Z00

1. Introduction

An important role in the process of communicating within an organization is played by developing effective strategies for dealing with difficult situations and people, problem-solving and handling conflicts. When such events occur at work, it is important to find the source/cause of problem, what attitude is most appropriate to take, how to react in the right way, and what the advantages and disadvantages of each approach are.

However, overcoming barriers that prevent us from being successful at work may not be always possible if we consider a hostile environment, or conflicting forces.

The approach is twofold: first, conflicts occur within an individual, being related to our deeper structures - *inner conflict* and, second, conflicts can occur externally, in relationship to others - *interpersonal conflict* (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000; Molden, 2001; O'Connor and Seymour, 2002; Alder, 2002; McMillan, 2003; Cooper, 2008).

2. Theoretical background

Some definitions focus on NLP's power in the communication area, considering NLP as *the art and science of communication*, or *a set of powerful influencing strategies*; others are concerned with excellence and define NLP as *a user's manual for the brain*; yet other definitions focus on attaining goals, regarding NLP as *an attitude of mind* or *a process by which you can achieve what you want in life and your future career.*

A person may feel conflicted about working with difficult personalities especially when the decision involves strong beliefs or opinions. Conflicting demands/ opinions/interests (when ideas, beliefs, opinions cannot exist together), conflict of interest (the inability to do your job fairly because you will be affected by short/long-term decisions), disagreement, disputes, confrontations of antagonistic intentions remain the biggest barrier to communication in the business environment and require a compromise between the conflicting parts.

The term *conflict*, for example, is defined by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as meaning "a state of disagreement or argument between people, groups etc", "a situation in which you have to choose between two or more opposite needs, influences etc", or "a situation in which you have two opposite feelings about something" (LDCE, 2014, p.371). Since conflict is based on a situation in which different people want different things, NLP's emphasis on addressing conflicts, both internally and interpersonally, lays the foundations for managing and resolving various forms of conflicts.

From an NLP perspective, conflict is interpreted as "a state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas, or interests".

Avoiding problems by using *appropriate language* and *tactics* is a method which seems suitable for handling a conflicting situation at work in the best way. It shifts away from sinking deep into a problem towards evaluating more options tactfully and professionally.

A key pillar of NLP is knowing what you want. Defining clear outcomes is considered to be the most important measure for business success. An example such as the unpredictability of market conditions can get a company off track from achieving its financial targets.

3. Overcoming barriers that prevent you from being successful at work is really possible

With healthy patterns of thinking, language and behaviour, NLP offers us the keys to *unlocking our own potential* and shows us how to use them to overcome barriers to success in the workplace.

A correlation between service-/retail-based businesses and businesses centred on customer/supplier/community interaction has been firmly established: the concern for people power makes all the difference for how we communicate and mis-communicate in the context of business.

To paraphrase Cooper (2008, p.23), *barriers exist rather metaphorically*. It can be argued that overcoming barriers provides an opportunity for guaranteed success within group work. By zapping away already formed habits or programs that limit our thinking, we can step into more positive feelings generated from imagined events or real experiences, and remove barriers from our success.

This approach uses strategies such as: trying to anticipate potential conflicts, finding common goals, being as positive as possible (Trappe and Tullis, 2006). Some useful phrases for dealing with co-workers could be:

● *Before we start, I think you should know...*, *I wanted to inform you before anyone else does – we' re planning to...* (try to anticipate potential conflicts);

● *Let's work on this together, We're all working towards the same goal / We've all got the same objective* (find common goals);

● *It is a good idea – it just needs a brush-up, I understand your point of view, but it's not what we need right now* (be as positive as possible).

Cooper (2008), on the other hand, refers to the categories of people who unawares stop us reaching our goals for multiple reasons – goals, beliefs and values, or patterns of thinking: "Other people can have goals that conflict with yours. For example, you want extra budget to hire an additional person, but your boss wants to underspend budget to show his management capabilities and get promoted" (Cooper, 2008, p.31).

According to her, "the biggest barriers to success in organizations are *misunderstandings, difficult relationships*, and *blaming*. All these are people-centred issues." (Cooper, 2008, p.55).

Using NLP tools, we can take a stand on conflict resolution by minimising a dispute, accommodating your point of view, or dictating what must be done or how someone must behave:

● *I don't see what all the fuss is about, I'm sure that won't be a problem* (ignore or make a conflict seem less important);

● *Can we set aside our differences?, What are your views on this?* (accommodate/find a compromise solution that both parts could benefit);

● *Whether you like it or not..., I'm sorry, but there's no point discussing this any further* (use authority to impose a solution).

In NLP, a negative state is also characterized by the use of *coercive language* showing disapproval or disrespect. It is easily recognized because it usually follows the pattern "That's + not + adjective" with the intention of dismissing the other person's view (Molden, 2001). From the

NLP perspective, problems result from negative judgements such as: *That's **not** rational/possible/practical/proper/feasible/right* and they can only be diffused through NLP conflict resolution techniques which unblock that state into a more flexible and resourceful one. It is the adverb *not* rather than the adjective which causes tension between people, or as Molden puts it, "the word 'not' is more often interpreted as a direct attack on the person, on their ideas, and it can be 'wrong' only if compared with the other person's unique map. So, *who is to judge*? (Molden, 2001, p.39).

Indeed, who is to judge? *How exactly do you decide what is rational/possible/feasible, and so on? What leads you to believe something is right/wrong/proper/improper?*

Similar results are reported by McMillan (2003, p.116), who is concerned with the questioning techniques as linguistic tools for targeting on specific information in a customer – seller relationship.

The findings of his study reveal several types of homing-in or targeting questions, among which *barrier breakers*, their role being to uncover the future customer's interests, motivation, needs and wishes. Barrier breakers are further subdivided into two main forms, i.e. *brick walls* and *sweeping statements*:

Brick walls examples include:

e.g. *I can't accept your offer under these conditions.*
  I can't increase your order to 3,000 units.
  I won't consider doing business with you again.

Homing-in questions meant to recover lost information and go beyond the barriers built in the prospect's mind can be: *I know you can't, but what would happen if you did it?, How do you stop yourself from...?* They lay emphasis on the outcome and identify the barriers as a first step to challenge the limitation.

Sweeping statements are obvious in the following examples:

e.g. *I've never been satisfied with the quality of this product.*
  All your suppliers have no idea of what my company wants.
  Every delivery you make is taking far too long.
  I always look for the highest bid.

Such statements are typically challenged with the help of universal quantifiers: *Never? All? Every? Always? Has there ever been a case in which / a time when...?* Molden (1996) notes that generalizing is a way of extending a statement to cover all possibilities. In agreement with McMillan (2003), Katan also notes that "in generalization, the specific context is lacking, and the implication is that the utterance is of universal validity" (2004, p.132).

4. Outcome – the most important measure for business success

Using NLP to set well-formed outcomes throughout companies, departments, teams, and individuals, empowers people with well-defined, meaningful goals.

The characteristics of a *well-formed outcome* model (Cooper, 2008, p.288) used in diverse areas of business are as follows:

- Positive: *What do you want*?
- In your control: *Can you initiate and do it*?
- Specific: *What or how specifically*?
- Context: *Where, when, with whom*?
- Resources: *What do you need*?
- Impact: *What are the consequences on other things and people*?

Outcome thinking has as a starting point expressions like *what I want to have* and *what I don't want to have.* However, the difference between these two outcomes is in the way we express them, either positively or negatively. Consider these examples:

e.g. (1) I reject/refuse/dislike having dissatisfied customers any longer.
  (2) I want to exceed customer expectations.

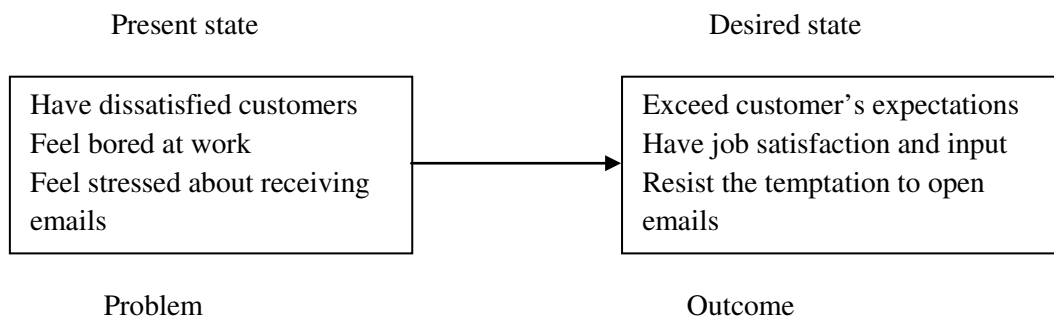e.g. (3) I don't want to feel bored in my job.
  (4) I want job satisfaction and more input in everything I do.

e.g. (5) I don't want to feel stressed about the cascade of e-mails at work.

(6) I want to resist the temptation of opening e-mails as soon as they arrive.

Although the first statement (e.g.1) does not include any overtly negative words or auxiliaries (like *no* or *not*, *don't*), the statement clearly expresses what *you don't want*. In the *dislike* variant, negativity may be understood from the prefix *dis-*, whereas with the *reject* and *refuse* variants, negativity is semantically implicit. Furthermore, in order to achieve an elusive goal, the example should give an indication of what needs to replace the current situation - what you want (*the outcome*) - rather than what you currently don't want (the *problem* of customer dissatisfaction). In metaprogram terms, the statement expresses this goal in *away from* language, rather than *towards* language. The difficulty with focusing on what you don't want is also expressed in examples (3) and (5) indicating that in order to think about *not* having something, you need to think about that very thing. In such a situation, attention is focused on what you *don't* want rather than what you *do* want. The art of NLP is to separate the *problem* (dissatisfied customers, feeling bored, feeling stressed about e-mails) from the *outcome* (exceed customer expectations, job satisfaction and more input, not to be afraid of e-mails). By moving *away* from *present state*, you can move *towards* your *desired state*, as shown in the diagram below:

<u>Moving from problem to outcome</u>

Present state   Desired state

| Have dissatisfied customers
Feel bored at work
Feel stressed about receiving emails | → | Exceed customer's expectations
Have job satisfaction and input
Resist the temptation to open emails |

Problem   Outcome

The antidote to shift an outcome to the positive is to ask these questions:
a) What needs to happen for [outcome]?
b) Is there anything else that needs to happen for [outcome]?
c) What do I want instead?
d) What do I really want in my work?
e) What are the consequences on other things and people?

Setting clear outcomes makes us consider some timescales when we *can* realistically reach our goals: e.g. *this week, this month, this year, in the next ten years, throughout my career, by the end of my career.* Problematic words like the modals *should*, *need to* and *must* introduce beliefs which are counterproductive in the modern workplace. In addition, the moment we think of our challenges and write them down on a chart, we always prioritize them in their order of importance to our success. In the list of urgent work situations that we *want* to overcome, the above modals create a false impression of taking charge of or having a strong influence on the outcome of a situation, as they are not compatible with what we *want*, but rather suggesting what we *do not want*, what *others* want, or what *we* think *we 'should' want*:

e.g. 1. They *should recognize* your merits/what you do for the company.
2. They *need to see* your real implication in the reconstruction of the organization.
3. They *must understand* that not everyone is as workaholic and perseverent as you are.

Statements/ Thoughts that start with modal verbs such as *should, have to*, *need to* and *must* express implicit rules, regulations, policies and procedures.

In NLP, clean questions help us access unconscious thoughts and lead us to a change in perception, often to a new attitude and behaviour. Using NLP Meta Model patterns, we can challenge the rules associated with imperative words at work:

e.g. I *should* work harder.
Meta Model Question: <u>Who says that</u>?

e.g. I *need to /ought to* coach my team to take on more.

Meta Model Question: <u>What happens if I don't</u>?
e.g. I *must* give feedback to all my suppliers' proposals.
Meta Model Question: <u>What happens when I say "I choose to" instead</u>?

Meta Model Questions bring a change in a person's map of reality and involve moving to the *specifics* of an experience, decomposing larger chunks of information into smaller bits, thus creating a clearer and more comprehensive or accurate description of an experience.

Defining the specifics of an outcome can be managed by means of the <u>questioning technique</u>. A broad outcome is not a reasonable, real and appealing one unless we describe it more specifically, by using sensory-related words/language about what we see, hear, or feel once the outcome is achieved. A broad outcome is a *vague* outcome which often does not work, but which can be brought to life by asking the right questions. Let us consider the following outcome: *I want more money and fame in my career*. Devoid of specific details, the statement needs a more accurate description. Thus, the following questions may arise: <u>More compared with what</u>? <u>How much money *specifically* do I want to earn</u>? <u>What do I see, hear and how do I feel when I've earned enough money and won fame?</u>

5. Research methods and material

This article started from the description of some effective strategies and tactics accompanied by their appropriate language suitable for handling conflicting situations in the workplace, and continued with practical examples of setting clear outcomes which brought me closer to the understanding of how the Meta Model questioning technique can lead us to a change in perception and a new, resourceful attitude.

From a linguistic perspective, I have looked up positive phrases for accommodating a point of view, ignoring a conflict, or minimizing a dispute, expressions focusing on misunderstandings, difficult relationships, and blaming as well as the coercive language for miscommunication in the context of business.

I have also concentrated on and analyzed contexts in which barrier breakers, both brick walls and sweeping statements, can be used as linguistic tools in a customer-seller interaction. Using targeting questions as guidelines has helped me clarify statements, recover missing information, connect language with thought, unlock potential, and overcome barriers to success.

From the NLP perspective, I pointed out that asking precise questions modifies the surface structure of a statement and forces the deeper structure to find more possibilities, widens our map of the world and ultimately, provides a framework for a clear outcome.

Thus, my research also focused on the essential role of Meta Model questions in moving to the specifics of an experience, decomposing it into smaller bits while making the actual description more vivid, colourful, with more details and even some sensory information.

6. Findings

On the basis of the above descriptions of language, thinking and behaviour patterns, the results show that, in order to open up more choices and find exceptions to the rule, professional business people need to resort to effective strategies in overcoming barriers and diffusing negative judgements through conflict resolution techniques.

This has allowed me to consider the role of flexibility in removing linguistic barriers and the extensive use of Meta Model patterns which makes all the difference in realistically reaching our goals.

On the one hand, the findings of my study reveal that uncovering our future customers' interests, needs and wishes through homing-in or targeting questions has to be taken into consideration if we want to go beyond the barriers built in the prospects' mind.

On the other hand, regarded as both necessary and sufficient for unblocking miscommunication and confusion, establishing clear outcomes as the most important measure for business success enable business people to generate a positive state of mind through effective linguistic expressions and work on a desired outcome.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, objective-focused people clearly define duties and assign roles and tasks within their teams. Flexibility seems to be the heart of the problem. Flexible business people build relationships first and then set out goals and let them develop with the relationship.

A step worth taking into account is to not do tasks until outcomes are carefully considered and set. They actively help us change from an unsatisfactory present state to a desired state, move towards solutions by means of available resources such as programming/reprogramming strategies, NLP Meta Model patterns, questioning techniques, beliefs and values.

Beliefs strongly shape our map of reality, focusing on our 'towards' language, i.e. what we want, and our 'away from' language, i.e. what we reject/refuse/dislike. They point to achievable goals as well as obstacles, self-doubts or conflicts, both internal and interpersonal.

In the context of business, an opportunity for guaranteed success within group work is to overcome barriers which exist rather metaphorically, diffuse disputes, zap away limiting habits and step into more positive feelings.

8. References

- Alder, H., 2002. *Handbook of NLP*. England: Gower Publishing Company.
- Cooper, L., 2008. *Business NLP for Dummies*. England: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Dilts, R. and DeLozier, J. 2000. *Encyclopedia of Neuro-Linguistic Programming and NLP New Coding*. Santa Cruz: NLP University Press.
- Katan, D., 2004. *Translating Cultures*. Manchester, UK and Northampton MA, St. Jerome Publishing.
- McMillan, A., 2003. *Advanced Selling for Beginners*. Gloucestershire: Forge House.
- Molden, D., 2001. *NLP Business Masterclass*. Glasgow: Pearson Education Limited.
- O'Connor, J. and Seymour, J. 2002. *Introducing NLP: Psychological Skills for Understanding and Influencing People*. Hammersmith, London: Element, Harper Collins.
- Trappe, T. and Tullis, G. 2006. *Intelligent Business. Coursebook*. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Zamfir, C.M. 2018. *Business Communication and NLP. Successful Drivers in Theory and Practice*. Bucharest: University Publishing House.
- * * * Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2014. England: Pearson Education Limited.