NLP Coaching
An evidence-based approach for coaches, leaders and individuals

Susie Linder-Pelz
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I dedicate this book to my wonderfully supportive partner, family and friends.
Introduction

Coaching is big business because of its potential to change people and organizations. To achieve personal fulfilment and organizational effectiveness, people and teams often need to change existing behaviours and take on new ones – such as greater flexibility, ability to deal with conflict and to renew creativity. Individuals and teams need not only to see and feel the desire to change, they need to actually know how to change.

Many organizations try to reduce or control [the complexity that is a fabric of our working lives] and this simply isn’t possible. It’s not about tackling complexity but more a case of understanding what it means for how we work to develop people and organizations.¹

Traditional notions of learning – to define outcomes and then design content and processes in order to get there – no longer work with personal, leadership and organizational development. Meaningful learning occurs when human resource professionals step back and make space for people to make sense of their own experience.

Coaching is a collaborative process of facilitating a client’s ability to self-direct learning and growth, as evidenced by sustained changes in self-understanding, self-concept and behaviour.²
Consultants give expert advice and mentors guide people who are new to a field or experience; trainers instruct in the learning of a new skill or competence and counsellors heal a hurt, wound or trauma. In these helping modalities the client needs something added or fixed; coaching, by contrast, mobilizes the client’s inner resources for the purpose of enhancing performance or personal and career development. So coaching is of growing interest in the fields of human resource development, executive development, leadership, career and personal development and health promotion. It is an emerging cross-disciplinary occupation that aims to enhance well-being and performance, individual and organizational development.

What is NLP?

Like coaching, NLP is about change and the enhancing of performance and fulfilment. Many say NLP has had a major influence on coaching in general; in fact, many of the assumptions and practices of current best coaching practice have come directly from NLP. One aim of this book is to shine a laser beam on what is common to all coaching and what is different about NLP coaching.

NLP has been around since the 1970s, starting in therapy and becoming widely used in education, sales and business, training and recruitment, professional development and personal development. Coaching with NLP is a relatively recent application of NLP. The distinction between NLP as a unique methodology for modelling and replicating behaviour and as applications, tools or skills based on that modelling methodology is something we will discuss in Chapter 1. Listen to Peter Thompson, an experienced NLP trainer, as he speaks about NLP:

NLP addresses things that people are not aware of. Although people talk to themselves they usually don’t hear themselves or realize the effect of what they say. So, for example, saying ‘I’m not confident at interviews’ leads to unconscious thoughts, pictures and feelings about interviews; that leads the person to speak and present themselves at interview in a less than helpful way.

NLP is about bringing the unconscious to awareness; having clients notice how they feel as a result of what and how they speak to themselves and how that colours their experience, how they limit themselves and their idea of what’s possible. How people feel is a result of the language they use; it colours their feelings or how they see the world, the day, themselves as ‘bright’ or ‘grey’. This is how people block themselves and don’t take actions they want to or are unable to imagine other solutions.
NLP is for people who have admired someone excelling, who have a goal they haven’t achieved or who have experienced unwanted emotions. It is about how people organise their thoughts, their ways of representing the world and their experience of it; that is, their memories, their responses in the present and ways they imagine the future unfolding. The key to NLP is that the founders, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, found ways of investigating what was occurring outside of peoples’ conscious awareness. Those mental processes – which include activity in their brain, in the rest of their central nervous system and in their body – result in the storing of information relating to beliefs, values, memories, habits and more. So NLP gives coaches ways to investigate clients’ goals and outcomes, to recognise the processes that stop them achieving their goals and to address the processes that underlie any emotional issue. NLP is about bringing unconscious processes into awareness so as to remove blocks and bring new, better quality to their internal experience.

NLP methodologies enable people to modify beliefs, feelings and behaviours that used to hold them back and assist them in taking on new ways of speaking, learning, deciding, feeling and acting. And organizations need people who can communicate, relate, manage time, motivate and develop their own and others’ performance; one way to do this is by pinpointing the precise qualities of thinking, emoting, speaking and acting used by effective change agents so that they can train their people to do the same. This means understanding exactly how someone like Barack Obama, for example, uses empathy and language to motivate his team and the specific ways he uses his body, gestures, eyes, voice and language. It could mean learning to think and act like a leader who, when accused of making mistakes, looks at his audience and simply says, ‘That’s how we learn’ and who engages, communicates, stays relaxed and focused the way he does.

Out of our neurology (nervous system, brain stem, cerebral cortex etc) arise our unique human powers of symbolization and language; we live in language and language constructions because that is how we make sense of the world. Words express thoughts, beliefs, understandings, mental maps; changing the words we use can change minds and meanings. (Michael Hall, cognitive psychologist and NLP trainer.)

There are good reasons for the popularity of NLP: it makes fast and lasting impacts, according to practitioners’ observations and feedback from clients.
It engages all the senses as well as the intellect, in an era when the importance of mind and emotions in learning, health and well-being is increasingly being recognized and when we are moving away from fragmented professional practices and embracing integrative and holistic approaches to well-being.

Over the past decade, NLP has become one of the preferred approaches in the massive coaching industry, particularly in the UK and Europe but also in the USA, Australia, South Africa, South America, India, South East Asia and New Zealand. NLP coaching has contributed to executive, team and leadership development in the business and corporate worlds as well as to performance and fulfilment in the personal arena. As one NLP coach colourfully pointed out, ‘Every person and their dog has an NLP certificate.’

Yet despite the proliferation of NLP practitioner training programmes – and even university-affiliated courses in NLP coaching – there is still much scepticism about NLP. There are several reasons for this. First is the confusion about the name and the lack of consensus about how to define NLP. Second, over-enthusiastic practitioners have misrepresented NLP techniques as easy and simple, sometimes making wild claims about its effectiveness. UK coach Angus McLeod says:

Some NLP coaches focus somewhat enthusiastically, if not bombastically, on the tools of NLP rather than the more important principles of listening, reflecting, supporting and facilitating. Therefore many serious coaches are dis-identifying with NLP per se. It would be good to understand what makes coaching exquisite as opposed to a set of tools that people use more or less effectively. A lot of academics and psychologists so far have missed that exquisiteness.

So is NLP like a Christmas stocking, full of bright stocking-fillers and offered with an engaging story of miracles? Is it myth? Or is NLP, rather than a random bunch of techniques, a substantial methodology based on a coherent and established body of knowledge?

NLP has never had the imprimatur of an established discipline or professional body such as its close cousin, psychology. In sharp contrast with behavioural scientists of their time, the developers of NLP were not interested in proving their approaches worked from a scientific perspective; rather, they just wanted to demonstrate how. They were not concerned to prove NLP was right, just that it got results.

Compared with the conversational therapies of psychology and other helping professions, NLP – with its unconventional use of language and
other techniques – is seen to work in mysterious and poorly understood ways. A related reason for scepticism is that the claims of getting quick results fly in the face of established truths about change being extremely difficult and taking a long time.

NLP was developed largely on reasoning and intuitive knowledge rather than on scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{12} As we will see, NLP methods and techniques come from many other disciplines, themselves based on reason, logic and common sense, and the majority of the authoritative figures in NLP objected to talk of NLP as theory and rejected the scientific method.

So while in recent years NLP has informed much coaching practice, ‘the relationship between NLP and academe has been tenuous and somewhat strained, influenced in part by the apparently atheoretical stance of the founders’.\textsuperscript{13} John Martin of the Open University (UK) explains:

\begin{quote}
NLP originally developed as a form of psychotherapy in the 1970s. NLP authors tend to quote one another rather than linking with the wider worlds of psychotherapy, communication training etc and their methods have often been experience-based rather than research-based, so it can be difficult to evaluate them in an independent and broadly informed way.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Yet, as you will see in Chapter 5, the rapidly growing interest in coaching psychology, neuroscience, complexity theory and cross-disciplinary approaches to understanding human behaviour have heightened the interest in NLP as a systemic model and methodology drawing on diverse fields of inquiry and practice.

**Questions this book addresses**

*The shift now to second generation coaching is reflected in the need for coaching to be based on explicit psychological principles and grounded in a solid evidence base.*\textsuperscript{15}

While NLP is still polarized around success stories and scepticism, the wider field of coaching has matured. Over the past five years the evidence for coaching theories and practices has become a hot topic and field of inquiry among academics in businesses and psychology as well as among growing numbers of human resource, training and development professionals and managers. Fillery-Travis and Lane,\textsuperscript{16} reporting on the large-scale investment
in internal and external coaching by organizations, conclude that there is an increasing demand for evidence to verify its value and impact.

For all these reasons I believe a gulf has emerged between NLP coaching practitioners, trainers and gurus on the one hand and behavioural researchers and professionals on the other who challenge the hype, want evidence, and debate about what coaching works, why and how.

Dan was a Human Resources director who had done a lot of coaching and advising employees. He thought a lot about these issues and now was very curious about methodologies that purportedly help resolve conflicts (internal conflicts as well as those between people) and boost productivity. He had read about NLP and although he was rather sceptical, he needed to know more. Kate, another trainee coach, had taken to NLP with gusto; she had already done a weekend programme in it and had started a practitioner training programme. People skills were Kate’s strength and she was driven to learn more because she was so dedicated to her clients and loved seeing the difference coaching can make.

As Dan asked questions about research Kate’s eyes would initially glaze over. As far as she was concerned, all that mattered was that NLP worked; she could see it in how her clients responded and she could feel it in their relief and excitement. But she was aware that some professionals and students of change, managers, psychologists, learning and development professionals, educators and researchers in the coaching and corporate worlds were critical of NLP and understood that she needed to address that.

So it is timely to address the question posed by Dan and Kate: Does NLP deserve to be taken seriously – by coaches, their clients and the coaching community? Jonathan Passmore, one of the UK’s leading coaches, has also thrown down the gauntlet:

What is needed is an evidenced-based approach to NLP, grounding NLP material in previous psychological research, questioning aspects of NLP where the evidence from research is missing, taking the best bits, developing NLP less as pop psychology and moving towards a science-practitioner model… I would really like to see an NLP coaching book which grounds NLP techniques in evidence and which challenges some of the floss which NLP can have.17
In writing this book I am taking up that challenge and taking some steps towards evaluating NLP in an informed way. I am also responding to calls to contribute to the development and validation of professional coaching practices that are grounded in established psychological theory and research. In doing so I will have an analytic eye on how NLP has developed over the past 35 years and a creative one on possible future evidence-based best practice.

This, then, is the context in which I write this book. While there are several excellent books on how to coach with NLP, this book, by contrast, addresses the following questions:

1. What exactly is NLP-based coaching and in what contexts is it found useful? Why do people use the word ‘magic’ in relation to NLP? Does NLP coaching meet coaching industry standards? What intellectual and cultural contexts gave rise to the NLP approach to coaching change? (Part 1)

2. What is evidence-based NLP coaching and how does it relate to best practice? Why is evidence-based coaching important to practitioners and buyers of coaching services? What principles underpin NLP coaching and to what extent are they supported by established theory and research? How does NLP fit with psychology, often considered the science of human behaviour, emotion and thought? What does NLP coaching share with other solution-focused and cognitive behaviour coaching approaches and what is its uniqueness? Is NLP ‘atheoretical’? (Part 2)

3. What are some recent developments in evidence-based NLP coaching practice? What, if anything, do they add? What does an agenda for research into NLP coaching look like? What does working as a researcher-practitioner mean for NLP coaches and trainers? (Part 3)

At the end I will reflect on whether NLP as a distinct methodology deserves to be taken seriously by coaching professionals and, if so, what justifies its place in the expanding fields of coaching psychology and positive psychology.

In their book How Coaching Works, the widely-respected NLP coach trainers Joseph O’Connor and Andrea Lages looked for commonalities among key coaching approaches in order to ‘put some boundaries around the field of coaching [as a] discipline compared with other disciplines such as humanistic psychology and positive psychology, so its effectiveness can be evaluated’.

By contrast, this book aims to put boundaries around NLP coaching so its effectiveness can be evaluated in comparison with alternative cognitive behaviour and solution-focused coaching models and methodologies.
Who is this book for?
This is for those of you who, like Dan and Kate, value learning, want detailed information about NLP coaching as well as an overview of the field; who like to make informed choices, strive for rigour as well as vigour in the work they do, stay curious and up-to-date, keep an open mind and use their critical thinking – by which I mean acquiring information and evaluating it reflectively to reach a well-justified conclusion. Although this is not a training manual, I address the relationship between NLP coaching practice, research and training, and offer links to some training organizations.

My researcher-practitioner perspective
In 1991, after 20 years as an academic behavioural scientist, I started building a private career-coaching practice. At that time the practice of career development was moving away from the traditional counselling model, towards a partnership model where the client takes responsibility for self-assessment, information gathering, decision making and actions, while the counsellor-as-facilitator asks questions, listens reflectively, clarifies, gives feedback, makes suggestions, offers information, sets tasks, supports and motivates. Like some other career practitioners, I started to use the term ‘coach’ to differentiate myself from the traditional counselling model and to emphasize my focus on assisting well people to think, feel and perform better.

Although I drew a lot from established career theories, I found I still did not have sufficient skills to assist well clients (no pathology) who wanted to overcome unwanted thoughts, emotional states or behaviour. I was later to understand that this required developmental coaching as distinct from performance coaching.

It wasn’t until I personally experienced NLP in 1991 that I felt I had found the facilitative skills that enable people to really deal with feelings and beliefs that were holding them back and to move forward feeling more free, positive and empowered. Although there was little systematic evidence of the efficacy of NLP, it was an approach that made sense to me and, once I started using it, I observed and heard more positive changes in clients’ feelings and actions.

In 2002 I started collaborating with Michelle Duval, a talented coach and trainer who, like me, is Sydney-based. At that time she and Michael Hall, an NLP writer and trainer from the USA, were developing an innovative NLP-based approach to coaching, which you will hear more about in Chapter 10. With my behavioural science background I was also reading and thinking about research on NLP, and a meeting in 2006 with Paul Tosey and Jane Mathison of the NLP Research Project at the University of Surrey spurred my interest in delving into the foundations of NLP coaching.
In this book you will hear from Michelle, Michael and Paul as well as from other NLP developers, trainers and educators in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Singapore and the USA. All are well regarded by their peers and have written thoughtfully about the coaching work they do.

**Mind the gap**

My intention here is to help bridge the knowledge and communication gap between practitioner coaches who use or are interested in NLP and the coaching psychology and research communities. This means acknowledging the need for both *rigour* and *vigour* in coaching.24

There have been many developments and offshoots of NLP over the past 35 years and much has been written. Any one writer’s focus when distilling and summarizing work that pertains to NLP will inevitably be partial, though I hope the Endnotes and Bibliography will enable you to look deeper and wider. In addition to my perspective as a practitioner-researcher, you will hear the views of my colleagues and clients; this will allow a fuller description and discussion of NLP-based coaching. My intention is for you to be informed and stretched, provoked to ask more questions and excited to keep learning and applying new knowledge.

I also do not claim to be unbiased; as mentioned, I have collaborated with some of the developers whose proprietary coaching models are discussed in this book, though I have no ongoing business ties with any of them.

![Rigour and Vigour in Coaching](image)

**Figure 0.1** Rigour and vigour in coaching
My hope is to tread the fine line between jargon-free writing and the use of important terminology that expresses unique features of NLP. And I echo many others – from O’Connor and Seymour in their landmark *Introducing NLP* to Lisa Wake’s scholarly exposition of neurolinguistic psychotherapy – in appreciating that subjectivity is central to NLP. This book presents my personal understanding of it; one that I hope will be enlightening, provocative and useful.

The terms ‘client’ and ‘coachee’ are both used when referring to a person being coached. For the sake of consistency, I have chosen to use ‘client’ when referring to someone being coached in an organization as well as when referring to coaching in the private sector.

**Outline of chapters**

**Part 1: NLP and coaching**

Chapter 1 presents coaching as one application of NLP; that is, it explains how the models or skills of communication and change discovered by NLP developers are applied to coaching issues. Chapter 2 describes the actual skills an NLP coach uses. In Chapter 3 I ask what is meant by the word ‘magic’ when it is used to describe NLP and I distinguish NLP coaching from the original NLP practice. The ‘packaging’ of NLP coaching and how NLP coaches address coaching industry standards are the subjects of Chapter 4. This section ends with a digression into the historical context in which both NLP and coaching evolved (Chapter 5).

**Part 2: An evidence-based approach to NLP coaching**

Chapter 6 distinguishes ‘theory’ and ‘principles’ and in Chapter 7 I invite you to consider nine systemic principles that underpin NLP coaching, with strong influences from psychology and support from the neurosciences; it also links some NLP coaching practices to these principles. Chapter 8 discusses the links between ideas in NLP coaching and ideas in other approaches in coaching psychology, lists the practices that are shared and those that are distinctive to NLP coaching and asks whether NLP is really ‘atheoretical’. In Chapter 9 I turn to the question of empirical evidence in support of NLP coaching, looking first at the research findings to date and then at three areas of research into NLP coaching that are potentially important. I also consider which research methods are valid and appropriate for such research.
Part 3: Towards best practice

Chapter 10 is where I introduce two interesting and influential additions to NLP coaching. They are examples of developing NLP practice with principles in mind. Chapter 11 offers some specific research questions and proposals for those who want to explore, understand, test, challenge and refine how coaching with NLP works best. Chapter 12 is about the benchmarking of NLP coaching competencies for the training and credentialling of coaches as well as for corporate learning and development.

Some of you may choose to read the chapters sequentially and others will dip into particular subjects of interest to you. For example, if you are new to NLP or to coaching, Part 1 will give you a feel for NLP coaching. If you are a buyer or manager of coaching services who needs to evaluate various change methodologies, Part 2 may interest you most. If you are a student or researcher there will be information and ideas for you in Parts 2 and 3. And for those who want to teach or talk about NLP as an evidence-based methodology, I hope all parts will be useful!
Part I

NLP and coaching
What is NLP coaching?

Your ultimate success at helping people achieve their desired outcomes – including managing change – will depend on your ability to observe, identify and utilise the multitude of patterns that will constantly be offered to you in your sensory experience by clients… not in the ability to measure and average types of behavior.¹

Consider, if you will, the issues people bring to coaching: they might be feeling fear, frustration or lack of confidence about their work; they may be searching for more fulfilment or need to understand their own or their colleagues’ motivations and goals. They may want to be more innovative and influential, resolve conflicts, manage time better or shape their own and others’ performance. Maybe they are in a bind with regard to their relationship, need to set priorities and get more balance in their lives, or align business goals with people goals.

A 38-year-old manager who came for coaching said, ‘I do the managerial thing perfectly well, but it doesn’t feel right. I want to know what will make me happy. Should I stay in this job or look for another one? I feel I should be able to sort this out by myself, but I seem to be going round in circles. Often I’m full of fear about how I perform. I feel overburdened with the workload and the responsibility. And I’m not enjoying the work. It’s so frustrating.’

People like this seek coaches who listen carefully and help them understand what they need to think and do in order to make the desired changes. But
as well as knowing what they need to do, clients need to know how. It is the focus on how people make changes that is the essence of NLP.

**A bit of background**

Whether you know little or lots about NLP, you have probably heard that NLP is based on Richard Bandler and John Grinder’s understanding that people internally code their experience of the world and of their life, first neurologically and then through language. The most detailed and technical account of the process of discovering, exploring and developing NLP is in *Whispering in the Wind*, which Grinder wrote with Carmen Bostic St Clair. They explained that the way we know what we know has to do with how we experience the world outside ourselves:

> The events presented to us in First Access… are the product of a series of neurological transforms beginning at the point where our receptors and the external world collide… This ‘first access’ is already a set of transformed representations, though it is prior to consciousness, pre-verbal and beyond our ability to influence. The second set of transforms is those of natural language and its derivative forms – formal systems such as logic – which result in our linguistically mediated mental maps.²

When Bandler and Grinder first started to study people’s subjective experience – by observing, listening, asking, eliciting and experimenting – they found that the meaning a person made related to the specific sequence (as well as intensity) of representational systems the person used to process information coming in through their visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory senses. Represenational system sequences were called strategies.³ That is what is meant by the structure or patterning of experience. By observing, listening, asking, eliciting and experimenting – modelling – Bandler and Grinder also discovered that people can change their feeling responses by changing the sequence and intensity of the sensory information. Then they explored how: they asked how changing the qualities of the representations (called ‘submodality shifts’) can be utilized to make permanent change, and by observing, listening, asking, eliciting and experimenting Bandler and Grinder came up with a number of change patterns.

Grinder and Bandler understood that the structure of language and experience could be modelled in terms of sequences of sensory experience. By accurately mapping these sequences a change agent has the keys to modifying unwanted or unuseful behaviours.
NLP modelling is based on the distinction – and correspondence – between the deep structure of experience (unconscious) and the surface (transformed, mapped by language) structure and is regarded as ‘one of the crowning achievements of NLP’.4 Dilts talks of the distinction between pure NLP modelling and analytic modelling which is used for information gathering and pattern finding:

The primary approach of NLP has been to model effective behaviours and the cognitive processes behind them. The NLP modelling process involves finding out how the brain is operating by analysing language patterns and non-verbal communication. The results of this analysis are then put into step-by-step strategies or programs that may be used to transfer the skill to other people and areas of application.5

So it is important to bear in mind that while NLP is often perceived as tools, techniques or a technology, originally it was developed as a means of ‘understanding how people process information, construct meaning schemas, and perform skills to achieve results’.6

The term NLP refers to the whole mind–body–emotion system, with systemic patterned connections between neurological processes, language and learned behavioural strategies.7

The rest of this chapter covers:

- The goal of NLP coaching.
- Modelling as the key to effective change work.

In the following chapter I describe the key skills of an NLP coach at work.

The goal of NLP coaching

The goal of NLP coaching is essentially to maximize the client’s ability to respond to their situation resourcefully; to increase the choice they have.

The coach’s job is to assist the client to discover [or map] their own present approach to their situation, to establish what works for them currently and what they want to improve or change. The coach then engages the client in learning more effective means to reach their goals. The outcome of coaching is to assist the client to increase the reliability and value of their
own thinking and performance to themselves and their chosen associates in and for the future.8

By going through this mapping process the client moves towards greater self-awareness, behavioural flexibility, choice and effectiveness. The goal of coaching is to clarify the client’s present or ‘problem’ state, their desired outcomes, and to use various NLP skills to enable the client to access their inner resources and resourcefulness to get the changes they want. See Figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1** The goal of NLP coaching

*Present state* is the internal (and external) picture, sounds, feelings, self-talk and behaviours the client is using to create their current, unwanted responses; *desired state* describes how the client wants to look, feel, sound and act when their outcomes are achieved, and *resources* refers to the neurological and linguistic potential the client has to alter their internal representations and external behaviours in order to achieve their outcome. In the next chapter we look at the skills or patterns an NLP coach uses to harnesses the client’s resources.

Summarizing so far: NLP addresses the relationships between how we think, speak (to ourselves and others), feel and act. By analysing and learning from these relationships people can effectively transform the way they traditionally think and act, thus adopting new and more useful ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, acting. The analytic part of this activity is called *modelling* and is a key feature that distinguishes NLP from other coaching models. In this book we will be talking a lot about the meaning and uses of NLP modelling.

**Modelling is the key**

It is through modelling that ‘NLP studies the way people take in information from the world, how they describe it to themselves (code it neurologically) with their senses of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling… filter it with
their beliefs and values, and then act on the result." \(^{10}\) Those internal and external senses are known in NLP as *representation systems*.

Another way of saying this is that modelling makes explicit the specific thinking and language patterns, beliefs, assumptions, perceptual filters and mental movies that create an experience, emotion and/or behaviour and being able to specify steps for replicating that experience. \(^{11}\)

There are three types of client information in modelling: \(^{12}\)

1. What they do (behaviour, physiology).
2. How they do it (the way they think).
3. Why they do it (beliefs and values).

In Chapter 10 you will read about a fourth, more recent idea in modelling that many coaches find very useful and effective.

Dilts describes the principles and procedures of the NLP modelling process and how he used it; for example, to study leadership skills and then put the identified leadership capabilities into a form that they could be transferred to and internalized by the people who wanted or needed those capabilities. \(^{13}\)

Modelling is the methodology on the basis of which the raft of NLP tools, patterns or strategies has been created. (A lot of the mystery and misunderstanding of NLP comes from this confusing terminology and I intend to keep clarifying it as we proceed.) The collection of patterns derived from systematic NLP modelling is known as NLP applications \(^{14}\) and coaching is one such application; neurolinguistic psychotherapy and training with NLP are others.

NLP co-founder Richard Bandler is often quoted as pointing out that the process of modelling is the true essence of NLP – not the trail of techniques that has been left in its wake. And in the beginning of his 2003 book on coaching, Robert Dilts talks about the crucial link between modelling and coaching: while the focus of other coaching is typically upon *what* a person is doing and needs to do in order to perform effectively, the focus of NLP coaching is on *how*. That involves identifying and analysing successful performances and sometimes comparing them with unsuccessful performance. \(^{15}\)

Learning and motivating strategies are the recipes for success, ingredients are the representation systems, amounts and quantities of each ingredient are the submodalities, and the steps are the sequence. \(^{16}\)
A client of mine needed ‘a strategy to keep momentum, unlike in the past’. His past pattern, which he did very well, was of getting bored and depressed. He identified a ‘little voice’ in his ear saying, ‘What will other people think?’ It was the voice of authority, his father’s voice and ‘my father has always put me down… never patted me on the back’. Any voice that sounded demanding, authoritative or telling him what to do now ‘drove me insane’. So he had learnt to ‘beat myself up’ and tell himself things like, ‘I’m bad at money management.’ He had a very good depression strategy. He also had an unhelpful strategy for ‘competing’, where he told himself he always had to be and have the best. He would say, ‘I know I can do better, I’m going to kill it, I’m not going to lose, I’ll feel like a loser if I don’t win.’

NLP coaches use modelling directly in order to facilitate change, as I did with this client, and it is called modelling-in-the-moment. Michelle Duval explains:

If we only model the internal and external strategies that anyone can replicate, the limitation is that this process does not merge or synthesise with the innate talents or strategies of the acquirer. My approach is to model the creativity and resources of the individual; only if they cannot access their internal resources or don’t have a framework then the coach looks outside for a model of excellence to help the client make it their own. This is the ‘co-creator’ role of the coach, one of the coach roles.

In the next chapter we look at the key skills of NLP coaching, which resulted from the modelling methodology developed by the founders and later developers of NLP. Strictly speaking, these skills are NLP patterns or strategies derived from modelling excellent and effective performers. In Chapter 7 we look at the theoretical origins of the key patterns/skills and Chapter 9 includes a description of the modelling research on which NLP coaching skills are based.

In summary, many NLP coaching skills are derived from the modelling methodology developed by Bandler, Grinder and their co-developers in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, during the coaching encounter the coach is modelling-in-the-moment the client’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour, including emotional/feeling states, way of speaking, postures, physiology, tone, gestures, beliefs and values. What’s more, modelling is a method for researching best practice, as we shall see in Chapter 12.
Catching a coach at work

The skills an NLP coach uses

In this chapter I aim to succinctly describe the skills that NLP coaches use. To start, there are a few points to bear in mind as you read this.

First, various coaches emphasize different skills and they also structure their coaching programmes differently from one another. You will see more on this in Chapter 3.

Second, NLP books like the one you are reading now are obviously limited to verbal representations and ideally you would also see, hear and experience the multitude of interlocking NLP patterns an expert coach uses. Bostic and Grinder have suggested that, ideally, a video library would make all the NLP patterns available. In the meantime, good descriptions of the sensory and body changes that occur during coaching with NLP are offered by O’Connor and Lages, McLeod, and Hall and Duval.

Third, ‘chunking’ in NLP refers to the size or scope of whatever we are dealing with: a goal, task and a methodology. Chunks can be small (details, parts) or big (general, whole). For example, in order to usefully address the questions I posed in the Introduction I need to chunk appropriately: I need to give enough detail (but not too much) and give an overview of the worlds of NLP and coaching (but not get too abstract or general). That is my intention in this chapter too.

Fourth, bear in mind too, as you go through the next few pages, that an NLP pattern is a complex skill; in fact, it is a set of skills. For example, sensory acuity requires prior skilling in distinguishing representation systems, language predicates and eye accessing cues. The best coaches use NLP patterns flexibly, seamlessly and often simultaneously according to information the client is presenting verbally and non-verbally at any one moment. That is the grace, confidence, elegance and unconscious competence
that you experience when expert coaches such as Angus McLeod or Michelle Duval are coaching.

The complex skills an NLP coach uses are also called *models, strategies, patterns, processes, tools or techniques*, and the coach does the following:

**Creates rapport**

Knowing that the client’s language reflects their internal representation of their experience, the coach listens, notices and matches that language, as well as *matching and mirroring* the client’s posture, breathing, gestures, voice tone and tempo, eye blinking and more. The more skilfully the coach establishes rapport at the sensory level, the more they can influence and lead the client towards the changes they want.

Rapport is the unconscious sharing of patterns of thinking, feeling and speaking. The reason it is vital in all coaching methodologies is that when people are in rapport they respond more easily to each other. In fact, one definition of NLP is ‘Getting rapport and joining their model of the world as a prelude to helping them find new choices in behavior’.4

**Stays in rapport while using sensory acuity to model the client’s internal representation of experience**

With well-practised *sensory acuity* the coach hears, sees and feels small reactions in the client as the latter communicates about their issues. *Calibration* is the term for using sensory acuity in attending to specific shifts in a client’s *external state* (the voice tone, posture, gestures, skin colour, muscle tension etc) that indicate changes are occurring in the client’s *internal state*.

With calibration, the coach also notices *patterns* in the client’s thinking, emoting, speaking and behaving. This is based on the NLP understanding that all internal processing (thinking, remembering, imagining, emoting) uses *sequences of representations* of our senses.

NLP coaches help clients become aware of how they internally represent and experience the outside world. The coach feeds back to the client shifts they notice in the client’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour; the coach notices shifts in the client’s external state and does not consciously edit or evaluate. This is what is meant by *modelling the structure of the client’s experience* of, say, anger, frustration or lack of confidence or motivation. To do this well the NLP coach puts themself in a *know-nothing state*, giving the client ‘exquisite attention’.5

The coach calibrates and models how people think and prefer to communicate. (With the same skill, managers can build rapport so that people get on with others, build business relations and take actions that
increase the front-line behaviours they want and decrease those they don’t want.) During this process the coach is also using the *precision questions* that start the change process.

**Uses precision questions**

Since language transforms our primary experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, and creates new mental maps, language skills are crucial in NLP coaching. The NLP model of precision questioning, *the Meta Model*, is based on Bandler and Grinder’s modelling of the language of expert therapists that challenges and clarifies deletions, distortions and generalizations in the clients’ verbal representation of their experience. This reconnects the client with their deeper, unconscious experience. For example, one of 12 linguistic patterns addressed is called *nominalization*, as in ‘I have a poor *relationship* with my boss.’ Questions of how, when and where lead the client to become more aware of – and to loosen – their unconscious mental map of what happens between them and the boss. ‘In what way, specifically? What is he doing that makes you feel…? How are you responding, specifically?’ *Denominalizing* is a key technique for getting clients unstuck.

Using Meta-model questions, coaches enable clients to see and choose how they speak, think, feel and act.

The manager who couldn’t decide whether to stay or leave quickly realised that her crisis was not so much about finding work that is more suitable as it was about confronting her fears. With Meta-model questioning the coach helped her identify her strategy for ‘going round and round in circles’, unpack the ‘fear’ and ‘frustration’ and clarify what makes her ‘happy’. She started to see that her beliefs were neither true nor logical but that she had allowed them to direct how she felt and acted. After this *deframing* the coach prompted the client in *reframing*: what she ‘fears’ is not actually dangerous; it’s something she dislikes (and can gain skills to handle); it is nervousness (which can generate energy and focus); accepting distressful feelings as a signal that she needed to move out of her comfort zone.

Precision questioning is used throughout the coaching session and especially when assisting clients to specify their goals using sensory-based language and to identify whatever it is that is holding them back. Such questioning assists managers and team members to cut through fuzzy thinking and get clarity about their goals, roles, intentions, agenda, strategy and performance.
Precision questioning is useful in helping teams set clear and specific outcomes and enables them to be more precise in the way they talk and think. It is also used to challenge and change limiting beliefs, leading the client to gain insight, expand their perceptions and respond more resourcefully.\\footnote{8}

Manager-coaches use precision interviewing for recruitment, performance management and needs analysis; managers, interviewers and coaches get high-quality information by questioning in a precise, systematic way.\\footnote{9}

**Focuses on process not content**

NLP coaches help clients access, amplify and change their internal representations, language and physiology in order to change behaviours; they do this by modelling the way clients internally represent their experience and construct meanings by using words as symbols (language) that get embodied and create feeling states and meta-programs which in turn induce reactions, actions, more thoughts and meanings.\\footnote{10}

It follows from the NLP principle of recognizing patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that the coach focuses on the client’s mental process rather than the content of their story. According to Bustic and Grinder, this is ‘the single most distinctive characteristic of NLP application’.\\footnote{11} It is also central to the coach’s responsibility to not impose their own perceptions, beliefs and values on the client.\\footnote{12}

NLP provides a way to look past the behavioural content of what people do to the more invisible forces behind those behaviours; to the structures of thought that allow people to perform effectively.\\footnote{13}

**Works to modify qualities (submodalities) of the client’s representational systems**

Can you see that clients’ internal representations of experience are the leverage point in NLP change work? Another way of putting this is that by working with the quality and sequence of the clients’ internal representations
the coach helps the client refine, expand and become more flexible in their thinking and their (previously unconscious) mental strategies for decision making, getting motivated, learning and so on.

Angus McLeod asked his client: ‘So the voice that’s saying “you’re failing” – does that voice belong to someone?’ When the client identified whose voice it was, Angus asks a question to see if the client ‘can flex the submodalities’ of his experience: ‘So, that voice which you hear behind your right shoulder, is saying, “You are failing”… Can you move that voice and change it? Can you make it small or muffled? Can you make it go far away?’

A client of mine talked about seeing her situation in black and white, so I asked her if she could put some colour into the picture she had of her future. I invited her to visualize herself working with books and writing creatively, creating in her mind a whole multimedia presentation – like a video with colour, sound and movement – that she found exciting and motivating. And she started to imagine doing things that until now she had believed could never happen: she considered how she will look and sound working in a bookshop, how she will talk to colleagues and clients and, most important, how she will feel as she efficiently and enjoyably carries out her role. This way she literally started to experience more options than she had previously allowed herself to consider.

Ddetects patterns or ‘strategies’

In addition to the sensory modalities and language modalities (of ideas, understandings, beliefs, values and decisions) and their qualities (‘submodalities’), NLP also identifies and distinguishes their syntax. This refers to the order and sequencing of qualities that create experience. The sequence of internal representations that leads to an outcome is called a strategy.

If you watch and listen to an expert coach it is immediately apparent that strategic and skilful questioning – based on in-the-moment mapping or modelling of how the client constructs their own experience – is central.

Bruce Grimley had a client who ‘goes to pieces’ whenever he has to present to the board of directors. After creating rapport by matching and mirroring his client’s posture, language, meta-programs and language,
Bruce obtained the client’s *well-formed outcomes* (see below). He then got the client to notice the differences between how the client presents now to the Board and how he would ideally like to present. Among the various tools Bruce could use to help his client gain flexibility in moving from present state to desired state, he chose to ask his client to *act as if* he was already presenting to the Board the way he wanted – standing, speaking, looking, sounding, feeling exactly the way he wants to.17

You will recall the client (in Chapter 1) who needed ‘a strategy to keep momentum’, unlike his past pattern of getting bored and depressed. First, he used the *self-edit* technique: he wrote a new script: ‘I know I can do better, that’s great, mate; stay cool and relax’ which he practised (voice tone, pitch, posture etc). He also practised responding differently to people who he perceived were putting him down; he asked them questions, told them what he feels, *reframed* their criticism into ‘feedback’. The coach helped him design a new *motivational strategy* for his career and money management goals, to replace the old strategy that often only produced ‘procrastination’ or ‘depression’. The coach utilized the client’s enjoyment of karate: the fun, challenge and good feeling he associated with attaining each successive karate belt and the new beliefs that he had taken on board. This was the client’s *new motivational strategy*: he noticed the feeling of enjoyment (as experienced when he did karate) and then saw the outcome. At that point he said to himself encouragingly ‘I can achieve this, I can only do my best and that’s OK.’ After taking those steps the client felt ready to act.

The coach attends to how the client is processing their experience, by observing their physiology and listening to their language and voice qualities. The coach can identify the intricate loops where the client gets ‘stuck’ in a set of mental procedures that have no satisfactory outcome. In NLP there is even a unique strategy notation for the sequence or code of the client’s internal and external visualizing, speaking, emoting and hearing.18

A marketing manager felt overwhelmed by her options. ‘I’m feeling anxious again. How will I stay focused? I flit from one idea to another, I can’t stick to a plan.’ To help her stay focused she started by recalling a time when she actually did feel really focused, when she was an athlete in the school ‘A’ team. She had trained regularly, loved it and done well. She pictured herself training, and noticed the feeling, the buzz it gave her. She saw herself fleet-footed and fast, and heard the shouts of support. She recalled the feeling of elation when it was over and people congratulated her. She then came up with a short phrase that she associated with that feeling, the words ‘stay on target’. She practised saying those words
at the very moment she felt most elated and in future will say them to herself whenever she wants her mind to stop flitting from one thing to another.19 Dilts calls this the *mapping across* of resources from one context to another.20

When someone is not enjoying their work and feeling anxious, acting with anger or any other unwanted emotion, the starting point for change is modelling or ‘unpacking’ their strategy for doing that. The coach gets the client to notice the trigger for unwanted behaviour; they notice, too, the feeling, any internal voice and other internal representations that had maintained the old pattern or habit and then they design a new pattern of thinking, speaking, hearing, seeing, feeling and acting that serves the client better.

**Works with neurophysiological or neurolinguistic states**

An NLP coach understands how we all create and change emotional states through unconscious conditioning processes. From an NLP point of view ‘states of mind’ means all the thoughts, emotions and physiology we express at a given moment.21 The term *neurophysiological* state is used by some researchers22 while others refer to *neurolinguistic*23 or *psychophysiological*.24

Anchoring is a natural neurophysiological process where any sensory element of an experience can recreate an entire experience. For example, the smell of a cigar anywhere might evoke the picture, sounds and feelings of family gatherings where one’s grandfather used to smoke cigars.

Replacing unwanted emotions with more useful, positive ones (called *resource states*) is a major part of NLP change work.

The client who wanted to work in a bookshop didn’t yet feel bold, so she learnt the *acting as if* technique. First, she gave herself permission to pretend to be bold, knowing that this process is about instructing your mind–body about what ‘boldness’ looks, feels and sounds like. Then, in her imagination, she stepped into the experience of boldness and noticed what she heard, felt and said to herself. She asked herself what someone else would see and hear as they look at her acting boldly. Next, she evaluated this new experience of boldness in terms of its usefulness; for example, how will it empower her in her job search? Then she imagined herself thinking, feeling and acting boldly in the future, in real situations. And she gave herself permission to keep trying this boldness on until it becomes a natural and comfortable behaviour on her part.
In eliciting mind–body–emotion states the coach facilitates the client to notice and respond differently to the triggers associated with an unwanted or ‘problem’ state. Anchoring a more resourceful state involves the client’s memory and imagination; when the client is fully associated into the desired state the coach guides them through a process of associating that positive or resourceful state with an anchor of their choosing. Anchors can be a particular spatial location, movement, touch or picture in the mind’s eye or a sound.

To lead people, it helps to be able to give them the mind–body states or resourcefulness they need to solve the problems before them. To improve their own creativity and productivity a coach/manager anchors states such as confidence, enthusiasm, commitment, and motivation. Working with clients to change and manage emotional states also involves changing breathing and physiology.25

**Future pacing** is the anchoring of changes made in the coaching session so the client will respond in the future the way they want. The coach guides the client through rehearsing and reinforcing the new mind–body–emotion mapping.

A manager who found himself out of work and was having difficulty finding a job felt very anxious at the thought of no longer earning the sort of money he believed he needed as a family man. He felt this anxiety in his stomach and legs when he thought about going for interviews. To deal with that anxiety he used an anchoring technique, one that enabled him to recapture the security and calm that he used to feel when he played cricket. He used the image of the pitch, the wide green space and the smell of linseed oil on the bat as triggers for the positive feeling he needed as he went about his job search.26

**Works with client’s representation of time**

The metaphor of ‘timelines’ relates to the way people mentally organize events in their past, present and future. The coach elicits the client’s coding of an experience – in terms of the precise qualities of the images, sounds and sensations – and can use a variety of techniques to change that coding. For example, hypnotic language enables the client to go back to the time in their
memory storage where they first experienced the problem and changes the way they recall that memory. Viewing the original event from a new time perspective allows the unconscious mind to let go of unwanted feelings; the coach then assists the client to access positive emotional resources from another experience in their life. Timeline techniques are used to improve focus, goal setting, decision making, planning and time management.

Imagine modelling how Barack Obama can so effectively ‘reckon with the past, live with the past in the present and move towards the future’. The coach would ask, ‘how exactly does he do that?’ What thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values, past decisions and specific internal representations enable him to act this way? And the NLP coach might offer to transfer this time strategy to a client who wants to have a better relationship with their past, present or future.

**Encourages different perceptual positions**

From modelling Fritz Perls’s gestalt therapy NLP developers got the idea of having the client experience their situation from different mental positions: first position is the client’s experience of the world through their own senses (seeing through their own eyes, with their own language, state, physiology, values, beliefs and interests); second position is where the client takes on the other’s perspective along with their language, physiology, values, beliefs and interests; third, the client adopts the viewpoint of a detached observer. These perceptual positions allow the client to get in touch with their own authentic self, to change their map of the world by stepping into the shoes of others, and to step back to describe their relationships with others in specific and non-judgemental terms. The detached (dissociated) third position is useful, for example, when clients have a time management issue and need to look at how they experience and talk to themselves about time.

Bruce Grimley had a client who had been laid off and was feeling angry, in a rut. Once the client’s first outcome of managing anger was articulated, Bruce asked him to adopt various perceptual positions from which to experience his behaviour. Different spaces in the room were used to associate him with different areas of his life so he could appreciate the effects of his anger in those different areas. And with the client who ‘went to pieces’ before presentations Bruce used various perceptual positions to address the client’s unconscious positive intentions behind that unwanted response.
A fourth perceptual position is the view of the whole system the client is in and on which their behaviour and goals may impact. In the case of an employee, for example, their system may include the organization they work for, their team and their family.31

Communicates with the client’s unconscious mind

The NLP coach recognizes that most communication and change take place at the unconscious level (everything that is outside conscious awareness at that point in time). This happens in everyday communications at work and in personal lives as well as in coaching encounters. So NLP coaches use language not only for greater clarity (Meta-model language) but also to induce more resourceful or desired states in which learning and changing occur. The latter is achieved by using hypnotic language patterns modelled by Bandler and Grinder32 on the work of Milton Erickson and known as Milton-model language.

With Milton-model language the coach uses artfully vague language that can match the client’s model of the world, distract and overload their conscious mind through linguistic ambiguity and enable access to their unconscious mind and its resourcefulness. Artfully vague or hypnotic language is also used to interrupt old, unwanted feelings or patterns that came up during the coaching sessions.

Using language for change means using language to access internal representations and meanings, to facilitate changes in those internal representations and thereby changes in external states and behaviours. Thus
both Meta-model and Milton-model language enhance the communication between clients’ conscious and unconscious minds.

NLP coaches differ in how much they work directly with the client’s unconscious or ‘under the radar’. Bandler and Grinder said, ‘[We are] not saying don’t use verbal conscious feedback, but understand that when you ask for that, you are tapping into the least informative part of the person: their conscious mind.’ Other coaches and trainers talk of balancing work with the conscious and unconscious minds; Michael Hall talks of partnership and collaboration of unconscious and conscious processes. Jules and Chris Collingwood point out that knowing when and how to engage the unconscious mind (or intuition) is an essential skill for solution generation. NLP manager-coaches can discover the unconscious patterns that make these people more able to excel.

**Frames and reframes**

The coach assists clients to reframe limiting beliefs by giving a different meaning to an event, word or experience. This expands the client’s thinking and feeling or, in NLP terms, mobilizes the clients’ inner resourcefulness. Reframing can be done explicitly or covertly (‘under the radar’) with stories or metaphors that bypass the client’s conscious mind and engage the client’s unconscious mind.

A poster in the career coach’s office depicts a yacht on the harbour competing in rough conditions. The caption says, ‘When we are on the high seas we cannot direct the wind but we can adjust the sails.’

Conversational reframing is about skilful use of words to change minds (thoughts, beliefs, understandings and mental maps).

The marketing manager who felt trapped and feared making the wrong career decision benefited from some challenging questions. Had she learnt anything from previous jobs about what she now wanted and didn’t want? ‘Yes, definitely.’ Can you now think of those previous jobs as valuable experience, rather than ‘mistakes’? ‘Yes.’ Does she really have to choose one type of work and one only for the rest of her life? ‘No, I suppose it’s common nowadays for people to move jobs and change careers.’ What’s the worst thing that can happen if she decided to change jobs again? ‘Very little, other than inconvenience, because I will have gained
more marketable experience and achievements.’ Had she considered that employers often look for experience and achievements rather than for a continuous and stable employment record? ‘Well, I didn’t know that until now, but it makes sense.’ And she found that using the word ‘feedback’ was more useful than focusing on ‘failure’.

Separating a person’s intention and their behaviour is a reframe and is a key NLP practice.

**Changes beliefs**

Our beliefs are what we take as being true at any moment. They are based on the generalizations or mappings we make, repeat and reinforce over time about why things happen, what other peoples’ verbal and non-verbal behaviours mean, our identity and so on.

The NLP coach understands that limiting or unresourceful frames of mind are behind most problems that can’t be resolved by making changes to the environment or capabilities of the client. So they use various belief change patterns derived, like all the patterns or skills, from NLP modelling. These include encouraging the client to explore the use of different representational systems, as we saw in the earlier example of a client making a colourful movie with a soundtrack of what it will be like to reach her goal rather than seeing it in black and white and having a heavy feeling about it.

The IT manager was fed up with feeling unworthy. First, she identified a belief she wished she didn’t have; one that was not serving her well, namely, ‘that I’m not good enough, not worthy’. That was her limiting belief and she described what it felt like. ‘It’s in my stomach – cold, solid and hard like a rock.’ And what did it look like? ‘Black, big, solid.’ Did she hear something or say something to herself as she felt that cold, solid sensation? ‘Yes, there’s this internal voice of unremitting self-criticism.’ Could she now think of a belief she used to have but that is no longer true for her or about which she now feels doubtful? ‘I used to think I can’t change but I now know I can.’ She noticed how the feel, look and sound of this belief that she now doubted differed from the feel, look and sound of the limiting belief. Then she gave her limiting belief the feel, look and sound of the one she doubted. She repeated those steps twice, each time switching her limiting belief into doubt and doing so faster and faster. She then thought of a new and empowering belief (‘I am successful’) to replace the limiting one that she had effectively just neutralised. She
then came up with a belief that she already has that is positive, true and empowering (‘I am smart’) and gave the new belief the feel, look and sound of the positive and empowering one she already had. As she did this, with her eyes closed, a smile came over her face and her shoulders relaxed.

Anything that changes the pattern or sequence of events a person goes through internally – in responding to either internal or external stimuli – will make the response they are stuck in no longer possible.36

**Works with client’s perceptual filters**

*Meta-programmes* determine what people pay attention to and how they respond. They are the frames of mind that have become the lenses of perception through which people notice and filter the world and their experience of it.37 For example, people respond reactively or proactively; they think globally and specifically; they may see the big picture or tend to be more into detail. Since the discovery of meta-programmes,38 Hall and Bodenhamer39 have identified over 60 such filters. Together with *Meta-model questioning*, the coach models or profiles these perceptual and emotional filters.

Coach trainees Kate and Dan, whom I introduced earlier, differ in many ways. Kate tends to be more motivated by moving away from confrontation and lack of income whereas Dan is more motivated by possibilities, challenge, competence. She learns experientially whereas Dan learns more from researching and reading. Kate prefers extroversion and she tends to think as she talks whereas Dan is more reflective and thinks before he talks. She filters for similarities and relationship implications, whereas Dan is an ideas person, independent in the way he thinks and works. Kate makes decisions based more on her feelings and values than on logic, is a team player and usually focuses on the big picture whereas Dan sees the detail as well as the big picture and is a bit of a perfectionist.

The meta-programmes framework assists coaches to align different personalities and find solutions to conflicts arising from those differences.40
Identifies level/s of change needed

The Neurological Levels model was developed by Robert Dilts in the 1980s after he became interested in levels of learning and changing from studying with Gregory Bateson.\(^{41}\)

Gregory Bateson’s *levels of learning* provide an important road map for coaches and awakeners to help clients to travel the path from incremental improvement to revolutionary change by getting progressively further out of the box of current thinking patterns and behaviours.\(^{42}\)

Dilts proposed an internal hierarchy of information that is progressively more encompassing and impactful. The first is about *environment*, then *behaviour*, followed by *capability, beliefs, values* and *identity*. The coach helps the client make changes at one specific level or supports change on all of these levels. Figure 2.2 shows the levels of change addressed by a career coach.

![Figure 2.2 Levels of change in career development](image)

Michael Hall modelled how Dilts coached a client on becoming more aligned and resourceful:
Dilts started at the level of behaviour and with his questions moved the client up the levels. As he did, the questions and suggestions coached the client to attach more and more meaning to the original behaviour. Specifically, the coaching conversation invited the client to access higher supportive frames that would enrich the behavioural performance. After the coach took the client up the levels from behaviour to beliefs, values, identity and mission, the client was then coached by various inductions to fully experience those states. The questions then invited the client to bring the highest resources back down, connecting the highest visions and meanings with the most immediate behaviours.43

The Levels of Change model is used by coaches to help clients identify where the ‘problem’ is and what needs to be changed. Similarly it is used to effect change in teams and organizations.

Sue Knight coaches leaders who want to build trust, resolve conflicts and negotiate win–win solutions. She uses the NLP skills of getting into a state of congruence (alignment of purpose, identity, values, beliefs, capabilities, behaviours and environment), building rapport, identifying and pacing others’ values, adopting different perceptual positions, giving and receiving feedback and more.44

Using the Levels of Change (or Neurological Levels) model together with NLP language and state change tools, coaching becomes more developmental or transformative than simply changing behaviours or performance (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Performance and developmental coaching45

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance coaching</th>
<th>Developmental coaching</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modifies behaviours, learning of new skills</td>
<td>Modifies beliefs and feelings about self, identity, purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on external behaviours</td>
<td>Focus on internal representations and frames of mind that affect behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumes linear change</td>
<td>Assumes systemic change: a change in one part of the system reverberates throughout</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guides client to set ‘well-formed’ outcomes

Using the skills of rapport, calibration, perceptual positioning, sensory acuity, meta-model questioning and anchoring, the coach gets the client to specify their outcome in sensory terms and in a way that motivates them. A well-formed outcome is not only compelling but also measurable and thus verifiable.

What do you want to do? By when? (Self-initiated and active)
What do you want that for? (Recognising what’s important about that outcome)
What will getting that outcome do for you? (Positive intention)
How will you know that you have attained that outcome? How does it look, sound and feel, specifically? (Sensory-specific)

The well-formed outcomes pattern engages the client’s positive emotional state, physiology and active voice (language and thoughts). It also engages their unconscious processes and has them experience the outcome from several perceptual positions in order to check that achieving the outcome is ecological for self and others. The coach gets the client to check for unintended consequences of having the outcomes and motivates the client by asking, ‘What if you don’t get this?’ Then the act as if pattern enables the client to imagine the outcome already achieved and to be motivated by experiencing the outcome state (which can then be anchored). A client’s visual, auditory and kinaesthetic representational systems, as well as language, are engaged when they actually write out their goals.

Sue Knight gives the example of a team-building exercise to set positive and specific outcomes. After doing exercises to strengthen rapport, such as changing perceptual positions, the participants individually and collectively imagined outcomes for the business. They imagined what they would see, hear, physically feel, smell, taste and emotionally experience in relation to their roles, the business culture, the premises and their success.  

In organizational planning and project management it is useful to address not only the outcome but also the intentions and likely consequences.
Combines many ways to install new mental strategies

The coach works with the client’s unconscious mind using skills such as anchoring, metaphors, parables, reframing and acting ‘as if’. You will find that each book on how to coach with NLP emphasizes and offers a slightly different set of NLP skills. For example, one highlights Meta-model language, strategy analysis and exploration of the quality and sequencing of internal representations as three ways to change a client’s reality. Another believes the most useful strategy for achieving results is to find a role model, someone who’s already getting the results you want and then tap into their knowledge. Learn what they are doing, what their core beliefs are, how they think, feel and motivate themselves. In Chapter 4 there are more examples of the different ways coaches present their offerings.

Career coaches have modelled the successful job-search strategies of people who have found the jobs they wanted and encourage their clients to learn and practise them. In organizations NLP coaches assist managers and teams model the successful sales, marketing and customer-service strategies (including beliefs, attitudes, capabilities, behaviours, environments) of other companies in order to make the desired changes and achieve their business outcomes.

Gives sensory-based feedback

In all coaching modalities the giving of non-judgemental feedback is crucial for clients’ learning and changing. The distinctive feature of the feedback given by an NLP coach is that it is offered in clean, sensory-specific terms of what the coach is seeing, hearing and feeling rather than judgements or evaluations (eg ‘that wasn’t good’).

Michelle Duval, coaching a client on presenting to the team, only pointed out what she saw and heard regarding what the client was actually doing. She specifically mirrored back to the client the actions and behaviours that interfered with her best performance. ‘Megan, I saw you looking down at your notes for 90 per cent of the presentation; I noticed your hand was sweating; you spoke so fast I missed some specific words you used.’ The client immediately identified the key elements and easily changed her voice tone, hand movements and was able to make eye contact with her audience.
**Tasks the client**

As in other solution-focused coaching methodologies, the NLP coach gives the client tasks to complete between sessions that reinforce the changes made, transfer the learning to additional areas of their life, put them in charge of generating solutions and moving towards their goals while developing new skills and awareness. In NLP coaching the key is that the tasking is very specific and sensory-based. It utilizes the client’s unique motivation strategy and enhances self-sustaining motivation; that includes using language that matches the client’s and induces resourceful states.

**Thinks systemically**

Derived largely from the work of Bateson, ‘the world-view of NLP is fundamentally one of cybernetic, ecological systems. Bateson’s model of “mind” is holistic and relational, in that it is concerned with the whole body–mind system and includes conscious as well as unconscious functioning; the mind is not located in the brain’.

Judith DeLozier was, with John Grinder, a developer of the ‘New Code’ of NLP in the late 1980s that has now been absorbed into most NLP training. Drawing on Bateson’s work in systems theory, New Code NLP focused more than Classic NLP did on the interactions and relationships among elements in the system: states, consciousness/unconsciousness, attention, perceptual

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**Figure 2.3** The mind, body and emotion system
positions, multiple descriptions of the world, perceptual positions and perceptual filters.\textsuperscript{53}

In practice, this means understanding that the client’s inner world of representations, thoughts, beliefs, interests and feelings form a system where changing one element can generate other changes and that the system operates with feedback or learning loops. The coach’s skill is in knowing what part of the system to tap into in order to start the desired change.\textsuperscript{54} This skill is very well conveyed in published case studies of O’Connor and Lages and Grimley.\textsuperscript{55}

**Utilizes client’s physiology**

Just as the NLP coach recognizes the client’s physiological cues (posture, breathing, skin colour, gestures and so on), they use many techniques that involve the client changing posture, spatial location and/or emotional state. In particular, changing location can be used to contextually reframe an experience and to anchor new, more resourceful states.

As with each and every skill described in this chapter, changing physiology is about promoting flexibility in clients’ thinking, feeling, speaking and behaving.

**Manages own mind/body/emotion state and intentions**

The coach has both the intention and ability to access their own resourceful coaching state. This means non-evaluative client focus or ‘exquisite attention’. In doing so they are utilizing the skills of anchoring and well-formed outcomes on themselves. Tracking is a term also used to talk about how a coach pays attention to the client’s train of thoughts, beliefs, values and metaphors expressed during the coaching conversation. That leads me to address, in the next chapter, what is meant by the ‘magic’ of NLP.
The ‘magic’ of NLP

The word ‘magic’ in relation to NLP – often used by developers of NLP as well as by popular writers – is metaphorical, suggesting not only its powerful effects but also the elusiveness of how it works and the apparent simplicity of its methods.¹

Yet NLP always had a structure, presented formally by Bandler and Grinder, so that the subtle differences in behaviour that NLP captures can be learnt by others.²

Richard Bolstad, a New Zealand-based writer, trainer and coach who is widely respected among his NLP colleagues, explains how the ‘magical experience’ of NLP has also been attributed to:

- the effect of its linguistic structures on feelings and behaviour
- the belief that it gets positive results
- the reframing of challenges as opportunities
- putting the client in charge of making changes.³

Primarily, Bolstad believes, the ‘magic’ is in understanding and using the linguistic structures unique to NLP.

Invisible glue

‘NLP is not magic, it is merely an awareness of what makes the difference that is so often missing in more traditional models and techniques.’⁴

That awareness is achieved through the skill of calibration. Peter Thompson sees NLP as a jigsaw of key skill sets with calibration at the centre (Figure
3.1). He says ‘You are not doing NLP coaching until you apply the principles of NLP affecting a well-formed outcome for which you need rapport, Meta-Model and Milton-model languaging, anchoring and you need to be able to do all at once; there is no NLP coaching without good calibration of state and behaviour.’

**Figure 3.1** The NLP jigsaw

### Five faces of organizational coaching

Being process-driven, an NLP coach can work with any client anywhere to get them from present state or situation to desired state or outcome. In 17 years of working as a career coach, I have not seen or heard the same issue twice and each coaching solution is unique. For example, many clients want to address their lack of confidence but each person’s experience of ‘lack of confidence’ is different. So the work of an NLP coach is endlessly varied and challenging.

Managers and trainee coaches like Dan find that through examples they get a good grasp of how NLP coaching is useful for employees, organizations and businesses. So in this chapter I bring examples and insights from several organizational coaches. Bear in mind, when listening to these accounts of
NLP practice in organizational and human resource development, that they are accounts from practitioners themselves rather than independent or critical analyses. That said, they serve the useful purpose of illustrating how and where NLP is used in organizational coaching.

It is useful to begin with an overview of the five categories of coaching – in addition to self-coaching – in which many coach trainers skill their trainee coaches: career and personal coaching, executive coaching, internal coaching, team/corporate coaching, and business coaching.

**Career and personal coaching** focuses on the individual’s career performance and goals, motivation and meaning making, relationships, health and work–life balance. Often this is done explicitly to align individuals with the goals of the organization.

**Executive coaching** in business, government, not-for-profit and educational organizations involves an external coach and focuses on the individual executive within the organization, working on issues of leadership, management, vision and mission, grooming for senior management and CEO roles. It may include developmental coaching, performance coaching and coaching for skill enhancement in areas such as presentation skills, negotiation or career development.

**Internal coaching** is often related to the human resources function and is about adding coaching as a modality for managers in communicating, improving work relationships, giving feedback, evaluating performance, developing and shaping performance and bringing out the best in others as a leader and manager within the organization. So NLP coaches not only act as external executive and career coaches but also often as trainers of managers and internal coaches.

**Group, team or corporate coaching** is for enhancing group dynamics, interpersonal relationships, team morale and performance, motivation, buy-in, responsibility, contribution and productivity. It includes team building, consensus building, understanding, implementing company values, and the visioning of future goals.

**Business coaching** focuses on assisting a business to operate more effectively and efficiently. Here the coaching may relate to marketing, positioning, visioning, financial management, people management, skill enhancement, interpersonal skills, time management, problem solving, creativity, productivity, dealing with difficult people, stress management, customer service and so on.
Let’s recap a difference that NLP coaching addresses: performance coaching is about motivating clients to take action in relation to a skill or environment issue, and gives feedback and notices – even celebrates – the result; developmental coaching is about enabling the client to reflect and change the thinking, beliefs, values and identity that stopped them getting the outcomes they wanted.

Another distinction, from UK coach trainer John Seymour, is between freestyle and structured corporate coaching:

Freestyle coaching often occurs when the coachee is spending their personal training budget... This still contains the technologies and structured approach that we deliver in coaching; however, the subject or content are led solely by the coachee. The structured coaching is delivered in exactly the same way; however, here the client will be the organisation, and may, with the agreement of the coachee, set an agenda or outcome for the coaching.9

And there is, of course, privately paid retail coaching, often with a focus on health, career and relationship issues. Here NLP coaches use the same guiding framework: identifying the present situation and state, using a range of skills to identify resources and resourcefulness that lead the client to their desired outcome and state (review Figure 1.1).

Coaching issues

Developing an effective team

NLP-based coaching tools are used to develop the flexible thinking and openness – to challenges and to new ideas – that underpin change within a team.10 These include matching and mismatching individual and team values in order to understand conflicts; using perceptual positions in order to learn and resolve conflicts and unwanted situations; using the Logical Levels model to understand the purpose and values in affecting changes in behaviour.

Building a team means reframing responsibility as something that can’t be given, it can only be taken; using questions, belief change and timelines to enhance performance; using precision questions to understand conflict and elicit team members’ needs; utilizing team members’ chunking preferences to better respond to their needs and motivate them.
Do you recall the example in Chapter 2 of Michelle Duval giving feedback in sensory or behavioural terms? All NLP coaches give feedback regularly and reframe it as learning. Listen to Michelle again:

NLP is useful for facilitating a team, business unit or entire company to identify and define their culture. The NLP coach models, through questioning and observation, the team’s core values (eg fun, focus, innovation, integrity), unique language (original words or phrases), the meaning of this language, driving beliefs (eg working long hours demonstrates commitment) business and people management philosophies and shared rituals (eg Friday-night drinks) that create and sustain the unique culture. We facilitate values alignment at many levels in a company: between board members, business partners, CEOs, managers, executive committee, front-line staff and customers, as well as across the entire organization. First we facilitate individuals to identify their personal work values. Second, we identify the core values of the team they are part of. Third, we facilitate the alignment of the values of board and investors, executive and management, front-line staff and customers. Ultimately a set of organizational values is identified. Finally we support each team to identify specific behaviours that represent each value for each role in the business. Values and behaviours are integrated across HR, advertising, recruitment, induction, performance appraisal, training, reward and recognition.

Developing managers and leaders

NLP coaches see the value of process-oriented coaching conversations when working with executives and organizations; they address issues of culture, values and meta-programmes, often in challenging or ‘fierce’ conversations. As Michelle says:

Using performance coaching, an NLP coach facilitates a leader to denominalize the abstract thing called ‘leadership’ into specific behaviours, skills and competencies. The coach will ask a leader to scale their level of competency in each skill, often using feedback from an internal sponsor in the organization who works with the leader or using 360-degree feedback. A performance coaching programme will assist the leader to incrementally develop their skill capacity where needed. Using developmental coaching,
the coach facilitates a leader to identify their personal values, beliefs and self-identity about leading themselves and others. They challenge the leader to step back from their thinking and feeling to reflect and analyse whom, what and how these frames are serving, including whether they ultimately serve the team’s highest purpose and outcomes. A key aspect of developing a leader is in optimizing their mental and emotional wellbeing for superior performance or what they may call work–life balance. Here we work with identifying driving meta-programmes that create internal stress, such as all-or-nothing thinking, referencing others rather than also referencing oneself, sorting for external authority, perfectionist thinking and sorting only for difference or sameness.

Dealing with communication issues

NLP skills enable resolution of communication problems and enhancement of team/organizational effectiveness. NLP coaches focus on the clarity of communication among colleagues and teams by knowing how to build and stay in rapport, posing precise questions and using artfully vague language including metaphors and stories to enable people to go inside themselves to access and experience new learning and resources.

Improving business outcomes

The same NLP skills – rapport, perceptual positions, belief change, well-formed outcomes, distinguishing the level/s of change required, anchoring, metaphor, precision questioning, hypnotic languaging – are used when coaching teams or organizations.

When coaching with NLP, modelling unconscious competence assists the achievement of organizational goals by improving customer support, negotiation, marketing and selling. With NLP modelling the coach elicits and then transfers context-specific patterns of excellence. As Sue Knight says, ‘the joy is that you can refine the model by testing which elements add to excellence and which detract or make no difference’. She talks of using NLP modelling as a research tool to explore and understand what’s not working and to reproduce known patterns of excellence in a business, in terms of having a coherent mission, shared values, empowering beliefs, behaviours and capabilities and environments that support the individual, team and organizational goals.¹²

Knowing about anchoring enables coaches to assist individuals, teams or entire organizations to override unuseful anchors and take on useful ones. As Michelle points out, teams or organizations can use key words repetitively in their communication over and over to anchor them and that way shape the
culture. Conversely, they can identify the aspects they don’t like and avoid utilizing those things that breed more of that culture. An organization or team can collapse unwanted anchors and create new anchors.

**Performance appraisal**

Can you imagine how different performance appraisals would be if managers were measured by the state in which they left their staff at the end of the discussion?¹³

Sue Knight was working with an employee who was frustrated at not getting the leadership roles he wanted. The trouble was, when he was given opportunities to lead he had problems in relating to some key people. As Sue says, there are many such cases where a company either offers performance feedback, some training or simply lets the unsuccessful employee go. She started by discovering (modelling) the patterns of thinking and behaving, identifying the strategies that got him the results he did not want when he was leading a team. She then guided him in identifying the beliefs, states and behaviours he had somewhere in his past experience and led him in reliving, anchoring and applying those resources to his team leadership role. Key tools she used were precision questions to discover or model client’s current strategy/pattern, finding resources, anchoring, perceptual positions, Dilts’s levels of change and giving sensory-specific feedback.¹⁴

**Dealing with diversity**

Andrew Bryant is a Singapore-based leadership coach.¹⁵ I asked him whether and how NLP assists in developing leaders and teams in South East Asian and culturally diverse contexts compared with Anglo-Saxon and English-speaking Australian organizations.

Understanding NLP has allowed me to coach Asians, Australians, Indians and Europeans in local and multinational companies. I have found that coaching works best when you understand the cultural frames of mind that drive the coachee’s behaviour. In addition, a cultural understanding enables the coach to more rapidly establish rapport, and without rapport the coaching will fail.

Some generalisations I have found include the following. With Australians and Europeans I might use a hypnotic metaphor to invite the
coachee to represent a situation in a different way. Most Asians that I have coached are like engineers; they need concrete examples to show them a logical rationale (using the auditory digital representation system) for a new perspective. Some Asian cultures, such as the Thais, discourage thinking too deeply about things and are suspicious of the Western addiction to introspection. Chinese culture is laden with metaphor, some of which can be utilised and some of which can be a strong anchor to the status quo. The concept of the iron rice bowl for financial security is one that springs to mind in the current financial climate and not being the sound of an ‘empty vessel’ is an anchor for not speaking up.

NLP allows me to pace the client’s representations and allows me to set new frames of mind (reframing). An example: I was coaching an Asian senior business leader of a multinational who had experienced a reorganisation from a country-based structure in which he was mostly autonomous, to a matrix organisation in which he had to report. He was highly capable but was not keeping his new boss in the loop and this was causing concern for the organisation.

Asking value questions I discovered that autonomy was very high for him. I therefore asked whether he gave any of his direct reports autonomy. He answered by telling me about a direct report in Australia whom he trusted to do her job. I then asked him how he ‘knew’ (representational convincer) that he could trust her. ‘Well, she reports in regularly even when things are going well,’ he replied. ‘Oh!’ I said, ‘So reporting in equates with trust and trust equates with autonomy?’ At this point the penny dropped and he realised that he needed to report in to get his much-valued autonomy.

Another example: I was coaching an Asian regional finance head who was passed over for an Asia Pacific role. The reason for him being passed over was that he was not vocal enough. The NLP coaching for this coachee was to help him represent ‘speaking up’ as a valuable behaviour, whereas his cultural beliefs were that being competent and developing his team should have been enough to merit a promotion. Typically, Asian and Indian senior managers are very task/results oriented and so I often find myself needing to coach them around people skills. I have one Indian coachee who is at director level in an international bank; he has been receiving ongoing feedback that he doesn’t listen to his team. When I asked him about this at the start of our coaching assignment he shrugged it off and then proceeded to tell me what we needed to focus on for his coaching and how we should go about it! My response was to say, ‘STOP!’ (which interrupted his state). ‘Step back and consider how you have just demonstrated NOT listening to me.’ After an attempt at justification he came to the realisation that he was indeed not listening.

In Asia, as in Australia, I find coaching flexibility around ‘either/or’ meta-programs is one of the most rewarding; for example, a client who says
'Either I keep my eyes on the bad stuff or everything will fall apart' and having the client arrive at a ‘both-and’ conclusion that it is OK to look at the good stuff as well as the ‘bad’ either consecutively or concurrently.

**Creativity**

With its focus on modelling successful strategies, NLP is useful for enhancing creativity in individuals and teams. Based on modelling, Dilts developed a creativity strategy that many NLP coaches use. Changing physiology and asking key questions help draw out the client’s ability to be ‘dreamer’, ‘realist’ and ‘critic’ during a creative planning process. Coaching creativity involves reframing beliefs, learning to access states of creative excellence, using and directing unconscious processes to deal with unwanted or blocking states such as fearing criticism or failure.

**Making decisions**

Joseph O’Connor and Andrea Lages, who coach and train internationally while based in Brazil, have described a client who wants to change career direction but expresses a duality or conflict between two career goals. Through calibrating and mirroring the client’s sensory language, posture, movements, gestures and eye movements the coach helps the client consider how each career goal relates to a different part of themself. (There are many NLP processes for working with a person’s metaphorical, unconscious parts.) By continuing to calibrate and by matching language and voice tone, the coach anchors the two parts and guides the client in exploring the values behind each. A key moment in the session is when the coach and client discover that the two parts have a common value that each part needs to have respected. In the remainder of the session the coach uses precision questions, artfully vague language, reframing and other language skills to enable the client to give both parts of themself the recognition they need.

Can you see that other issues such as achieving work–life balance can be addressed with NLP processes for dealing with parts?

**Career development**

‘In a world of abundance... people have become liberated by prosperity but not really fulfilled by it. So we have this democratization of the search for meaning, which is becoming an important part of recruiting and the HR profession... people are now coming into the workforce and saying “Work is about being my best self, finding my purpose, doing something that matters”.’
In the current coaching boom the emphasis has been on executive coaching, leadership coaching, business coaching and life coaching. However, there is also a growing need for career coaching for employees – and not just for executives – to enable them to manage work-and-life changes and challenges. The need for career coaching is felt not only in the corporate world, concerned as it is with productivity and performance, but also by the growing proportion of the workforce outside the corporate sector. As a leading career coach wrote:

When employees feel more secure about managing their own careers they cooperate and contribute better to the needs of the work unit. One of the key responsibilities of a manager is to motivate and develop employees to meet the organisation’s changing needs for skills, knowledge and competencies... It involves teaching employees how to manage their own careers and develop an understanding of and commitment to career self-reliance, then supporting them as they integrate their goals and plans with that of the organisation and their work unit.²⁰

Much of what is called ‘career development’ can more accurately be described as career planning and management; it involves assessing personal characteristics, researching appropriate occupations and preparing for job search or other career action steps. Insofar as career planning and management involve modifying existing skills and behaviours or learning new ones (such as writing resumes, improving interview skills, researching alternative occupations and learning business skills) such career coaching is better described as skills and performance coaching.

When I began coaching clients in the late 1980s I immediately noticed that while the most common reason people seek career coaching was to see, understand, expand or get feedback on their career options, the second most common reason was to deal with unwanted thoughts and feelings – of confusion, procrastination, lack of confidence, fear or frustration – and to find more enjoyment, confidence and fulfilment in their working lives. This required developmental coaching.

There are at least two approaches to career coaching; one is generic, pure NLP process coaching, exemplified by O’Connor and Lages²¹ whose case study of a client stuck between options is mentioned above. As well as eliciting clients’ goals, beliefs and values, O’Connor and Lages model how clients think, speak and use their body in order to uncover their strategies for feeling stuck, making wrong decisions etc. The coaches’ process goes from exploring the present to designing clients’ future/ideal work, setting
well-formed outcomes, harnessing resources including states and beliefs, discovering the values (intentions) behind the goals, increasing awareness through use of perceptual positions, and then tasking the client to take action.

A second approach to career development is where the coach also acts as trainer and mentor. 22 This is process coaching combined with offering expert knowledge (Table 3.1). Incidentally, the same process/content distinction can apply to health coaching, financial coaching or executive coaching, although the role of expert knowledge in coaching is controversial. 23 Jonathan Passmore 24 has examined executive coaching and mentoring behaviour and found that recipients of executive coaching value sector knowledge and an understanding of leadership dilemmas and hence the need for overlapping or combining skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coaching steps:</th>
<th>What work does client want?</th>
<th>Where will they get it?</th>
<th>How will they find it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content:</td>
<td>Assess skills, interests, values, personality</td>
<td>Explore and evaluate suggested options</td>
<td>Prepare resume, set job search goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process:</td>
<td>Understand strategies for decision making, motivation, etc</td>
<td>Let go of limiting beliefs and feelings by changing language, internal representations, meanings</td>
<td>Set well-formed outcomes, learn from feedback, act with confidence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working with both content and process requires clarity and distinctions about what you are doing, when and why. How does a coach do this? As a career coach I present it visually in a few meaningful and memorable chunks; this becomes a visual anchor which I show to clients and talk about in order to clarify at any point in time what we are working on and what my role is. In this approach, NLP process coaching does not preclude the use of select psychometric instruments such as the Myers Briggs personality questionnaire; instruments are framed as exploratory tools and aids to the facilitative coaching conversation rather than hard-and-fast judgements about the client.
Do you now have a taste of what NLP coaches are doing in the contexts of personal and career coaching, executive coaching, internal coaching, team/corporate coaching and business coaching? The coaches you heard from here have also written in detail about their methods and case studies so you can, if you wish, follow up their work using the Endnotes and Bibliography, and look further into their coaching tools, transcripts, mindsets, ethics, contracts and other practical matters.

In the next chapter we look at whether talking of the ‘magic’ of NLP accurately represents the professionalism of many NLP coaches.
Meeting industry standards

My aim in this chapter is to touch on some queries raised by Kate and Dan, who were new to NLP coaching. Their queries had to do with the way some coaches sometimes portray and use this methodology without having sufficient rapport with the client or by exaggerating their coaching qualifications.

**NLP coaching vs NLP practice**

For many practitioners NLP coaching is simply NLP change work by another name, useful for marketing NLP in the coaching industry as distinct from counselling and therapy. Others differentiate the *generative* intention of coaching from counselling and therapy; coaching helps people and teams develop and perform to the best of their abilities. Hence the emphasis on a collaborative, goal-oriented relationship between coach and client, with a number of sessions taking place over a period of time and clients being tasked to take actions and being held accountable.\(^1\)

However, consider the following: Richard Bolstad has ‘a developmental model for helping’, whether in a therapy or coaching context.\(^2\) Richard makes the point that NLP work, whether it is framed as remedial/therapeutic or coaching/self-actualizing, is always about individuals and groups making changes in how they think, feel, speak and act.

And here’s another distinction, made by Joseph O’Connor and Andrea Lages: coaches need NLP; however, they do not need to study NLP in its entirety to use it as a coach. Coaching builds skills by implementing four NLP presuppositions and by addressing the client’s goals, values and beliefs.
Coaching, like NLP, builds skill; however, unlike NLP, coaching is not about applying a set of tools.³

For some, NLP per se is not coaching; it needs to take on insights from the broader coaching community. This view has led O’Connor and Lages to now work with an approach to coaching that integrates five distinct models, of which NLP is one.⁴

Angus McLeod is another NLP coach who does not believe coaches need to study NLP fully in order to use it beneficially. In fact, Angus encourages trainee coaches not to follow a particular model.⁵

I aim in writing and training coaches to reduce coaching to basics and principles rather than tools; while I use tools I want to emphasise the skills of listening, reflecting, supporting, facilitating etc as I see much enthusiastic but crude use of NLP tools that was not effective or sustainable for the coachee.⁶

Bear in mind that Angus and Joseph, like most of us who have written about our experience with NLP coaching, are talking from personal experience rather than on systematic research comparing ‘pure’ NLP coaching and eclectic approaches. I come back to the issue of comparative research in Chapters 9 and 11.

**Packaging NLP coaching**

While utilizing the NLP skills outlined in Chapter 2, each coach structures their coaching programmes differently and gives emphasis to particular skills or tools. And they do so with their own authentic style, which is what NLP values. For example, Robert Dilts finds that his Levels of Learning model provides a useful and important roadmap for coaches.⁷ Ian McDermott speaks of the ‘four pillars’ of NLP coaching: rapport, outcome, acuity and flexibility.⁸ And as we saw earlier, O’Connor and Lages pay particular attention to the client’s beliefs, values and goals.⁹

Descriptions of NLP coaching also differ in terms of how the process is chunked for ease of learning and understanding. Consider how Richard Bolstad¹⁰ uses chunking in his RESOLVE model for NLP change work:

*Resourceful state*… coach fosters a relationship of respect and willingness to talk and work together, open to client’s model
Establishes rapport by phone, tone of communications, eye contact, content etc
Specifies outcome... of session or sessions
Open... to client’s model of thinking, feeling, speaking, acting
Leads to desired state... offers content (options) and process/change work (with language, submodalities and strategies)
Verifies change... coach feeds back what they notice and hear about the client's shifts
Exit... future pace

In addition to presenting these seven steps Richard groups NLP ‘interventions’ in 10 categories: anchoring, installing new strategies, changing the qualities of sensory experience, trance work, parts integration, time-line changes, linguistic reframing, changing interpersonal dynamic, changing physiology and tasking.\(^\text{11}\)

According to Bruce Grimley, all NLP patterns/skills are variations of five basic NLP patterns, all of which have as their basic outcome nothing more than the manipulation of our client’s representations:

1. Meta model
2. Ordered operations over representations
3. Reframing
4. Anchoring
5. Milton model.\(^\text{12}\)

Elsewhere Bruce offers a different – and also useful – chunking of a coaching session:\(^\text{13}\)

1. Establish rapport – pace, matching and mirroring language, posture, breathing, filters, pacing language.
2. Elicit outcome – using precision questioning, perceptual positioning, modelling present state (and strategies) and desired state as well as values.
3. Raise acuity – use modelling together with client to lead change in internal representations, thinking, speaking, strategies (internal resources), all of which lead to changes in feelings and actions that may have held them back. Mobilize resources in various ways including with reframing, use of metaphors and stories.
4. Encourage behavioural flexibility by adopting second, third and fourth perceptual positions. Techniques include framing, anchoring resource states, using stories and metaphors and artfully vague/hypnotic language, writing out goals with specific steps and timeframes.

5. Future pace – visualizing, anchoring, reinforcing (still with rapport).

Jules and Chris Collingwood are a couple of Australian colleagues who, like Bruce, trained directly with John Grinder. However, they present their coaching quite differently from Bruce. They use the same key NLP models but maintain that even Grinder emphasizes and uses various basic ‘building blocks’ at different times. They feel that their Australian government-recognized graduate certificate NLP practitioner training ‘is more than adequate for coaches’.

**Meeting professional coaching standards**

From what you have read so far, can you see how coaches who want to use NLP skills/patterns seamlessly need to have the unconscious competence and flexibility that come with considerable training, feedback and practice? Best practice in NLP coaching is demonstrated by fluid and flexible behaviour on the part of the coach. Hence the emphasis on rigour, standards, ethics and certification of training by leaders in NLP coaching – just as in the wider coaching community.

While nowhere in the world is there yet a national licensing body for coaches, there are at least three professional bodies that in effect set industry standards through having accreditation schemes for coaches and coach-training programmes. The International Coach Federation (ICF), for example, has a set of standards, core competencies and an accreditation process, which you can see online.

All over the world there are commercial and non-profit bodies set up to train, assess and accredit NLP coaches. There are a few NLP associations dedicated to fostering and maintaining standards (Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1  NLP associations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Association of NLP (ANLP)</th>
<th><a href="http://www.anlp.org">www.anlp.org</a></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International NLP Trainers Association</td>
<td><a href="http://www.inlpta.com">www.inlpta.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Professional Guild of NLP</td>
<td><a href="http://www.professionalguildofnlp.com">www.professionalguildofnlp.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Board of NLP (ABNLP)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.abnlp.org">www.abnlp.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sometimes the boundaries between promoting business and promoting the development of coaching standards seem rather blurred. If you are seeking coach training or if your job is to select coaches to work with your organization, it is best to read what coach trainers say about their programme and to question them directly regarding how they address the competencies and standards of external bodies such as the ICF.

The Master of Arts programme at the University of Kingston assesses and gives credit for competency-based modules on NLP coaching developed and delivered by a private training company; this is the first NLP-based Masters degree in the world. In Australia an increasing number of higher-education institutions recognize and endorse NLP training under the government’s competency-based training standards, and so these NLP courses can comprise part or all of a postgraduate diploma or degree. Jules and Chris Collingwood were among the first to specify competencies and standards for NLP practitioner training that comply with Australian government accreditation process; their ‘process-oriented coaching’ programme is a nationally accredited training course.

It is important also to note that some NLP businesses – like some other coaching companies – make claims in their marketing materials such as ‘setting new benchmarks’, which is a misleading use of the term benchmarking. In Chapter 12 we will talk more about benchmarking NLP coach competencies.

As I have already pointed out, proponents of NLP-based coaching differ on whether the trainee coach needs full NLP Practitioner certification (with one of the NLP certifying bodies) before undertaking specialized coaching modules or whether a shorter introduction to NLP within a broader coach-training programme is sufficient. For example, Joseph O’Connor believes that ‘You do not need to study NLP in its entirety to use it as a coach’; with his partner Andrea Lages he delivers a programme that integrates five coaching models including NLP and which fully meets the standards of the ICF.

Another distinction is that some coaches believe NLP Practitioner and Master Practitioner trainings equip them with all the skills and intentions they need to coach effectively, while others feel that what is needed is a coach-training programme which focuses not only on the core NLP skills but also on how to manage the coaching relationship, ethics, buyer and client agreements, knowledge of the field of coaching and the specific issues dealt with in organizational coaching. One, for example, adds a short (two-day) module on business coaching to Practitioner trainings. Another company runs an ICF-accredited programme and requires of its business coaches to have Practitioner, Master Practitioner and NLP coach certification as well as having attended at least 125 hours of coach-specific training.
Tosey and Mathison\textsuperscript{23} suggest that using only some NLP tools – the ‘instrumental use of NLP’ – violates the systemic principles on which NLP is based. We will look closely at those principles in Part 2 and in Part 3 we address ways of evaluating whether coaching with all core NLP skills is experienced differently by clients and gets better outcomes than coaching that utilizes only some NLP tools. But first, let’s digress and take an overview of the context in which both NLP and coaching have evolved.
Shifting paradigms

When the puzzles and paradoxes cry out for resolution, a new paradigm is due... We need pluralistic philosophies that free us to see the evidence from many points of view.¹

Marilyn Ferguson has been one of the foremost philosophers and chroniclers of the shift in Western education, health and management away from valuing only analytic, linear thinking and rationality towards holistic, non-linear and intuitive mental strategies.

With this shift came a rekindling of interest in consciousness and a view of mind, body and emotion as an interconnected or integrated system; hence the interest in the interaction between biology and consciousness.² Systems thinking started influencing medicine, health and biology;³ it also brought a critique of the scientific establishment where each discipline studied, in its own ‘silo’, a different part of the human being.

So NLP emerged in the 1980s, a time when the accepted scientific paradigm – and even the certainties of many psychologists about human behaviour, emotion and cognition – was being challenged. As Michael Hall points out in reviewing the history of NLP, it is outsiders that drive paradigm shifts.⁴

Science and post-modernist inquiry

Science isn’t the sole source of evidence.⁵

Science – seen as Aristotelian (either–or) thinking – is often repudiated by ‘post-modernism’, which is characterized by systemic and complexity thinking. The post-modern approach to evidence rejects the ‘positivist’ scientific premise that an objective truth is out there to be discovered; instead,
it reflects a belief in the complexity, subjectivity and diversity of ‘truth’. With this paradigm shift, empiricism, modernism and positivism gave way to post-modernism, phenomenology and constructivism.6

Science did not sit well with those who believed in and felt comfortable with uncertainty. As influential writer Ken Wilber says, ‘The scientific approach isn’t wrong, it’s only partial, the external, material part of human potential.’7

The critics of science also started raising the issue of the observer effect in research, in contrast to belief in the ability of scientific methods to identify objectively a reality that exists out there. That led to a valuing of subjective evidence as distinct from the public or objective evidence produced by ‘rational’ inquiry that scientists such as Richard Dawkins believe ‘eliminates bias or delusion or private prejudice’.8

Bandler and Grinder, the originators of NLP, sought to discover how internal patterns and structures produced excellent and effective outcomes, whereas the psychology at that time had been based on the scientific model that sought to understand and prove empirically why problems arose. Grinder and Bandler used unconscious knowing as well as – not instead of – logic.9

In Chapter 9 we will talk more about Bandler and Grinder’s methodology for identifying NLP patterns.

Grinder’s critique of science is that all sciences have, as their ultimate domain, only representations, just as individuals’ reality are only representations.10 Despite the transparency and rigour of their methodology, scientists’ internal representations or mappings get built into the design and interpretation of their research, in ways that are as yet not well understood. And even where robust quantitative data is collected with scientific instrumentation, language still plays a role at all stages of the scientific endeavour and thus affects scientists’ representation of their findings. This implies that some observer effect is always inevitable. And despite NLP being based on constructivist (subjective) principles (see Chapters 6 and 7), Grinder argues that the systematic, rigorous and transparent practices of NLP modelling mean it can stand beside other scientific disciplines that study human behaviour.11

Hence O’Connor and Seymour hold the view that NLP is the science as well as the art of personal excellence ‘because there is a method and process for discovering patterns used by outstanding individuals’.12 In principle, there should be minimal observer effect because of the NLP modeller’s non-judgemental, know-nothing state.

I would make the point that ‘scientific research’ and ‘rigorous research’ are not necessarily the same thing. We will come back to this in Chapter 9 when asking about evidence for NLP coaching from both a scientific perspective and an inductive/discovery perspective. And in Chapter 11 we look at how, specifically, NLP research can be vigorous, rigorous and rich.
Humanistic and positive psychology

NLP is another child of the human potential movement and has very similar roots to coaching.¹⁴

Michael Hall has contributed much to our understanding of the intellectual roots of NLP in the Human Potential Movement. From this movement came the premises or underpinning beliefs of NLP (the ‘NLP presuppositions’).

‘Undoubtedly the central strength, power and charm of the Human Potential Movement in psychology in the 1960s rested in how it shifted focus from studying sick people to studying and modelling healthy people.’¹⁵

A substantial source of NLP was the Human Potential Movement of which Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers were the leading pioneers. The connection for this goes back to the key figures in NLP and in the Human Potential Movement.¹⁶ At Esalen in southern California, Fritz Perls was the first ‘scholar in residence’ and Gregory Bateson was the last. The first person in charge of Research and Development at Esalen was Virginia Satir. These key leaders of the Human Potential Movement were also the key people modelled by Bandler and Grinder from 1972 to 1975.¹⁷

The Human Potential Movement, launched from Maslow’s modelling study of psychologically healthy people or ‘self-actualizers’,¹⁸ created a paradigm shift, away from building a model of human nature based on sick or neurotic people towards one that explained healthy or self-actualizing people. From this came the NLP presuppositions such as ‘people have all the resources for their full development’, ‘resistance indicates the lack of rapport’ and ‘there is a structure to all experiences’. According to Michael Hall, the NLP presuppositions were derived almost entirely from the work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old way of thinking about change</th>
<th>New paradigm of change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only expert and objective scientific knowledge is valued</td>
<td>Multiple points of view, including embodied subjective experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralized control</td>
<td>Systems self-organize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanistic, looks at behaviour of parts</td>
<td>Emergent, looks at whole system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear causes-and-effects logic</td>
<td>Complexity thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values predictability</td>
<td>Assumes unpredictability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims to improve performance</td>
<td>Aims to transform people and organizations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 The paradigm shift in the past 25 years
of Virginia Satir and Fritz Perls, which in turn was based on the premises of the Human Potential Movement of Maslow and Rogers.19

These NLP presuppositions (beliefs) about human behaviour fit the mission and task of coaching as a communication process to facilitate a person’s own abilities of thinking, learning, choosing, changing, acting and getting desired outcomes. We will talk more about the presuppositions of NLP in the next chapter.

Gregory Bateson, the last scholar in residence at Esalen, made a seminal contribution to learning and changing. His ideas ‘fuelled a whole generation of behavioural scientists and psychotherapists’.20 One of Bateson’s many contributions was to look to the body to understand the mind.21 In the next chapter we look more closely at how psychological principles and practices inform NLP change work. Drawing on the work of Tosey and Mathison, my proposition will be that while NLP is primarily grounded in Bateson’s systemic/cybernetic thinking there was a simultaneous overlay from psychological theory and practice of the time.

In this climate of humanistic psychology, Positive Psychology also began to emerge.22 It is a key tenet of Positive Psychology that people who learn to control their inner experiences are able to determine the quality of their life.

A view of NLP from coaching psychology

In this book so far I have defined and differentiated coaching, NLP practice per se and NLP coaching. I have also mentioned coaching psychology. So now it is time to clarify that term too. It was coined in 2002 and refers to coaching that draws on and develops psychological theory. For some it is also an applied positive psychology.23

The roots of coaching psychology stretch back to the humanistic traditions of psychology24 and are related to the factors underpinning the emergence of the Positive Psychology movement… and the Human Potential Movement (HPM) of the 1960s [which] drew heavily on the emerging humanistic-existentialistic psychologies… The HPM was based on an ‘anything goes’ eclecticism, in which methodologies, techniques and philosophies from a wide range of perspectives were combined.25

A key factor in the derailment of the Human Potential Movement in the 1960s and 1970s was a reluctance to engage with the academic community. For example, if it were not for the anti-science sentiments shown by the founders of NLP, today we could have seen the original NLP making a useful contribution to the applied psychology curriculum taught at universities – after all, the core of NLP is an often elegant application of
cognitive behavioural science and linguistics. Instead, we have seen some sections of the NLP community drift further and further away from solid foundations.  

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**Convergence of neuroscience and psychology**

*In the last 25 years the research of many neuroscientists, cognitive scientists and cognitive linguists has converged to form a new understanding about the way the human mind works.*

Not long ago, it was thought that a set of master genes activated the DNA necessary to produce the appropriate proteins for development and behaviour. However, there is now evidence that human biology provides potentials and constraints for representation and behaviour attuned to this social world; there is evidence that human biology is shaped profoundly by the social world. By the 1990s neuroscientists were providing detailed evidence of the complex neural and biochemical feedback and feed-forward loops that explain the interactions among perception, neural/mental patterns, sensory representations, emotion, feeling, changes in body state, thought, language, consciousness, sense of self, decision making and other behaviours. Scientists attest, for example, to ‘the partnership between so-called cognitive processes and processes usually called “emotional”’.  

In recent years there has been exponential growth of the fields of cognitive science and neuroscience including neurobiology and neuropsychology. We now are starting to have neuroscientific explanations of how coaching practices within cognitive, behavioural and/or solution-focused frameworks enhance meta-cognition (self-awareness and insight), intentionality, motivation, self-regulation, goal-directed behaviour and complex decision making.  

I have digressed to take an overview of the ideas/intellectual context between the 1950s and 1980s in which NLP emerged, particularly systems theories, holism, the cognitive revolution and the Human Potential Movement in psychology.  

NLP can be seen as a model of its time as it deals with *complexity*, which is also the focus of modern sciences of complex systems such as chaos theory and systems theory. NLP also understands *emergence*, which can be summarized as ‘more comes out than was put in’; underpinning NLP is the belief that new thoughts, meanings, beliefs, feelings and behaviours can emerge under the right conditions.
Perhaps the NLP of Bandler and Grinder was a visionary precursor of the sort of cross-disciplinary model that is now ‘de rigueur’ in the behavioural, health and neurosciences. NLP – and the practice of coaching with NLP – certainly reflects the focus on systems, multiple points of view, subjectivity and intuition associated with post-modernism. In Part 2 we will look more closely at how NLP coaching reflects these perspectives including, in part, the ‘cognitive revolution’.34

The current convergence of neuroscience and psychology and the growing interest in ‘coaching the mind’ suggest that NLP was ahead of its time and this perhaps has contributed to its popularity. Nonetheless, as many people claim that NLP is a unique way of effecting changes in how people think, feel and act, it is not surprising that managers and professionals such as Kate and Dan, who have become interested and involved in change work, ask the question, How solid are these claims? This is the question I address in Part 2.
Part II

An evidence-based approach to NLP coaching
Best practice is evidence-based

Evidence-based coaching requires the coach to have the ability, knowledge frameworks and skills to be able to find [information from valid research theory and practice], understand it, determine its applicability, apply it and finally evaluate its effectiveness.¹

In the last chapter I suggested that NLP may comprise models and methodology in advance of its time in the way it allows us to work systematically with clients’ complex and largely unconscious experience. But how does NLP stack up in a climate of increasing scrutiny of evidence-based and ‘best practice’ coaching?

Let’s talk first about the meaning of ‘evidence-based coaching’ and ‘best practice’. Then we will look at a set of principles that underpin NLP coaching. In Chapter 6 we look at support for those principles and also at some NLP skills or patterns that reflect each principle. My intention in Chapter 8 is to highlight some links to coaching psychology and, in Chapter 9, to ask questions about the empirical evidence that NLP is an effective coaching methodology.

What does evidence-based mean?

The idea of developing professional services based on evidence has made inroads into coaching psychology as it has into other professions such as medicine.
An evidence-based approach to coaching is the intelligent and conscientious use of the best current knowledge in making decisions about how to deliver coaching to clients, and in designing and delivering coaching-training programs... Best current knowledge is up-to-date information from relevant, valid research, theory and practice. Because the existing academic coach-specific literature is limited, best knowledge can be drawn from the established literature in related fields.2

So evidence-based coaching means demonstrating that (1) what we do as coaches has links to established principles, models and theories, and (2) the coaching is effective in actually getting the results we say it does. In other words, we need to distinguish between evaluating the theoretical grounds or reasoning and the effectiveness of any coaching practice.

Best practice coaching is also comprised of protocols, principles, standards, guidelines and procedures that contribute to the highest, most resource-effective performance of the discipline. It is based on a foundation of extensive real-world experience conducted by the industry leaders.3 And best practice involves benchmarking: identifying the crucial elements of coaching that get coaches’ and clients’ desired outcomes and then training coaches accordingly. According to Hall and Duval, benchmarking is the ‘metrics of best practice’.4

I know some NLP coaches who, having learnt (modelled) the attitudes and skills directly from the founders of NLP, believe that ‘best practice’ is demonstrated by having that NLP lineage. To these coaches best practice means helping the client identify the change they want to make, facilitating that change using tools that uncover unconscious processes and making that change ecological, sustainable, generative and adaptive for the client. To such coaches, best practice is established by the practitioner checking on the quality of the results. While that approach is ethical and careful, I believe it is no longer sufficient. Best practice is continually changing and must reflect our current understanding of how coaching works.5 At the very least, when talking about best practice, coaches need to specify the context and purpose of the coaching: what works, for what issues and for whom?6 We will talk more about best practice research in Chapter 12.

Theories, principles and presuppositions

A principle describes a mechanism at work (for example, how anchoring works in NLP coaching) and is usually derived from systematic observations and/or established theory. A theory would explain all the mechanisms that create the whole effect of NLP coaching and would cover all the skills we looked
at in Chapter 2. One of the many definitions of a theory is that it needs to be internally consistent.7

Paul Tosey and Jane Mathison, working in management development at the University of Surrey, are the first NLP-trained academics to take a rigorous and independent look at the principles and theory underlying NLP. They see NLP as internally consistent but refer to it not so much as a theory but as a transdisciplinary set of principles in the sense that it draws on various sources and has been generated through application more than deduced from axioms or principles. While NLP literature does not articulate an underlying theory, it is possible to infer a theoretical coherence to NLP based largely and essentially on Bateson’s systemic perspective.8 Tosey and Mathison also suggest that, while there is no unifying theoretical explanation (theory) of NLP, ‘the key theory of NLP is that which pertains to its methodological [modelling] nature’.9 Here’s how they understand theory in relation to NLP:

Underlying the methodology of NLP is an epistemological dimension – in other words, theory about the processes through which we perceive, know and learn… our view is that NLP can be seen to have emerged from, and to represent an application of, coherent principles. These appear to us (as suggested also by authors in the practice field),10 to be based substantially on Gregory Bateson’s multi-disciplinary, systemic perspective.11

With the growing emphasis on evidence-based coaching, it is important to articulate the mechanisms – that is, the principles – that support NLP coaching practice. By articulating, verifying, falsifying and modifying our thinking about the mechanisms implied in this coaching methodology we will continue to develop the most effective coaching practices.

You will recall I mentioned earlier Angus McLeod saying he dis-identified somewhat with NLP. Angus says that NLP has great tools but tools do not make a good coach and he quotes the father of modern coaching methods, Timothy Gallwey, as saying that ‘Principles are more important than tools.’12

Principles and presuppositions

Although the founders of NLP were not interested in the formal theory from which their practice drew, they used intuition and logic to come up with the modelling methodology that was ‘capable of identifying the effective aspects of existing models of communication [and therapeutic interaction] for pragmatic purposes’.13 Thus the change models of NLP drew on
the developers’ prior knowledge of principles of general semantics and computer sciences, as well as from various psychological approaches and, most importantly, from cybernetics and the dynamics of calibration and feedback principles.

Accordingly, the NLP coach’s own state and behaviours are underpinned by a set of beliefs or frames – usually referred to in NLP training programmes as the operational presuppositions – which have been around since the early days of NLP. They are principles and beliefs that guide behaviour and were derived by implication rather than direct observation. They include:

- The map is not the territory.
- Life, mind and body are systemic.
- As a system becomes more complex, more flexibility is needed.
- Behind all behaviour is a positive intention.
- People have all the resources they need to learn and adapt.
- People always make the best choice available to them at the time.
- There is no failure, only feedback.
- ‘Resistance’ on the part of the client indicates the need for more rapport based on better mapping of the client’s internal representations.
- The meaning of your communication is the response you get.

Dilts and DeLozier made the useful distinction between the operating presuppositions and the fundamental presuppositions – the ‘unprovable beliefs’ upon which the NLP methodology is built. In the next chapter you will hear of growing scientific support for some of those ‘unprovable beliefs’.

So presuppositions are beliefs, assumptions or principles and it is widely understood that the NLP presuppositions resemble much in the work of Gregory Bateson whose systems thinking was a major influence on Bandler and Grinder.

**Nine systemic principles**

*The epistemological thrust of NLP is that the processes of perception and conceptualisation, aided by language, create people’s [maps of] experience. NLP is committed to a cybernetic view of how those processes are structured and how they operate.*

Paul Tosey and Jane Mathison identified a set of principles in the NLP approach to teaching and learning and I believe it is useful to take them as a starting point in understanding and evaluating NLP coaching; we can consider these principles as coat hangers on which to arrange and review the apparel (intentions and skills) of the NLP coach.
The cybernetic principles (Table 6.1) are the underlying ideas operationalized in NLP coaching and other applications.\textsuperscript{16} NLP reflects Bateson’s systemic theory wherein the human mind, body and emotion system is one of patterned connections, or cybernetic links, between internal experience, language, behaviour and the external world.

Table 6.1  Systemic principles underpinning NLP change work\textsuperscript{17}

1 The coach–client relationship is a cybernetic loop, a dynamic process in which meaning, learning and changing are constructed through reciprocal feedback.

2 Coaches and their clients act according to their personal subjective understanding and internal representation of the world.

3 People use all their senses/sensory imagery (seeing, hearing, feeling) and language to represent the world internally. These internal representations are structured, both in themselves (eg in terms of location, size, brightness etc of visual imagery) and dynamically (eg as sequences). The precise structure of internal representations is unique to each individual.

4 There are systematic relationships between the structure of the individual’s representations (internal experience), their language and external behaviour. So a client’s internal representations are reflected in their language and non-verbal behaviours.

5 Skills, states, beliefs and behaviours are learnt; they have corresponding sequences of internal representations (which are also called strategies). Learning and changing are the process whereby such representations and sequences are acquired and modified.

6 A person’s capacity to learn and change is strongly influenced by their neurophysiological state and beliefs at the time of learning.

7 Such modification of states, beliefs and behaviours happens through communication, through both verbal and non-verbal channels, and both consciously and unconsciously. (The functioning of which humans are conscious and that can be controlled consciously represents only a small proportion of total functioning.)

8 As all communication potentially influences learning, the coach’s language, beliefs and behaviours influence the client’s experience of coaching and its outcomes. The coach’s awareness and skilful choice about their own language patterns, beliefs and behaviours, as well as sensitivity and curiosity about their influence on and interaction with the client’s internal representations, are key to an effective coaching outcome.

9 In essence, therefore, coaching is a three-step process of creating states that are conducive to learning and changing, facilitating the client’s exploration and enhancement of their internal representations and facilitating them towards their desired outcome with the coach giving feedback all the way.
As mentioned in Chapter 5, NLP in the 1970s was also broadly influenced by the humanistic psychology of the time and, as I see it, the cybernetic principles in Table 6.1 are heavily overlaid with practices and principles of the renowned psychologists whose skills Bandler and Grinder modelled. In the next two chapters I link NLP ideas to psychological theory and practice.

In the *Handbook of Coaching Psychology*, O’Broin and Palmer point out that an evidence-based approach to coaching incorporates best current knowledge, often from allied fields, while Tony Grant makes the case for theoretically inclusive coaching.

In the next chapter I:

- describe how the principles of NLP coaching are overlaid with established knowledge and practices from psychology and other disciplines;
- bring in recent neuroscientific evidence that supports or questions each principle;
- consider how the principles relate to the NLP coaching skills we looked at in Chapter 2.
Systemic principles with psychological overlay

Taking each of the systemic principles outlined in Chapter 6, I now consider:

- its theoretical origin;
- its influences from psychological theories and practices;
- recent supporting evidence from neuroscience; and
- some of the coaching practices that reflect that principle.

I want to acknowledge the input of UK-based NLP trainer, coach and therapist, Lisa Wake, whose Neurolinguistic Psychotherapy\(^1\) sets a benchmark in evidence-based NLP practice. Also, Richard Bolstad in New Zealand has brought both rigour and vigour to NLP change work. Since his article on ‘Putting the “neuro” back into NLP’ was first published,\(^2\) Richard has continued to contribute to the knowledge base of NLP change work. He explains the evidence in support of the mind–body–emotion system that was described by Korzybski\(^3\) and the many ways NLP practitioners assist clients to communicate with and through their nervous system.\(^4\) You will also hear from James Lawley and others who bring rigour as well as vigour to this discussion.
Roots in psychology and support from neuroscience

1. The client’s mind, body and behaviour – as well as the coach–client relationship – are dynamic cybernetic systems in which meaning, learning and change occur through reciprocal feedback

Bateson suggested that the mind operates within a wider mind–body–emotion system; change in one part effects changes in other parts of the system. NLP took from this the need to think systemically and operate ecologically, meaning being alert to the possible consequences of any change work. Milton Erickson, whose therapeutic language patterns Bandler and Grinder studied and modelled, applied the notion of ecology as he worked with the client’s conscious–unconscious system, as well as the client–therapist system (and the client–family system).

While an individual’s mind and body form a cybernetic system, so do processes between people and their environment and between minds and life. Such systems are self-organizing and seek balance and stability. Neuroscientists provide evidence that human organisms interact with the environment as an ensemble and have also demonstrated the body/mind interdependency. Mind and body operate as one system; the mind is embodied as much as the body is embrained.

The Gestalt therapy of Perls, which is ‘loosely derived from the principles of Gestalt psychology’, assumed that mind and body are one and that the human organism responds holistically to life events. Perls recognized that individuals are constantly developing and devising behaviours that are self-organizing and self-actualizing. From Perls also comes the NLP focus on strategies; people do not need fixing but their strategies do.

Bateson’s cybernetics underpins a central idea of NLP: when something is changed in one part of the system, change will ensue throughout. Hence the NLP coaching tool of mapping (transferring) existing resources or strategies from one context to another. Do you remember the client who got focused and the one who learnt how to access confidence (in Chapter 2)?

Calibration and feedback

The cybernetic aspect of NLP is reflected in its adoption of the TOTE (test-operate-test-exit) mode of functioning and self-regulation which, in the words of Tosey, Mathison and Michelli, depends on the dynamics of calibration and feedback.
The TOTE model, developed by neurologists Miller, Galanter and Pribram, holds that effective mental and behavioural strategies require a goal, behavioural flexibility and a feedback process. The TOTE model informed the work of Bandler and Grinder and led to the strategy model in NLP. Hence the TOTE model underpins the key skill of first modelling the client’s ‘problem’ strategy, then designing a new and more useful one. Or, in other words, assisting the client get from their present state or strategy to their desired one, using sensory-specific verbal feedback as well as non-verbal feedback regarding what is working or what is not. Bolstad, in pointing out that the TOTE model is linear and rather simplistic, suggests Michael Hall’s layered model is more useful. (We look at Hall’s model in Chapter 10.)

So at the level of the coach–client relationship, systemic principles are expressed in the giving and receiving feedback. Note that ‘feedback’ has two distinct meanings: it refers to systemic processes, as in ‘feedback loops’, as well as to the content of what a coach says when responding to an individual’s behaviour. The latter is a component in setting and getting well-formed outcomes. The core coaching skills of giving and receiving feedback provide both coach and client with information about how the mind–body and coach–client communication systems are working and what can improve them.

The neuroscientist Edelman offers this explanation for why outcome orientation is useful for change work: the human organism is a field of endless neurological potential and it is conscious attention and intention that modulate conscious states and direct them to some extent. The outcome frame of NLP helps move the client from an unwanted state to a goal-oriented one. Also, ‘imagery can engage neural structures that… affect events in the body itself’. Hence in future pacing, the client imagines they have the outcome they want and describe what that looks, sounds and feels like.

**Goals**

*Consciousness is a continuous process and the only thing that changes is intentionality.*

The motivational power of goal-setting is a central assumption in NLP as in other cognitive behaviour approaches. Erickson recognized that people were naturally goal-oriented and that using a process of association enables clients to access their own internal resources to help resolve their problem.
It is the reticular activating system [part of the central nervous system] that NLP techniques such as anchoring and goal-setting utilise to facilitate goal achievement and positive state actualisation. When a client visualises actualisation of a goal this results in neuropeptides being released and blood and oxygen flow to the part of the body directly responsible for the achievement of the goal.22

It can be assumed that, in a system geared towards adaptation and success, all behaviour has – or once had – a positive adaptive intent (even if unconsciously). Hence the NLP coach attends to the client’s conscious and unconscious intentions and to expanding their choices.

Carl Rogers’s humanistic and person-centred therapy influenced NLP. Based on his scientific and psychometric research, Rogers23 had concluded that people have a basically positive direction, are self-directing and autonomous; he talked of self-regulatory activities. Change was about ‘loosening cognitive maps’; he also linked thoughts, feelings, experiences and physiology to the change process (see Principle 5 below).

As discussed in Chapter 2, Bateson’s levels of learning and Dilts’s Neurological Levels model suggest that not all interactions in a system are on the same level: behaviour is not the same as identity. Therefore NLP change work often involves identifying the positive intention behind unwanted behaviour. Watzlawick et al24 laid the groundwork for the use of Bateson’s ‘logical levels’ and ‘logical types’ to explain the difference between first-order change that occurs within a frame of mind and second-order change that occurs when we move to a meta-level and change the frame itself.

**Information processing**

Jane Mathison25 finds that mirror neuron research supports the notion of TOTEs and strategies in NLP and the notion of well-formed outcomes: ‘There has to be some kind of plan coded in an organism in order for it to be able to evaluate the extent to which the plan has been realised… and also supports the idea in cybernetics that one of the main functions of information is feedback about the extent to which a pre-existing plan has been executed.’

The involvement of mirror neurons in human information processing relates to the building of internal representations of information conveyed by language and the sequencing of information.
What the existence of mirror neurons shows is that not all information is processed by a linear series of cognitive actions, but that the nervous system itself may respond through complex patterns of neuronal activation which contains within it complex information represented and conveyed in a holistic and non-linear way. This is more in keeping with the emerging sciences of complexity, and implies that cognition may not be the only way we have of making sense of information from other people.26

Dilts talks of information theory as the basis for modelling; the SOAR (state–operator–and-result) model focuses on the feedback loop in a system that is continually learning.27 This is supported by Edelman’s finding that ‘neurons that fire together wire together’ and that highly individual neural networks develop in each person.28 Damasio’s view is that:

Having a mind means that an organism forms neural representations which can become images, be manipulated in a process called thought, and eventually influence behavior by helping predict the future, plan accordingly, and choose the next action.29 By the term images I mean mental patterns with a structure built with the tokens of each of the sensory modalities – visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and somatosensory.30

**Flexibility**

NLP also took on Ashby’s systems principle of requisite variety regarding the internal regulatory mechanisms of any system (be it the individual and their world of work and family or the coach–client relationship).31 In order to adapt, any part of the system needs to be as diverse or flexible as the environment in which it is trying to adapt or succeed. This principle is reflected in NLP skills – such as Meta-model questioning, dissociating from unwanted states, associating into desired states, hypnotic language and metaphors, changing perceptual positions and developing flexibility in meta-programmes – that lead the client to more flexible thinking, feeling and acting and to new neurological patterning. Erickson recognized the various ways the brain could create neurological connections to assist behaviour change. This principle also suggests that the more flexible a coach can be in their communication, the more likely they are to influence the client’s system.
**Emotions**

From the cognitive behaviour model that underpins Rational Emotive Therapy, NLP considers emotions to arise from the body kinaesthetics and evaluative thoughts. How we think affects how we feel, which in turn affects how we behave.\(^{32}\)

From the neurobiological perspective of Damasio,\(^ {33}\) emotions are unlearned reactions to objects or events in the world, the mind or the body.

Emotions are involved in problem solving and management for organism; they are vital for the homeostasis and well-being of organism… Feelings [by contrast with emotions] are the mental mapping of what happens while we emote… that is the mind process, taking stock of what we are doing when we emote and the connexion between the emotion and the object that triggered that emotion. Feelings reveal ‘good-for-life’ states or ‘not-good-for-life’ states.

In that sense emotions are essential *somatic markers of difference* and of the need to take action to regain homeostasis.

Much has been written of the complex neurology of perception and Bolstad\(^ {34}\) describes how perception is as much a result of emotional state as it is of the stimuli delivered via the eyes, ears and other sense organs. Because the brain is a system with feedback loops, emotion affects what we see and what we see affects our emotions.

The anchoring of emotions in NLP change work relates to the systemic principle which says that all parts of our biological system and the environment in which it operates influence each other. Skinner’s work on conditioning suggested that all behaviour is generated by positive or negative reinforcement and then becomes a generalized response even when the trigger that originally generated the unwanted behavioural response (or strategy) disappears from consciousness.\(^ {35}\) As we have seen, the key to NLP coaching is understanding how a client has sequenced their representation system, resulting in specific behaviours, then changing the sequence to facilitate a different result.

**Parts**

Bateson’s cybernetic theory also suggests that the system is designed for adaptation and sometimes sub-systems will occur within the system to enable the optimum functioning of the individual. The idea, or metaphor,
of parts came from modelling the therapy of Perls and Satir and gave rise to NLP change skills such as reframing and parts integration. Parts, which are often created from significant emotional events, stay neurologically detached from the rest of the unconscious mind. They have their own beliefs, values and intention and generate behaviours that are in conflict with their intention. An example is Bruce Grimley’s client who went to pieces when he had to present to the Board (Chapter 2). NLP processes such as parts integration, reframing and time reframing are used to change such limiting or conflicting beliefs.

Recent research using brain imaging techniques confirms what neuro-linguistic and trance practitioners have known intuitively for years: that effective reprogramming changes the brain as much as drugs can. New neuronal firings create new programmes, new programmes prompt the neurons to fire differently – a systemic effect based on the simple if still widely unacknowledged principle of the body–mind loop… Neuroscientist Ian Robertson offers a simple test of the body–mind interdependency: ‘By an act of will or whimsy we can decide to change the state of our brains this moment by choosing to summon some sweet memory into consciousness… Brain scans show that thinking a body state is neurologically no different to having the state in action.’

2. Everybody acts according to their subjective understanding and internal representation of the world

In the field of general semantics Korzybski articulated an explanatory model of the human mind–body system comprising many interactive parts: mind (meaning, semantics), body (neurology), emotions and beliefs. Korzybski also explained how humans create their unique cognitive ‘maps’ of the external world they encounter. His map/territory distinction explained emotion as the somatic registering of difference between our maps of the world and our experience of it. Note how this is now supported by Damasio’s evidence, mentioned above, of emotions as ‘somatic markers’.

Bateson explored Korzybski’s formulation that ‘the map is not the territory’ and realized that differences are the things that get onto the map. Bateson talked about information or abstract matter:
The elementary unit of information is a difference… it is able to make a difference because the neural pathways are themselves provided with energy… The territory never gets in at all… always the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps of maps, ad infinitum.40

Hence ‘news of difference’ lies in information coding; that is, in the qualities and sequencing of representations.

Bandler and Grinder established that NLP was about how neurology constrains primary images, sounds and feelings, then language quickly transforms it. Their formulation was based on their knowledge of physics and neurology, perception and language and how we create what we see.41

Bandler and Grinder used this principle of the neurolinguistic relationship that an individual has to their environment to underpin much of their early modelling work… [However, while NLP recognizes people receive information via their senses], what NLP omits from its theory is the relationship between the more complex aspects of the nervous system and unconscious processing.42

Redressing this, Wake cites the finding by Pert43 that the quality and quantity of neuropeptide receptors at the points where the nervous system connects with the external world determines what the individual pays attention to. These neurological responses are utilized in anchoring and strategy work, particularly with regard to the triggers for strategy activation and the biofeedback mechanisms that mean a change in physiological state will always be accompanied by a change in emotional state.44 Wake also provides evidence that various parts of the brain, when activated, trigger neural synapses into action and if this reoccurs, patterns start to form.

Damasio tells us that:

The center of neurobiology as I see it [is] the process whereby neural representations, which consist of biological modifications created by learning in a neuron circuit [manipulated in a process called thought], become images in our minds: the process that allows for invisible microstructural changes in neuron circuits… to become a neural representation, which in turn becomes an image [visual, auditory etc] we
each experience as belonging to us... On the basis of those images... we can interpret the signals brought in at the early sensory cortices so that we can organize them as concepts and categorize them. We acquire strategies for reasoning and decision making; and we can select a motor response, a willed, deliberate composition of actions, which range from pounding a table... to playing Mozart on the piano... Together, this ‘organ’ of information, this government, this great collection of systems, holds both innate and acquired knowledge [which] is used to deploy and manipulate motor outputs and mental inputs, the images that represent our thoughts.45

**Constructivism**

The complex process of constructing one’s own reality is, of course, what the NLP founders embraced and is what is meant by the NLP presupposition that ‘the map is not the territory’. Meta-model questioning accesses information that was deleted, distorted or generalized through the client’s filtering of information according to subjective factors such as experience, values, beliefs, past decisions, emotions. Neurological factors have also been shown to account for the filtering of information: the human ability to consciously process only a limited amount of information at a time and, in the case of distortion, the alteration of neural synapses due to disuse.46

So NLP belongs philosophically to the discipline of constructivism.47 Constructivists believe in the primacy of a person’s personal constructs in making sense of the world and determining their behaviour. Three NLP presuppositions derive from constructivism: the map is not the territory, people make the best choices available to them given their map of the world at that moment in time, and the meaning of a communication is the response it elicits.

Rogers, whose person-centred psychology48 influenced NLP, also held the idea that ‘perception is reality’. NLP also draws on self-efficacy theory and his cognitive learning theory regarding the quadratic reciprocity of four domains of human experience: thoughts, feelings, behaviour and situation.49

Fig 7.1 shows the NLP communication model that is common to all NLP change work.50 It is called a communication model because it is about how people communicate with themselves as well as with others. It describes peoples’ subjective experience and constructed reality.

Milton Erickson was exemplary in his constructivist approach; he entered a client’s reality, honoured, validated, mapped and utilized it. As we have seen, it was by modelling his work that the founders of NLP created the Milton model.
Both Erickson and Satir, influenced by Kelly’s personal construct therapy, worked with the principle that if people acted as if something were possible or true, that perception would act on their neurology to make it possible. The brain does not need to alter the body in every situation of emotion; it can make a short cut and alter the neuromap that represents the body in the brain and create an emotion on the basis of the stimulus alone. The mirror neuron literature explains the machinery for this bypassing of the body while altering the maps of the body and supports the coaching skill of ‘acting as if’ or mental rehearsal.

Client is ‘at cause’

From the principle that people construct their reality comes the view that the client is at cause; they can and need to take responsibility for how they respond and act in the world. That is why tasking is a key part of coaching.

Satir used chairs to have clients act as if they were other family members. This is like the perceptual positions that derived from Perls’s work around the same time. And as with perceptual positioning, questions such as ‘How else might you achieve this?’ and Meta-model questions are intended to loosen personal constructs. And ‘How will someone else know you have achieved it?’ encourages the client to dissociate from their current, unwanted state and consider their situation from other perspectives.

Bolstad says his intention as a coach is to model what he expects from the client; that includes ‘healthy relating’ and ‘being at cause’. The intent of

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**Figure 7.1** The NLP communication model

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NLP coaching is to have the client understand how they have unconsciously created their world view, beliefs, blocks, strategies, feelings and results and then assist them to take on new and more useful views, beliefs, feelings and behaviours.

Given the huge role of the unconscious mind in clients’ strategies, some NLP scholars such as Michael Hall emphasize the importance of also engaging the client’s conscious mind in order for the client to be fully at cause. This is supported by research on mindfulness and reflexion for self-regulation, motivation and change.\textsuperscript{57}

From interviewing neuroscientist Jeffrey Schwartz, Rock suggests that research on the placebo effect supports the principle that people respond according to their subjective understandings.\textsuperscript{58}

3. People use all their senses (seeing, hearing, feeling) and language to represent the world internally

*The domain of NLP is representations, pure and simple.*\textsuperscript{59}

According to the founders of NLP, internal representations are structured, both in themselves (for example, in terms of location, size and brightness of visual imagery) and dynamically (for example, as sequences). The precise structure of internal representations is unique to each individual. As Grinder says, ‘There are few NLP patterns that can justify the claim to be original but this is one.’\textsuperscript{60}

With his expertise in linguistics Grinder understood that sensory experience is transformed into conscious understanding via language and that process follows rules whereby sensory information is deleted, distorted and generalized. Chomsky’s work on transformational grammar had identified how individuals linguistically express their experience to themselves and to others quite differently from how they experience it in their unconscious minds. He proposed that language – which transforms neurological/sensory experience – has both deep and surface structures, which are connected by grammatical rules or transformations.\textsuperscript{61}

Wake describes how Chomsky’s later work explained further how individuals distort and generalize patterns of response and that ‘by the linguistic structure of these patterns, often held at belief level, it is possible to work with a client to assist change by interrupting the pattern of behaviour’. Lisa Wake also finds evidence, from Steven Pinker’s work on the acquisition of language, that clues to the client’s inner world exist in the grammar and words they use.\textsuperscript{62}

Jane Mathison points to evidence that mirror neurons are involved in processing language: ‘It is thought that action-related sentences actually cause
the firing of the mirror neurons relevant to the content of the information conveyed by the words. Mirror neurons are associated with many aspects of human information processing, including the processing of information and building internal representations of information. The NLP emphasis on sensory experience came from modelling of Perls’s work as therapist and his use of sensory language with clients contributed to the Meta-Model. The auditory-digital modality is where we process information in words and give meaning to our experience. In NLP that is referred to as ‘secondary experience’ as distinct from the primary sensory representations of hearing, seeing and feeling. Damasio’s work on emotion and feeling supports this distinction.

Language... is a translation of something else, a conversion from non-linguistic images which stand for entities, events, relationships, and inferences. Extensive studies... have given us a workable idea of how the brain processes an object, in sensory and motor terms, and an idea of how knowledge about an object can be stored in memory, categorized in conceptual or linguistic terms, and retrieved in recall and recognition modes.

Bolstad explains that within each area of the neural cortex that specializes in one of the senses, there are areas of cells that process qualities such as (in the case of vision) colour, contrast, movement, speed and so on. He cites the research that these qualities – called ‘submodalities’ in NLP – are a learnt result of interaction with the environment. Even for language – which in NLP is called the ‘auditory-digital’ sense modality – there are structures similar to submodalities and each is stored in a separate part of the brain.

Edelman’s neural Darwinism says that all learning and memory are dependent on synaptic strength, which is unique to each individual. This explains the individuality of the maps people construct. Edelman also holds that neurological reactions only occur in a given context which is called ‘perceptual categorization’. Take the example of someone missing their grandfather when they smell cigars; the explanation is that the neurological pathway is activated in one sensory system and follows a series of other pathways before the emotion-bearing neuropeptides are released and the emotion is felt.

Principle 3 underpins the importance in NLP coaching of modelling and eliciting client’s sensory representations and then changing the qualities of those representations. This is what is meant by the NLP presupposition that ‘people have all the resources they need inside themselves’. Wake challenges
this, pointing out that people do not necessarily have all the neurological resources they need and that they may be acquired from an external source. O’Connor and Lages are careful to state that ‘everyone has the resources they need or can acquire them’. 

4. **There are systematic relationships between structure of the representations (internal experience), language and external behaviour**

Representations constitute our thoughts.

Korzybski held that the human experience of states involves physiology as well as language-based thoughts and beliefs; hence the term ‘neuro-linguistics’. NLP practitioners talk about how ‘words are coded in our neurology’, but how?

Cognitive theory – first as rational emotive therapy or RET – focused on thoughts as primary in driving human experience. Later, rational-emotive behaviour therapy or REBT suggested that thoughts are revealed primarily as words, self-talk statements and beliefs. Thinking affects feeling, which in turn affects behaviour. Cognitive reframing and challenging self-talk are used in RET and REBT.

Principles of Gestalt psychology contribute to a number of NLP tools. According to Dilts, the use of submodalities is ‘implicitly based on perceptual principles established by Gestalt psychology’ while reframing patterns are based on the influence of meaning, context and configuration in perception and understanding.

Bateson proposed the importance of categorization to sense making and Jane Mathison explains how the central nervous system is ‘hard-wired’ to perceive similarity and how the primary cognitive function of abstraction and categorization leads to the unconscious building of conceptual schemas mediated by language. With language we categorize experiences, behaviours and events, assigning attention – or not – to certain experiences, behaviours and events. This creates attitudes and behaviours towards those experiences, behaviours and events. It is through language that we categorize and re-categorize events and thus think and respond differently.

NLP places considerable importance on understanding the many ways in which language can categorize events and this is best illustrated by the various reframing techniques. As Mathison points out, our sense-making processes are (as yet) impossible to separate:
Other sense-making processes that come into play in categorization include internal representations. This is part of our sense making to which NLP assigns great importance. Thinking of an event, then changing the category to which one assigns the event, alters the configuration of the internal representations and submodalities used in its representation... and may also bring changes to the perceiver’s physiological responses... as well as change cause–effect structures and generate new actions and goals.\textsuperscript{76}

I have already mentioned the evidence that mirror neurons are involved in processing language; there is some evidence that certain words activate specific neuronal circuits.\textsuperscript{77} Jane’s own research provides evidence of the effect of language on internal processes (beliefs and internal representations) and then on a person’s responses.\textsuperscript{78}

As Bolstad\textsuperscript{79} documents, people respond to external stimuli through neural circuits; the storage and activation of memories, which they call thoughts and emotions, can be monitored on an electroencephalogram. These electrical impulses flow throughout the body on the chemical molecules that are the basis of emotional states and eventually shape the immune system. The white blood cells of the immune system move through the bloodstream and body tissue and act as a mobile brain. This is Pert’s explanation of the mind–body–emotion system and how people respond instantaneously to thoughts and emotions.\textsuperscript{80}

Bolstad\textsuperscript{81} also cites Ramachandran and others’ neurological explanations of why change in one modality effects changes in other modalities, usually unconsciously. For example, if you change the way your internal picture looks you will feel differently. There is also evidence of an area of the brain where complex meta-analyses of perceptual information occur; research shows that when a meta-analysis area is stimulated the person will report changes in their submodalities: ‘This relationship between submodalities and the “feeling” of an experience is the basis of some important NLP processes... Changing submodalities changes your response right down to the body level.’\textsuperscript{82} An example is how the IT manager changed her beliefs by shifting submodalities (Chapter 2).

Psychologist and neuroscientist Ramachandran has explained the link between use of metaphor and submodality shifts; both occur through the same precise area of brain tissue and have similar neurological structures.\textsuperscript{83}
5. Skills, states, beliefs and behaviours are learnt and have corresponding sequences of internal representations – these sequences are also called strategies

The idea of the sequencing of representations comes from computer science and from the TOTE model (see Principle 1) which led to the NLP process of detecting a client’s strategy. Any experience, and the memory of it, are laid down in new neural networks that contain a new strategy. There is plenty of scientific evidence that the more strategies we learn, the more neural networks will be set up in the brain. The founders of NLP believed that it is possible to model and replicate any behaviour; that is, to learn the strategies of excellent performers. That is what is meant by the presupposition that people have all the internal resources they need and the role of the coach is to enable them to access those resources. Neuroscience provides much evidence in support of this: memories and images that create a positive state can be connected to neural networks where problem states are stored.

Empirical evidence supports the NLP process of modelling, which utilizes natural and innate learning capabilities to absorb patterns of physiology, states and behaviours. The involvement of mirror neuron circuitry particularly supports one form of NLP modelling where there is disengagement of conscious (linguistic) filters and unconscious (implicit) learning of the client’s patterns.

As thoughts normally causative of [bodily] emotions appear in the mind, they cause [bodily] emotions, which give rise to feelings [in mind], which conjure up other thoughts that are thematically related and likely to amplify the emotional state… Associative learning links emotions with thoughts in a rich two-way network.

Damasio emphasizes that emotions are not only solutions that come from evolution but that ‘emotional competence is also acquired and shaped individually and uniquely both consciously and by non-conscious modelling… this happens all the time and, with the addition of cultural conditioning, there are hardly any stimuli that are emotionally neutral by the time one is an adult’ (emphasis added). The attention that the NLP coach gives to the client’s emotional state and to the clearing of unwanted emotions is supported by Damasio’s neuroscientific evidence that emotions are ‘somatic
markers’. Principle 5 is also supported by evidence of neuroplasticity, the capacity and speed to change brain circuits, which is responsible for all learning.

Skinner’s concept of operant conditioning – namely, that all behaviour is generated by positive or negative reinforcement – was seen as the basis of generalized, unconscious behaviour responses and explains how behaviours (strategies) persist even when useless or unwanted. This means that strategies are learnt behaviours, triggered by specific sensory representations or stimuli (such as a word or smell). Strategies get reinforced and trusted, even if they do not lead to the desired outcomes. NLP has the Meta-Model and other linguistic tools for deframing and reframing that enable the collapsing, redesigning or overriding of unwanted strategies.

When looking at an NLP coach at work, as in Chapter 2, you see many skills that assist clients change the sequence and quality of their internal representations (their neurolinguistic strategies) in order to think, feel and act differently. The attention an NLP coach gives to the client’s preferences in terms of meta-programmes and values is based on the understanding that these are crystallized strategies that are amenable to some loosening and choosing on the part of the client.

Research on mirror neurons... shows that modelling and matching and mirroring representations is building rapport at a neurological level. The most important implication of [the findings about mirror neurons] is that we now have empirical evidence showing that people, at the most basic neural levels, are modelling others, learning from their behaviour by directly simulating them in their minds... The brain has a neural mechanism that allows a direct matching between the visual description of an action and its execution. The brain is hard-wired, by nature, to translate the results of visual analysis directly into action and to interpreting the visual world into our own motor circuitry.

6. Learning and change are influenced by the client’s neurophysiological state and beliefs

NLP holds that learning and changing are the process whereby such representations and sequences are acquired and modified – and emotional state has a big part in that. Strategies, or neural networks, are state-dependent.

Bolstad cites research suggesting that strong emotional states assist the learning of new strategies. Furthermore, the chemical present when the
strategy was laid down needs to be present in order to re-run the strategy. Here’s how he explains state-dependent memory and learning, which are the neurobiological process behind anchoring.

If someone is angry, for example, when a particular new event happens, they have higher noradrenaline levels. Future events which result in higher noradrenaline levels will reactivate this neural network and the strategy they used then. As a result, the new event will be connected by dendrites to the previous one, and there will even be a tendency to confuse the new event with the previous one. If my childhood caregiver yelled at me and told me that I was stupid, I may have entered a state of fear, and stored that memory in a very important neural network. When someone else yells at me as an adult, if I access the same state of fear, I may feel as if I am re-experiencing the original event, and may even hear a voice telling me I’m stupid… The task of the NLP change agents is often to transfer skills from functional networks (networks that do things the person is pleased with) to less functional networks (ones that do things they are not happy about).94

From an understanding of this unconscious conditioned learning came Pavlov’s classical conditioning that, in NLP, became the tool of anchoring that enables unwanted patterns (strategies) to be overridden. Thus a desired state, whether remembered or imagined, can be associated with a specific sensory trigger and accessed whenever the client needs or wants it.

In NLP anchoring processes the client, in an emotionally aroused state, can override such associations if they are unwanted and can create new, meaningful and desired emotional memories. Lisa Wake explains how anchoring and the development of neural chains works in the context of outcome-oriented aspects of change work: ‘By facilitating a client to find their own internal resources, positive states and times when they don’t “do” the problem, they are encouraging neural networks to be stimulated that are more aligned with the solution state than problem state.’95

The complexity of body–brain events that we interpret as ‘feeling’ and ‘thinking’ occur largely unconsciously, as neuro-scientists have shown... The importance of recent work on emotion and cognition... is, I believe, this: if none of us is truly capable of distinguishing our emotions from our cognitions, how can we help but fall victim to what LeDoux calls
‘the Associative Tendency’? Our brains have evolved to create an endless succession of (re)constructions of past events, pre-existing associations and conditioned responses in combination with present-day (‘remembered present’) beliefs, values, attitudes, needs and goals. It is this mix, this wild inextricable maze we call ‘memory’. It is in no one place in the brain, but distributed throughout in what Damasio calls ‘dispositional representations’ or ‘dormant firing potentialities’.96

Many researchers have demonstrated how learning that takes place under specific physiological conditions will more likely be recalled when the original physiological state is again present; that is evidence that state influences behaviour. Similarly, in discussing neuroplasticity, Conger97 mentions research that shows neurogenesis depends in part on learning through association; he suggests that change work that uses associative memory tasks will improve cognitive processing and decision making.

7. Modification of states, beliefs and behaviours happens through communication

This modification happens through verbal and nonverbal channels, and both consciously and unconsciously. The functioning of which humans are conscious and that can be controlled consciously represents only a small proportion of total functioning; the thoughts currently present in our minds and the behaviours we exhibit are the result of a vast amount of processing of which we are not aware.98

Neuroscientists have shown how little effect the conscious self has on the unconscious processing that produces our thoughts and feelings.99 As mentioned above, Damasio has shown that emotional competence is acquired and shaped not only consciously but also by non-conscious modelling.

So science confirms that most learning and changing go on in the unconscious mind. Erickson, whose work influenced so much NLP, assumed that people already have the internal resources to make the change they want; those resources just need to be acknowledged, appreciated and harnessed. Erickson’s noticing of contradictions between verbal and non-verbal patterns led to his work in creating rapport between the unconscious and conscious minds of his clients and to ways of unconsciously integrating new learning. For example, using metaphor enables the client to take on a new strategy by accessing neurological resources in one context and transferring them to another context. This process is explained neurobiologically in terms of Edelman’s finding that ‘neurons that are fired together stay wired together’.100
Erickson showed how rapidly perceptions, behaviours and states can change when the conscious mind is bypassed. His highly skilled and effective use of language to achieve this included reframing, artfully vague or hypnotic language and metaphor. The NLP presupposition that clients have unlimited resources refers to their ability to access and utilize inner, unconscious resources. In the article ‘Can you see Erickson as a coach?’ Michael Hall\textsuperscript{101} points out how Erickson’s belief in people’s resourcefulness and potential, his creating of rapport by entering clients’ subjective world and his helping clients access inner powers have influenced NLP. Hall concludes that coaching by its very nature is Ericksonian. I will come back to this point in Chapter 8 when distinguishing NLP from other cognitive behavioural and solution-focused coaching.

Modelling the work of Erickson and Satir, Bandler and Grinder developed Milton-model and Meta-model language patterns that enable clients to access their unconscious experiences. As mentioned in Chapter 2, NLP coaches and practitioners give varying emphasis to the unconscious and this is reflected in the skills they choose to use most. For example, patterns for working with parts, such as the six-step reframe, presuppose that the client’s unwanted behaviours or states are controlled by a part of their mind–body over which they have no conscious control. Lisa Wake makes the point that change work that focuses only on the conscious mind loses the potential for unconscious change and when change work focuses only on unconscious processes, the conscious self cannot rationalize past experiences and cannot apply the learning across contexts.\textsuperscript{102}

8. All communication potentially influences learning and the coach’s language, beliefs and behaviours influence the client’s experience of coaching and its outcomes

It follows that the coach’s awareness and skilful choice about their own language patterns, beliefs and behaviours – as well as sensitivity about their influence on and interaction with the client’s internal representations – are key to an effective coaching relationship and outcome. NLP coach trainings are designed to do that.

The coach’s state and beliefs reflect all the previous principles and have been called the operational presuppositions or beliefs.\textsuperscript{103} Principle 8 reflects all the previous principles, so let’s look at what is happening when the coach is operating on the basis of these principles.

Rogers’s idea that helping relationships require reflective listening, empathy and separateness of self underlie NLP practitioner skills such as state management and rapport building through calibration of representational
systems, matching and mirroring language predicates, pacing and leading; so do traditional approaches to helping skills that emphasize qualities such as congruence, empathy and positive regard.¹⁰⁴

First of all, the coach will access a resourceful mind–body–emotion state (of curiosity, know-nothingness, exquisite attention) and will create rapport (pace and lead) both verbally and nonverbally. Thompson and Collingwood find research-based support for the know-nothing state when modelling the client: ‘subvocalization (self-talk) strongly involves motor processing which, like motor activity such as finger tapping, distracts from and impairs mirror-neuron based learning.’¹⁰⁵ Research on mindfulness supports the importance of this state for coaches.¹⁰⁶

From neuroscience we know that mirror neurons enable the involuntary copying of others’ actions and speech, thereby affecting people’s ability to understand or experience the emotions of others. This finding explains why and how rapport is important.¹⁰⁷ Lisa Wake explains how rapport between coach and client assists the change process:

When a change agent validates the client’s views and negative feelings, neurotransmitters associated with those feelings are released in the subcortex of the brain. Existing neural networks are activated, resulting in the release of the stress hormone (cortisol) which floods the brain. This creates the right environment for the development of new neural pathways. The change agent then guides the client in making choices about how they want to feel. Also, the process of mirroring facial and other expressions triggers high levels of endorphins which creates an optimum environment for neural repair and development.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, modelling, which is at the heart of the NLP coach’s work, is supported by knowledge of the role of mirror neurons.¹⁰⁹

From Watzlawick, founder of Brief Therapy and author of The Language of Change,¹¹⁰ came the insight that all communication is (partly) about unconsciously communicating internal landscapes (meta-messages) and the change agent cannot not influence.

Coaches set themselves ‘outcomes’ and ‘possibility’ frames of mind. This derives from Erickson’s demonstrating how a change agent’s outcome frame and use of the well-formed outcome pattern can lead clients to become future oriented, proactive and ‘at cause’.¹¹¹ Also from Erickson, as well as from person-centred psychology, comes the NLP belief in respecting and working with the client’s model of the world.¹¹²
9. Coaching is a three-step process

As we saw in Chapter 1, a widely held view is that NLP coaching is essentially a three-step process of:

1. creating rapport and other states that are conducive to learning and changing;
2. facilitating the client’s exploration and enhancement of their resources (including internal representations, physiology, memories, imagination, states, thoughts, strategies);
3. leading the client towards their desired outcome with the client and coach in a feedback loop all the way.¹¹³

All behaviour stems from neurological processes mediated by language and thought. So coaching includes modelling for clients so they know where to place their attention (sensory acuity), how to change and increase perceptual filters and how to act flexibly.

Unsubstantiated aspects of NLP

While there is considerable support for the principles and practices of NLP coaching, there are aspects of NLP that are not (yet) supported by neurological evidence. For example:

1 The research on complex neural networks supports the critique by Bolstad,¹¹⁴ Hall¹¹⁵ and others that the linear TOTE model is too simplistic. There is a need for NLP theory and practice to become less linear.¹¹⁶
2 Chomsky’s transformational grammar cannot account for metaphor and other lexical features in NLP processes and we need to explore – with scholars in the field of cognitive linguistics – new approaches to understanding how language affects thoughts and meaning.¹¹⁷
3 There is a need to further explain the unconscious processes that occur in NLP processes (involving internal representations, language and behaviour) from both neuroscientific and phenomenological (first person) perspectives.¹¹⁸
4 We need to look more closely at the range and connections among sensory representation systems which NLP regards as resources; for example, Faulkner¹¹⁹ posits eight representational modalities, not just five (seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling).
5 Damasio’s finding of pre-conscious emotional responses suggests the need for further distinctions about the feeling modality.¹²⁰
6 A well-known feature of NLP is that certain eye movements are associated with using or accessing a particular sensory representation system.
Bolstad suggests some support for this, others believe that there are conceptual and methodological problems with research in this area that need to be addressed.

Dilts’s neurological levels are supposedly linked to universal neurological structures. However, according to Clement, there is no direct evidence of this.

Research in the field of cognitive linguistics suggests a much bigger domain – of non-representational knowledge – is available to be modelled and used in the service of personal change. James Lawley, for example, believes that the focus in NLP on only sensory representations is limiting.

We can only intervene at the level at which we can make distinctions about the situation.

In this chapter we have looked at the mechanisms of NLP – how people experience the world through their senses and translate sensory experiences into thought processes, both conscious and unconscious, which in turn activate the neurological system; how we use language to capture and conceptualize experience and then communicate that experience to ourselves and others; and how we code (mentally represent) our experience and adopt systematic patterns of response. There is considerable support from the neurosciences of the reciprocal influences of physiological state, mental state and behaviour. NLP researchers are currently looking even more closely at how knowledge is embodied and symbolic, and at the complex relationship between perception, experience, meaning and action in relation to transformational learning and change.
In Chapter 7 we looked at NLP coaching draped, as it were, on nine coat hangers – the systemic principles. We also saw in that chapter how the principles and practices of NLP coaching derive partly from the psychotherapeutic approaches of Rogers, Perls, Watzlawick, Erickson and Ellis.

In addition, many ideas in NLP coaching echo other current frameworks and practices in coaching psychology. From looking at any handbook of coaching you can see many distinct approaches to coaching in general and to coaching psychology in particular. In this chapter I briefly introduce a few approaches whose ideas overlap with NLP coaching. Following that, I specify the ideas and practices that distinguish NLP coaching and some that distinguish the NLP approach to mindfulness in coaching. Finally I address the widely held view that NLP is atheoretical. This chapter is intended as a taster for those of you who want to delve further into the links between NLP coaching and psychology.

**Links to other coaching psychology approaches**

To highlight NLP coaching ideas that are common or closely related to other approaches, I italicize the NLP ones. For example: Rogers’s insight that helping relationships require reflective listening and empathy (rapport) underpins all coaching approaches; there is strong evidence for this as a core skill in all change work. And, to a degree, state-dependent learning (anchoring of states) happens in all coaching approaches as even the coaching room and relationship create anchors.
To some observers Erickson and Bateson are originators of NLP just as they are of other brief, solution-focused approaches.\(^4\) Watzlawick and his colleagues (with the influence of Bateson’s thinking about systems and levels of change) developed brief, solution-focused approaches to therapy that were based on the principle that the client knows the solution and the therapist’s role is to ‘reconnect the client’s conscious perception of their world with their unconscious resources and facilitate resolution of the problem state... People do find new solutions, social organisms are capable of self-correction, nature finds ever-new adaptations, and the whole process of scientific discovery or artistic creation is based precisely on the stepping out of an old into a new framework’.\(^5\) This approach led to Solution-focused coaching.\(^6\)

Watzlawick and his colleagues’ insights on paradox and reframing\(^7\) also appear in Solution-focused coaching (eg noticing that the term ‘problem’ is the problem). Like NLP, the Solution-focused approach was informed by cognitive therapy\(^8\) and by Erickson’s Strategic Therapy.\(^9\) Erickson worked with clients on the problems to be solved rather than on the causes of the problem. The accessing of a problem state (state elicitation in NLP coaching) begins its restructuring into a more resourceful state.\(^10\) State interrupt, also used in Brief Therapy, assumes a link between physiology, state and behaviour.

The Solution-focused approach is outcome-oriented and uses visualization to experience the preferred future or solution. It builds on what’s working in the client’s life (in NLP this is done by replicating successful strategies) and assumes clients have many strengths and competencies (resources) that they need to recognize. The Solution-focused approach presupposes people have access to memories that can be used as behavioural resources in the present. The client is their own expert and is capable of self-directed learning. This possibility frame and the idea that change in one part of the client’s system can effect change in other parts is also seen in NLP coaching. Goals are clear and specific.

So NLP is partly based on the same cognitive behavioural approaches that have informed the Solution-focused approach over the past 20 years.\(^11\) Both approaches emphasize the clarification of goals; harnessing strengths and resources; focusing on meanings, possibilities and solutions (not ‘problems’); talking about feedback not ‘failure’; amplifying what works; suggesting that if something doesn’t work it is useful to try something different. Questioning to discover outcomes is also central to this approach and the Solution-focused approach uses precise questions to discover and sort outcomes.\(^12\) Both NLP and Solution-focused approaches are constructivist, humanistic and focus on collaboration.

James Lawley, whose work you will read more about in Chapter 10, has discussed with Solution-focused facilitators in the UK the similarities and difference between their approach and the NLP outcome-orientated approach. They agreed that it may be more accurate to call the Solution-
focused approach the *difference* or *change-orientated* process because there is a qualitative difference between a solution (to a problem) and a desired outcome.\textsuperscript{13} Incidentally, Lawley, who has trained practitioners from many different NLP schools as well as other therapy/coaching schools, also points out that while many coaching approaches involve goals, it is rare for coaches to be able to recognize a desired outcome statement during a session except when it is in answer to a direct request by the coach for an outcome.\textsuperscript{14}

**Behavioural coaching**\textsuperscript{15} is akin to performance coaching (see Table 2.1). It assumes people have positive directions and are *self-regulating*.\textsuperscript{16} This approach assumes the motivational power of *goal setting*.\textsuperscript{17} The concept of self-efficacy,\textsuperscript{18} which is *belief in one’s own abilities*, is key to this and most cognitive behaviour approaches. Other keys to behavioural coaching are social *reinforcement* and *modelling*.

Tasking is central to both Behavioural coaching and Solution-focused coaching. Tasking relates to the idea common to most coaching models that the *client is at cause*. Rogers\textsuperscript{19} started the discussion about client self-direction and autonomy; now theories of self-regulation underpin much coaching psychology. Tasking can also encourage behavioural rehearsal (*acting as if*).

The important concept of self-efficacy that developed within social learning theory\textsuperscript{20} means coaches understand that clients need to not only experience or observe success in order to attempt a task; they need to be motivated and feel good about themselves in the context of doing that task. There are many research findings on effects of self-efficacy on positive and adaptive responses.\textsuperscript{21} Researchers have found that clients who believe they are in charge of their own responses do better.\textsuperscript{22}

While Bandura noted that motivation is tied to a strong sense of self-efficacy, it was Abraham Maslow’s premise – underpinning coaching psychology and positive psychology coaching – that humans are motivated to realize *possibilities, grow, develop and self-actualize*.\textsuperscript{23} Prochaska, Norcross and DiClemente,\textsuperscript{24} whose model of change is widely used in coaching, found that *positive goals motivate* and create readiness for change.

**Motivational interviewing**\textsuperscript{25} is about facilitating the client to be ready, willing and able to change (which is similar to the fostering of *attention, intention and skill* in NLP change work). Motivational interviewing is based on three key concepts: the client’s readiness for change, which relies on the importance they give to the change (*valuing*) and on their self-efficacy or confidence regarding their ability to change (*resourceful beliefs*). The coach assesses the client’s readiness to change by asking questions and listening (which includes *calibrating* the client’s language). The coach also facilitates the client to define their current and ideal selves (*present and desired states*). The coach’s intention is to enhance the client’s intrinsic motivation by exploring their *values* and *positive goals* and by resolving any conflicts between these and their current behaviour.
The **Cognitive behavioural coaching** approach builds on Rational Emotive Therapy and the later Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy. It holds that the way people feel and act is largely determined by their beliefs. So the change agent’s role is to help people become aware of and modify their thinking, self-talk and then develop an action plan. So this approach brings in the solution-seeking concept from the Solution-focused approach as well as goal-setting theory and social cognitive theory. It also conceives of a reciprocity between thoughts, feelings, behaviour and situation and it targets all of these for change.

The insight that how we think affects how we feel, which in turn affects how we behave, has some relationship with NLP’s changing internal representations (‘submodality shifts’), changing physiology and changing language. Cognitive psychologist Beck and his colleagues taught clients to alter disturbing visual images by, for example, defocusing the picture, putting it on a TV screen, adjusting brightness. Rogers used language to support clients’ changes in perception; for example, when a client sees things in black and white.

Cognitive behaviour coaching also includes reframing and reimagining of past or future events that bother the client. It also uses hypnotic language – in the form of relaxation techniques, indirect suggestion and presupposition as well as guided visualizations – and reframing offers new meanings in any client-centred model where the aim is to stay with the client’s own perceptions, meanings and emotions.

Also related to cognitive behaviour coaching is social learning theory, which stresses the importance of behaviour (actions) as well as cognitions (knowing/thinking) and holds that learning is mediated by what people say to themselves, whether consciously or not.

**Modelling** was used by Maslow in a longitudinal study in the 1940s of successful, positive and productive people. Learning through modelling is central to Bandura’s social learning theory. However, working with role models to develop new ways of thinking, choosing and acting (eg in business or career development) is not the same as purposefully installing new strategies as an NLP coach would.

**Person-centred coaching psychology** is another approach based on Rogers’s ‘meta-theoretical assumption’ that people have the potential to grow (the tendency to self-actualize) and the coach’s role is to provide a social environment in which the client’s intrinsic motivation is facilitated. This requires the coach to be authentic, congruent and empathetic (matching client’s frames and staying in rapport) as well as accepting of the client’s world view and directions. Again, the client is their own best expert. The core conditions of the client-centred approach are aligned with the concepts of Emotional Intelligence and non-directivity (process-oriented) on the part of the change agent as well as self-determination of the client (at cause). It is also future-oriented; future focus is crucial to successful change.
Constructivism – which refers to the primacy of a person’s personal constructs in making sense of the world and determining their behaviour – is based on Rogers’s view that perception is reality and underpins his person-centred psychology. It is also central to Person-centered coaching psychology as well as to Solution-focused coaching and Cognitive Behaviour coaching.

Do you now have a sense of the numerous and intricate links between NLP and other coaching approaches? Bolstad points out that the structure of each coaching approach – including Cognitive Behaviour and Solution-focused – is itself a strategy where the coach rehearses their client through problem solving and the client takes on those strategies.

To the shared assumptions, philosophy and techniques of NLP and other cognitive behaviour and solution-focused approaches that I have touched on here, NLP added a strong emphasis on physiology in order to change emotional states and behaviours; it also added the unique and original focus on the structure of internal representation systems and the subtle language processes that help clients change those internal representations. NLP recognizes and works with the human mind–body–emotion system and how it learns and runs unconscious programmes or strategies. By utilizing all sensory representation systems NLP reduces the bias towards verbal processing that is inherent in other approaches.

**Distinctive and shared practices**

Table 8.1 highlights practices common to cognitive behaviour and solution-focused coaching methodologies, including NLP, and those that are distinctive to NLP coaching.

Here is an example of differences among these approaches: most cognitive behaviour and solution-focused coaches work with values and emotions and will ask the clients about their values. An NLP coach will uncover (model or elicit) the client’s values indirectly and then utilize the way the client uniquely represents those values internally (how they see, hear, say, feel, talk to themselves about those values) and assist the client in making changes through reorganizing, integrating and embodying those representations.

Another example is how coaches help clients change emotional state. Most cognitive behaviour and solution-focused coaches focus primarily on the mind, using words and internal representations to change thoughts and beliefs (although some foster mindfulness by having clients experiment with their physiology). NLP coaches tend to focus more on the body to change emotion: changing posture, breathing, gestures and facial expressions. NLP is more about mind–body–emotion as an interactive system than mindful states and it uses many techniques linking language and internal imagery to states and behaviour.
Table 8.1  Distinguishing NLP coaching from other coaching approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common to all cognitive behaviour and solution-focused coaching</th>
<th>Distinctive to NLP coaching</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Client-centred&lt;sup&gt;42&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Considers the ubiquity and importance of conditioned emotional responses (states)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Client at cause, responsible&lt;sup&gt;43&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Evokes and gains access to resourceful states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coach manages own state of awareness, attention, mindfulness&lt;sup&gt;44&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Thinks systemically and intervenes by changing states, physiology, behaviours, language and/or beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coach acts collaboratively, empathetically&lt;sup&gt;45&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Works with process not content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Builds rapport using perceptual positions&lt;sup&gt;46&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Gives attention to embodiment of language and thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Questioning&lt;sup&gt;47&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Hones sensory acuity to calibrate changes in physiology, gestures, eye movements, language, beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Motivational questioning&lt;sup&gt;48&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Uses a unique modelling methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasizes learning and feedback loops; positive reinforcement&lt;sup&gt;49&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Models unconscious strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Outcome/goals oriented; future focus&lt;sup&gt;50&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Works in great detail with internal representations of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Builds client’s mindfulness for self-regulation&lt;sup&gt;51&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Not biased to one (verbal/auditory or kinaesthetic) representation system&lt;sup&gt;53&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourages possibility, learning and solution thinking&lt;sup&gt;52&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Builds rapport at a non-verbal, neurological level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses linguistic reframing and positive language&lt;sup&gt;53&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Distinguishes behaviour from intent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learns from action; amplifying what works&lt;sup&gt;54&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Designs and installs new neuro-linguistic strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Utilizes state-dependent learning&lt;sup&gt;55&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Uses language patterns purposefully and subtly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cultivates positive emotions&lt;sup&gt;56&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Regards well-formedness of outcomes as key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Beliefs affect feelings and behaviour&lt;sup&gt;57&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Adds a systemic approach to multiple perceptual positioning (using language, imagery and state change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Challenges to evoke awareness&lt;sup&gt;58&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Considers and changes 60+ meta-programmes, including representations of past, present and future experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Challenges negative thoughts and cognitive distortions&lt;sup&gt;59&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>• Addresses multiple levels of learning and changing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uses metaphors for enhanced communication, change and learning</td>
<td>• Employs sensory-based tasking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Programmes the unconscious using visualization and mental rehearsal&lt;sup&gt;60&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Looking at the distinctive features of NLP (Table 8.1) can you see they include ways to change cognition, affect and behaviour – the three domains of psychology?

**More on mindfulness**

Mindfulness refers to the state or skills with which an individual examines their own thinking, emotions and behaviour while they are occurring. There is research evidence that it enhances behavioural regulation\(^6^4\) and there is currently much interest in the role of mindfulness in coaching, for both coach and client.\(^6^5\)

The significance of mindfulness to coaching psychology is that it leads to autonomy, which in turn enables improved quality of actions and well-being.\(^6^6\) It is a complex set of skills at the heart of coaching because it is about managing emotions – both for coach and client. It is partly about perceptual positions, concentration, awareness, presence, focus, acceptance, decentring (thoughts are just thoughts and not the truth), being in the moment.\(^6^7\) Mindfulness also relates to metacognition, which is a key to coaching and we talk more about it in Chapter 10.

There is theoretical support and empirical evidence for the idea that mindfulness can enhance a coach’s ability to concentrate, be present and give focused, detached attention to the coaching client and process.\(^6^8\)

From an NLP perspective, a limitation of some mindfulness training is that it assumes that mindfulness is experienced the same way by everyone and introduces content rather than understanding what it takes for any particular coach to experience focus, awareness, acceptance, decentring and ‘not-knowing’. (Dilts refers to the state of ‘not knowing’ as a strategy used for facilitating the process of gathering information and modelling others, a state in which all previous mental maps and assumptions can be put aside.\(^6^9\))

Also from an NLP perspective, there are several approaches to helping coaches practice mindfulness. They include (1) modelling the neuro-linguistic structure of the experience of focus, awareness and/or attention of those coaches whose clients get lasting outcomes; (2) eliciting a coach’s unique strategy – in terms of the sequencing and quality of sounds, pictures, feelings and language, meanings they use to access a resourceful state of mindfulness; and (3) using hypnotic language and anchoring to take on a mind–body–emotion state of know-nothing (stacking anchors for concentration, awareness, presence, focus, acceptance, decentring, knowing-nothing).

NLP coaches encourage clients’ mindfulness by using precision questioning to increase awareness of embodied experience\(^7^0\) and to access hidden layers of unconscious thinking and feeling.\(^7^1\) This contrasts, for example, with Rock’s bias towards ‘thinking’ and ‘brain’ rather than the mind–body–emotion system in his Neuroleadership model.\(^7^2\)
NLP, like other cognitive behaviour approaches to change work, takes a different approach from Buddhist-based mindfulness, which creates change by bringing to light experiences of which the client was formerly unaware. Whereas NLP and other cognitive behaviour approaches to change address meta-cognitions, Buddhist-based mindfulness creates change ‘as unconscious patterns of behavior become exposed to the light of conscious awareness… they lose much of their power to deceive and compel us’.73

Mindful awareness is different from metacognition insofar as mindfulness involves participant observation without evaluation… it is awareness of, rather than thinking about, mental events.74

**Is NLP really ‘atheoretical’?**

It is well documented that the original developers of NLP were more interested in demonstrating that their approach got results than in explaining why. So among NLP practitioners and coaches there has been a widespread view that NLP is atheoretical.

Michael Hall and I have debated this with our colleague Bruce Grimley.75 Bruce himself has shown that NLP draws on established theories76 and when claiming NLP is atheoretical he means that there is no coherent, cause–effect explanation for the way NLP works. We are in agreement that while the influence of psychology on NLP was often implicit, NLP is inextricably linked to psychological theories and models. Tosey and Mathison77 support the view that it is simply the case that the theories behind NLP have, until now, not been articulated. And we all agree that there is more theorizing and researching to be done on the mechanisms of NLP.78
Empirical evidence

The benefits of coaching research for coaching practitioners is to help us better understand which interventions work and when.¹

In this chapter we continue to explore the evidence for NLP coaching by:

- glancing back historically at the NLP approach to research;
- summarizing the state of existing research on NLP coaching; and
- identifying valid and useful types of research for the future of this field.

The historical role of research in NLP

The originators of NLP were not interested in ‘proving’ their approaches worked; rather, they wanted to demonstrate how. They were not concerned to prove NLP was right, just that it got results. As Auble stated,² NLP is based largely on intuitive and authoritative knowledge rather than scientific knowledge based on observations in which observers’ subjectivity was limited. Common sense and reasoning were used. NLP methods and techniques come from many other disciplines, themselves based on reason, logic and common sense.

Furthermore, NLP philosophically values subjective experience and knowledge over ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ knowledge. Words, personal meanings and responses – the very focus of NLP – are associated with qualitative research.³ Whereas positive psychology emphasizes scientific method, NLP research is primarily phenomenological research grounded in constructivist theory.⁴

Having said that, let’s not forget the rigour in the pure modelling of Bandler and Grinder; it’s worth recapping the process and context of discovery
and development of the early NLP patterns. This is the pure NLP modelling referred to in Chapter 1 and it started with rigorous formal thinking about, and representation of, human behaviour derived from logic, linguistics and computer science, psychology and anthropology.5

NLP developed out of ‘small experimental-research therapy groups’ in the late 1970s in Santa Cruz led by Bandler and Grinder.6 This involved inductive testing and documenting as done, for example, by Bandler and Grinder in their books The Structure of Magic I and II. The historical narrative of the development of Classic NLP and the later New Code appears in Whispering in the Wind.7 Here’s a taste of it:

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First stage (Classic NLP) 1971–1979: Evidence for the language model, the Meta Model: Some language patterns were deduced from the existing, explicit code for capturing verbal patterning. Others were induced: over several months Grinder observed and imitated the patterning of highly effective therapists until there was agreement among modeller and modelled that the modeller could produce responses/results as effective as the therapists he modelled. The developers focused only on the patterns they were attempting to explicate and test. They tested these patterns in the context of change work, discarding some and retaining others until the Meta Model was complete. Through exploration and openness to discovery, Bandler and Grinder started noticing that words reflect how we think, feel and create rapport (or not). They used reasoning/logic/case study evidence for focus on form rather than content.8

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The sensory-based descriptions in NLP modelling yield information that is directly observable and verifiable by the senses, so in principle they are empirical and replicable.

Since NLP is ‘the art of modeling those complex differences that make the difference between a top performer and an average performer’;9 the art and skill of modelling can be used to understand and evaluate this coaching too. Dilts10 has written in detail about modelling as a research methodology: how to model from different perceptual positions, using an evidence procedure, the steps in modelling and multi-level modelling questions.11

Joseph O’Connor is a coach trainer and executive coach, author of many books on NLP, systemic thinking and coaching.12 In a recent book written with his partner Andrea Lages they say, ‘We have modelled the patterns of excellent coaches. We can say exactly what works best and what does not’.13 So I asked Joseph to share with us how he used NLP modelling to develop his approach to coaching. Here he talks about evidence-based NLP modelling:
NLP is a modelling methodology. It was built by modelling excellent communicators and the results became the tools of NLP. There are at least three methods documented in NLP on how to model and in theory any human activity can be modelled.\(^{14}\)

I have used modelling techniques to study excellent coaches, and many of the distinctions I have used have not come originally from NLP, but from other evidence-based disciplines of psychology. As I have very little space I will briefly indicate four areas that I believe are important and leave the reader to follow them up from the references at their leisure.

1. Good coaches get good rapport. In NLP terms, they have a facility to take a rich second position with their client. They are ready and willing to leave their own reality in order to better understand another’s. They take both emotional and cognitive second position. Rapport plus sincerity plus competence build into trust – an essential for the coaching relationship.

2. Good coaches listen. A truism, but listening is not the same as hearing. There are (at least) three levels of listening. The first level is where everything is referenced to the listener. If the client says, ‘I am having difficulty delegating’ the coach is most likely to think ‘Oh! So do I!’ Their response never goes beyond their own preoccupations. The second level is ‘focused listening’. It is focused on the client. So in response to the same issue, the coach might say, ‘Tell me more about that.’ The third level is deep listening or systemic listening. The coach is aware of self, client and context; there is little or no internal dialogue and no judgment.

3. This brings us to the third point. What do good coaches listen for? They listen for what is missing – they listen to what the client does not or cannot say. They employ systemic or dialectical thinking.\(^{15}\) Dialectical thinking takes the basic idea that the client brings (eg delegation) and illuminates it from many angles to see what is missing from the client’s account. Client problems rarely exist in themselves but in the way that the client thinks about them, so the answer will lie in another way of thinking. Most clients think in logical terms where one thing is defined in contrast to another. Dialectical thinking looks at both in a bigger picture. This subject is a big one but essential for a good coach.

4. Finally good coaches have reached a certain level of personal development. Most people are familiar with Piaget\(^{16}\) and therefore tend to think of development as stopping with physical maturity. There is a rich literature on adult development, essential for a coach to know. One of the best approaches is found in Robert Kegan’s work.\(^{17}\) A basic skill of a coach is to take something that the client was identifying with and hold it up so the client can see it objectively. The client has been acting this out rather than seeing it. A coach helps a client become aware of their habits of thinking (in NLP terms ‘limiting beliefs’) only to the extent that the coach is free of them. The coach can only help the client to see what
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the coach can see in themselves, therefore the developmental level of the coach is a critical factor in their success with a client. I have elaborated most of these ideas in my two books on coaching.18

We will talk more about evidence from the perspective of NLP modelling in Chapter 12.

The verdict so far

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the systematic and rigorous study of NLP in relation to health, learning, organizational development and personal development.19

To date, there have been quantitative, quasi-experimental control studies as well as qualitative case studies that support the use of NLP in psychotherapy, especially in terms of the speed with which it gets results in health, addictions as well as spelling.20 However, there are only one or two on NLP-based coaching as distinct from counselling. This contrasts with the growing number of systematic studies of the efficacy of other cognitive behaviour and solution-focused coaching models.21

It seems to me useful to think about research in NLP coaching in terms of three areas of coaching research: what efficacy/impacts does coaching have; how effective is this coaching methodology compared with other methodologies; and what specific coaching behaviours make the difference?22

Impacts: Does it work?

Many practitioners have witnessed that NLP has techniques that make choices available to clients within short periods of time but we do not yet have independent evidence that it works.23 Reviewing the meagre academic NLP literature, Tosey and Mathison concluded that there is no substantiative support for NLP and yet there is insufficient evidence to dismiss it.24

Similarly, Thompson25 concluded that much of the experimental research on NLP in the 1980s – for example, randomized control studies to test representation system matching – was methodologically flawed. He suggests, ‘NLP can and should be researched, quantitatively and qualitatively… If adequate research is to take place, concise, highly specified and empirically verifiable descriptions of the models of NLP need to be in place.’

The coaching process: How does it work?

Jane Mathison’s research was the first formal testing of NLP’s model of, and assumptions about, language patterns (see Principle 4 in Chapter 6).
She found evidence of the effect of language on beliefs and of how language changes internal representations and then a person’s responses. As Jane demonstrates, modelling is a qualitative methodology for getting evidence of cause and effect. Jane asked what languaging and rapport building are happening during transformative learning that lead to changing internal representations and beliefs that in turn lead learners to feel and act differently long after the experience. She found, for example, that learners see possibilities (their eyes flit around as they access old and new images), they then see the world in different qualities of colour, size, distance and sound, then they get a feeling of excitement that leads them to go inside themselves to reflect. Or they may want to share/talk with other people, which leads them to form new intentions or goals, which energizes them to take action.

More recently Jane’s phenomenological (first-person) study of being coached describes the coach’s skilled questioning and the resulting transformational experience of the client. This study demonstrates how observing, recording and critically reflecting on the coaching experience help understand what happens, when, how and with what outcome in the coaching process. Notice that this qualitative research is essentially self-modelling. NLP modelling can be used as a method for researching coach behaviours and client responses (the coaching process) as long as the modelling process is systematic and explicit.

Sally Vanson undertook an exploratory case study in a professional services firm that wanted to know how best to support the promotion process. She started off with a systematic exploration of ‘what was going on inside’ for the professionals and used Dilts’ Neurological Levels model to help understand the stress the professionals were experiencing as they faced changing skills, roles and responsibilities. This way Sally identified various sources of tension and stress – including the need for planning and visualizing promotion, for dealing with feelings of ‘not being good enough’ and the need for anchors and symbols to reinforce the new identity. This research then informed the coaching programme that Sally brought to the firm.

Comparisons: Which method works best?

There is evidence that the success of psychological interventions is explained more by professional–client rapport than by the particular model or method the professional uses. However, while acknowledging that the professional–client relationship was key, Passmore and Gibbes question whether different effects would arise from different coaching interventions and whether different interventions may be more suited to certain individuals and issues. Hence the importance of carrying out comparative studies.
We do not yet know whether NLP coaching works better than other cognitive behaviour and solution-focused models of coaching or any of the other approaches, nor in what contexts.

**Yin and yang in coaching research**

*Quantitative and qualitative studies are the yin and yang of modern research.*

In coaching psychology there is a strong commitment to scientific research, which means following the principles of scientific method, proposing hypotheses, collecting data as an unbiased observer and carrying out empirical investigations to test hypotheses. For example, speaking in the language of science, Stober and Parry\(^32\) point to the need to identify the independent and dependent variables that can demonstrate the impact of coaching and the need to uncover the mechanisms by which these independent and dependent variables operate.

We must seek to uncover the mechanisms by which [independent and dependent variables] operate, along with the mediators and moderators that influence them. By answering questions about how coaching works and what constructs are relevant (e.g., self-concept, self-efficacy, goal-achievement, life or job satisfaction, client and coach types), we can begin to develop testable theories of coaching.\(^33\)

The scientific view says that if we want to find out specifically what NLP skills/tools make a difference in coaching, we need to isolate those skills and test their effects statistically. This was done by Attwater\(^34\) and by Zyl and Lee\(^35\) who randomly assigned clients to interventions using either the meta-model or other counselling techniques.

*If we see a pattern over many clients, it’s time for a hypothesis and an experiment, but it’s not a fact.*\(^36\)

A criticism of ‘scientific fundamentalism’ is the implication that until a coaching methodology is shown by a double-blind controlled study to be effective, or if we can’t yet explain how it works, then it has no value; *either* a coaching intervention can be explained by current science *or* it is not valid. However, in the field of coaching research there is a new ‘both/and’ paradigm
of inquiry that considers a greater range of evidence than that of the strict scientific paradigm. As we saw in Chapter 5, the ‘post-modern’ approach is one of multiple perspectives and pluralism. In relation to research, this new paradigm asks different questions and considers a range of data and interpretations. Useful findings about executive coaching have already come from studies of varying sample sizes and sampling processes as well as from a range of methods of data collection and analysis.37

Hence I distinguish between rigorous research and strictly scientific research. Others also argue that there is a place for both quantitative and qualitative approaches in coaching research and that ‘an appropriate combination may enhance productive and practically applicable research through complementary methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation, depending on the overall purpose of the research’ (emphasis in original).38 And indeed, in recent years the boundaries between quantitative and qualitative have become blurred.39 Seale talks of the need among qualitative and quantitative researchers to respect each other’s skills and data.40

**Exploratory/inductive studies**

*Phenomenology*, of which Jane Mathison’s NLP research is a great example, is an established qualitative research methodology. It is exploratory and inductive; it uses first-person accounts in contrast to second-person accounts, which are used in interviews, and third-person accounts, which are used in observational studies. Similarly, *grounded theory* means basing hypotheses on what is being observed and induced. An example is Sally Vanson’s action research around issues of professional identity in the organization in which she was doing some coaching. Another example is a study that looked at coaching as a process of making meaning, from a social constructionist and phenomenological perspective.41 The usefulness of case studies for understanding both the process and impacts of coaching for organizational effectiveness has been demonstrated by leading coaching psychologists Annette Fillery-Travis and David Lane.42

Jane Mathison’s research, mentioned above, shows how NLP modelling of verbal and non-verbal (sensory) feedback can be used to understand changes in thinking and responding – as long as there are benchmarks or criteria for the modelling process.

By using open and closed questions and analysis of recorded coaching sessions we can learn about what works best and what doesn’t work as well. And qualitative researchers can use template analysis and thematic analysis of clients’ response to open questions;43 they can do content analysis and language analysis44 of recorded sessions using simple coding protocols or computer-assisted qualitative data analysis of coaching sessions.45
In pointing out that current qualitative research covers an immensely diverse set of practices, Seale and his colleagues advocate that the only orthodoxy needed is rigour, consistency and fruitfulness.46

**Evaluative/deductive studies**

While qualitative research explores the nature of the process and impacts of coaching, quantitative research tends to be evaluative of outcomes or testing hypotheses.47

In making the case for a better relationship between science and NLP, Hollander48 points out that even scientific results can be generalized in an unscientific way and that quantitative results have limited use as guidelines for practice. That said, it is also the case that many coaching psychologists believe the only way to demonstrate the efficacy of NLP coaching is by using the scientific method of randomly allocating people to different coaching programmes and comparing the outcomes of each programme.

As with qualitative methods, there is diversity among quantitative studies. They differ not only in design of data collection and in data analysis but also in scope (and cost).

Evaluation research in the broader coaching field typically measures outcomes that are theorized or demonstrated in the existing research literature to result from effective coaching: self-efficacy, hope, proactivity, goal attainment, subjective well-being and others. Such studies use established survey and interview instruments to obtain client information about goal attainment.49 For example, Grant and his colleagues at Sydney University have developed a Goal Attainment Scale.50 Participants were asked to identify three goals; they then rated each goal for perceived difficulty on a four-point scale (1 = very easy to 4 = very difficult) and also rated their degree of past success in attaining the goals on a scale from 0 per cent (no attainment) to 100 per cent (total attainment). Goal attainment scores were calculated by multiplying the difficulty rating by the degree of success and dividing by the number of chosen goals to find a mean score. Participants also rated the length of time they had sought to attain these goals. Spence has discussed how this ‘more objective’ measure of goal attainment compares with self-report measures.51

Grant52 points out that the quantitative methods used in coaching psychology and positive psychology research have included primarily correlational and group statistical methods. An example relating to NLP is an impact study which compared mean changes in the widely used Personal Orientation Inventory before and after NLP training; on this basis the researchers found support for their hypothesis that training ‘is based on the principles that should enable the trainee to be more present-oriented, inner-directed, flexible, self-aware and responsive to others, that is, more self-actualized’.53
Grant’s own impact study\textsuperscript{54} used a within-subject design to study the impact of a solution-focused cognitive behaviour coaching model. Twenty-two participants in the coaching programme completed questionnaires both before and after the programmes; the questionnaires comprised well-established psychometric tools to assess goal attainment, depression and stress, quality of life perceptions, self-reflection and insight. This study was replicated in a small scale but rigorous case study using quantitative measures and data analysis.\textsuperscript{55} The latter is an interesting example of a single-case, time-series study, where data are collected at several points in time. It is a prospective study that specifies at the outset the coaching techniques to be used in the programme and the data to be collected using valid and reliable outcome measures including performance ratings. Using descriptive statistics it allows a comparison between stages of the coaching programme in order to see the effects of the programme. This is a practical alternative to using control groups as a way to evaluate a principle or hypothesis regarding individual or team coaching.

So a key issue in NLP impact studies is: how do we measure outcomes? Do we use subjective or objective measures or both?

**The case for mixed methods**

Even when using quantitative methods, qualitative design components can help put the clients’ subjective story to the numbers.\textsuperscript{56} Much rigorous research on outcomes uses qualitative analysis of clients’ feedback and content analysis of records.\textsuperscript{57}

Gyllensten and Palmer\textsuperscript{58} demonstrated a multiple method approach in studying the impact of coaching on stress reduction. They used a quasi-experimental design with before and after measures of stress, depression and anxiety. In addition, a correlation study looked at the relationship between participation in coaching and subsequent stress levels. The authors point out that, while quasi-experimental procedures in naturalistic settings have strengths and limitations, they are an alternative to randomized control trials and are suitable when investigating whether interventions work in practice. The same research team also did an interpretive, phenomenological analysis of rich data from semi-structured interview questions that provided a deeper understanding of the participants’ experience of coaching – particularly of the coach–client relationship – and stress.\textsuperscript{59}

By adding exploratory case-study elements researchers can model how clients’ thinking and actions have changed as they talk about the issues they brought to coaching and their experience of the coaching process.
Whilst large-scale randomized controlled studies are often held as being the gold standard of research methodologies, case studies have much to offer as a fundamental method of furthering our understanding of the realities of the coaching process.\textsuperscript{60}

Case studies of coaching impacts – using one coach and several clients – can utilize many different sources of information, including recorded sessions, systematic coach notes, and client interviews with open and closed questions at the end of the coaching programme. This was done in a case study of the impact of workplace coaching on one individual: a qualitative questionnaire and one post-intervention measure yielded insights into what changed for the managers as a result of the coaching.\textsuperscript{61}

Pluralistic research methods are used to study changes within an individual as well as between individuals.\textsuperscript{62} While there are limitations to small sample and within-subject designs, they can be useful for generating further research questions.\textsuperscript{63}

Passmore and Gibbes\textsuperscript{64} emphasize the need for rigour in case study research just as in randomized control studies; they even specify five guiding principles. So it is methodological rigour, rather than scientific method, that is the key.

\textit{Rigour requires methods that reduce ambiguity and add precision regarding the relationships and outcomes being studied.}

**Conclusion to Part 2**

In this section we have seen strong evidence for NLP coaching in established psychological and coaching practices. However, the jury is still out on whether and how coaching with the set of skills that distinguishes NLP has effects that differ from other cognitive behaviour and solution-focused coaching.

Some practitioner-researchers have likened NLP to psychoanalysis, which has principles not easily demonstrated in laboratory settings but, nevertheless, is strongly supported by practitioners.\textsuperscript{65} Others have argued that psychoanalysis lost ground to the behavioural and cognitive approaches by failing to define its concepts with precision and strengthen its research methods; Stober and Parry\textsuperscript{66} conclude that a lesson for coaching – and I would add especially for NLP-based coaching – is that theory and research are required for it to grow.

An evidence-based NLP needs controlled evaluation studies of the set of skills that distinguish NLP (Table 8.1) and other types of impact research
as well. In order to better understand and refine NLP coach practices – and the principles outlined in Chapter 6 – we need to consider many types of evidence including qualitative case studies and in-depth interviews with coaching practitioners and their clients. In Chapter 11 there are some specific research questions for students and researchers of NLP coaching.

From within the NLP community there are calls to continue to substantiate NLP with a range of outcomes and process studies as well as by collaborating with, and using findings of, researchers in other fields such as neuroscience and consciousness studies. One possibility for future NLP research is based on the capacity for eavesdropping into humans’ sounds and images, electrical activity and neural responses so that we can record thoughts, emotions, expectations, memories. This amounts to ‘downloading our minds onto computer’. With the convergence of computer science and neuroscience it is possible to model how the brain maps the microcircuitry of neurons and converts the physical world into electricity. Diamantopoulos has started using this in research into the eye accessing cues used in NLP.

An evidence-based NLP coaching will also draw on research in allied fields such as positive psychology, coaching psychology, cognitive linguistics, adult and transformational learning and neuroscience.

*When a vigorous cycle of research, theory and practice is developed, each part of the cycle and the field as a whole benefit.*
Part III

Towards best practice
Building on NLP coaching

The purpose of NLP is to be useful... Find out what is useful and what works by trying it out. More important, find out where it does not work and then change it until it does. That is the spirit of NLP.

Before going on to suggest some specific research on NLP coaching I want to digress again to talk about two approaches that have grown partly out of their developers’ positive experience with NLP and their curiosity about what might be even more useful. My criterion for including them is that they have drawn thoughtfully and creatively on established theories and principles (a criterion for evidence-based practice). Also, these approaches have received strong support from NLP-trained coaches. The first is Lawley and Tompkins’s Symbolic Modelling with Clean Language and the second is Hall and Duval’s Meta-Coaching based on the Meta-States and other models.

In the first part of this chapter Lisa Wake joins me in explaining Symbolic Modelling and in the second part I present Meta-Coaching. In this chapter, as in Chapter 7, the discussions cover theoretical origins, principles, the methodology that derives from those principles and the relevance for coaching in organizations.

Symbolic Modelling and Clean Language

What do you do... when your client or colleague says ‘It’s like I am hitting my head against a brick wall,’ ‘I’ve got a knot in my stomach’ or ‘I’m looking for the right path to take’?... Most [NLP] research into how people perceive the world, and most approaches for helping them
create new and better perceptions, have been sensory and conceptually based. Symbolic Modelling is a process for working with symbolic and metaphoric perceptions directly.³

Whereas three levels of modelling are distinguished in NLP (see Chapter 1), James Lawley and Penny Tompkins add a fourth, that of modelling the client’s symbolic landscape that comprises the metaphors which the client uses to represent their current situation:⁴

1. modelling what they do (their behaviour, physiology);
2. modelling how they do it (the way they think);
3. modelling why they do it (their beliefs and values);
4. modelling their symbolic expressions.

Lawley and Tompkins consider that there are fundamental differences between NLP modelling and Symbolic Modelling. NLP Modelling involves the coach working with a client to understand how they do something, how their ‘system’ works, usually to improve their performance or to stop certain patterns of behaviour. In Symbolic Modelling it is the client’s metaphorical landscape that is being modelled; this involves the active participation of the client as well as the coach in understanding the model, with the coach using ‘clean language’ to facilitate the client’s self-modelling.

Modelling client-generated metaphors enriches the [NLP modelling] methods traditionally used to encode excellence. It is our belief that some human processes are either so complex or so core that everyday behaviour, words and concepts are insufficient descriptors. Thus the human mind–body has evolved the ability to process information in metaphor and symbol. This is not just another way of representing our experience; it is a fundamentally different way of making sense of the world.⁵

At a simple level, metaphors are thoughts or representations about one situation or phenomenon in terms of another by using a story, symbol or analogy. Metaphors can have many layers of meaning and people use them to express, both verbally and non-verbally, their lived experience.
For example, when a client says: ‘This organization does not value its people and I am forever chomping at the bit to stay on track’ he is using several metaphors to express the complexity of his perceptions and feelings about his current work situation. While the form of the metaphor differs from the original experience it has a similar organization; the attributes of the metaphor’s symbols, the relationships between symbols and the logic of the whole matches what is being described; it captures the essence, the intangible, the relationships and the patterns.6

Verbal expressions may include overt metaphorical links that the client makes to describes their experience (eg ‘I feel as if they are restricting me’) and they are aware that they are using symbols to describe their experience. Verbal expressions may also include embedded metaphors, which are identified by looking at each word that the client uses, for example: ‘I managed to escape my boss’s attention.’ Here the key word is ‘escape’; the client experiences being captured or imprisoned in some way.

Non-verbal expressions include the use of the body through postures, gestures, facial expressions, eye movements, and through the use of sounds such as coughs, throat clearing, groans and sighs. Material expression includes the use of physical objects such as equipment, objects that are played with during the coaching, clothing that is worn and the use of colours.

So a coach trained in Symbolic Modelling also works with the way people see, hear and feel symbolism (meaning) in material objects and the environment they are in – including the coaching room. And the coach works with the client’s imaginative symbolic expressions – the way they create their internal virtual reality by seeing objects and events with the mind’s eye, hearing sounds and internal dialogue and feeling emotions and other sensations. An example is a client ‘feeling like the world is collapsing in on’ them, where there is a mind–space relationship to the world.

Explicit metaphors are only a tiny fraction of metaphors used in everyday speech. The ‘key’ to recognizing these mostly unconscious implicit metaphors is to notice that conversations are ‘littered’ with metaphors. In fact it is ‘hard’ to ‘put together’ an ‘everyday’ sentence which does not ‘contain’ a ‘hidden’ metaphor.7

As metaphors embody and define intangible experience, they specify and constrain ways of thinking about the original experience. So metaphors are both descriptive and prescriptive;8 they can be tools for creativity or self-imposed prison. This idea came from the founders of NLP.9
The primary purpose of Symbolic Modelling is to facilitate an individual to reflect on and learn about their unique metaphoric representations. Penny and James give the following basic example of how Symbolic Modelling is used in executive coaching. A client who was on a final warning for his poor sales performance said, ‘It is like I am operating with the handbrake on.’ Once he had safely released the brake and developed his Metaphoric Landscape, within six months he became the second-highest performing salesperson in the company.

Any organization or business, too, has implicit and explicit metaphors that may help or hinder it in attaining its outcomes. ‘The biggest challenge facing the modern manager is to become accomplished in the art of using metaphor: to find appropriate ways of seeing, understanding and shaping the situations with which they have to deal.’

**Theoretical origins**

Penny and James allude to the interest among psychologists as eminent as Jung in understanding the meanings of metaphors and the ways people’s inner experiences are verbalized and physicalized. They also point out that Bandler and Grinder were among the first to apply the correlations between language, behaviour and imaginative representations to psychotherapy.

David Grove, a psychotherapist who worked with clients’ metaphors as a way of resolving traumatic memories, extended this to symbolic representations such as ‘seeing an image of a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow’, ‘hearing the perfect pitch of a bell at the bottom of the sea’ and ‘feeling the sensation of a knot in my stomach’. Out of this work, Grove developed ‘clean language’ which was modelled by Lawley and Tompkins. ‘Clean Language is a series of questions that minimally “contaminate” the client’s perceptions with the coach’s own metaphors, assumptions and presuppositions.’

Modelling Grove, who partly drew on the figure–ground distinction from Gestalt psychology, Penny and James developed a model of perception from the client’s perspective. They also drew on ‘the emerging theory of cognition that holds that mind is not a thing but a process; cognition is a process of knowing’ and involves perception, emotion and action as well as language, conceptual thinking and all other aspects of human consciousness.

Lakoff and Johnson’s work on cognitive linguistics had also shown that metaphor is not just a matter of language:
Many cognitive scientists now conclude that people not only talk in metaphor, but also think and reason in metaphor; they make sense of their world through metaphor, and they act in ways that are consistent with their metaphors.\textsuperscript{22} And most of our metaphors are derived from the way human bodies interact with their environment, ie they are experiential through and through. Mind is an embodied phenomenon, from the electro-chemical level all the way up to the highest psychological levels.\textsuperscript{23} Thus the organisation of a client’s language and behaviour will be isomorphic with [have the same structure as] the organisation of their cognitive processes, and both will be grounded in the embodied nature of experience.\textsuperscript{24}

The embodied nature of some metaphors is supported by evidence from Johnson’s \textit{The Body in the Mind}\textsuperscript{25} and Pinker’s \textit{How the Mind Works}.\textsuperscript{26} James Lawley and Penny Tompkins highlight three reasons why they consider their work important in understanding the meaning of a client’s metaphor:

1. Metaphor is about capturing the essential nature of experience.
2. Metaphor is an active process which provides understanding of ourselves, others and the world around us.
3. Metaphor is more than a verbal expression; it includes any expression or thing that is symbolic for a person.\textsuperscript{27}

James and Penny also found that the works of author and critic Koestler\textsuperscript{28} on creative states and of Rossi\textsuperscript{29} on mind–body healing explain how Symbolic Modelling ‘seems to induce creative breaks in our habitual patterns’.\textsuperscript{30} They also incorporated the work of cognitive scientist Pinker,\textsuperscript{31} who highlighted location in space as a fundamental metaphor within language. And they have subsequently drawn on work on the neurobiology of space.\textsuperscript{32}

The change component of Symbolic Modelling is supported by Bateson’s systems thinking, where change that occurs in higher-level patterns will always result in change at lower levels within the system.\textsuperscript{33} Penny and James say:
For a change in a Metaphor Landscape to be noticed, one or more attributes of a symbol, or a group of symbols, has to be seen, heard, felt or in some other way sensed by the client as different compared to how they were before. Even changes to organizing patterns will be embodied in differences to the attributes and location of symbols.34

Wilber refers to this as the self being ‘given a new way to think or feel about reality’.35

Like in NLP, Symbolic Modelling’s interest in metaphor relates to its interest in the unconscious mind and draws on the work of Erickson and of Rossi.36 It also draws on NLP for an understanding of the relationship between language, behaviour and imaginative representations.37

In summary, Symbolic Modelling has its origins in the systems thinking of Gregory Bateson,38 the self-organizing systems of Ken Wilber39 and the mind–body work of Rossi,40 cognitive linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson41), the ‘clean language’ of David Grove42 as well as the understanding NLP has of the relationships between language, internal representations and behaviour.

**Principles**

The main principle of change work with Symbolic Modelling is to enable the client to change an existing unuseful model of the world to a more useful one.43 This principle is supported by the principles of self-organizing systems; metaphor landscapes, like people and organizations, are *self-organising systems*.

Self-organizing systems are characterized as follows:

1. being organized into levels;
2. each level of the organization or individual is simultaneously a whole and part;
3. the system simultaneously self-preserves and self-adapts;
4. each level of the system exhibits emergent properties;
5. each lower level is nested within a hierarchy of higher levels and each higher level transcends and includes all lower levels.44

Thus Metaphor Landscapes evolve according to six characteristics of systemic change and this change manifests as a difference of form over time.
The five stages to the Symbolic Modelling change process are congruent with and reflect the self-organizing and self-perpetuating system. Rather than linear, they are emergent, systemic and iterative:

Stage 1 – Entering the symbolic domain, where clients become aware of the symbolism of their communication. This can be done through Clean Language, or the client may become aware of it as they focus more on the inner world.
Stage 2 – Developing symbolic perceptions, focuses on individual symbolic perceptions in time.
Stage 3 – Modelling symbolic patterns. The client considers multiple perceptions and begins to connect with their metaphorical landscape and their perception across these patterns.
Stage 4 – Encouraging conditions for transformation, which may include addressing binding patterns through moving to higher forms of pattern or changing the attention on the boundaries of the pattern.
Stage 5 – Maturing the evolving landscape. New symbols are evolved, developed and differentiated that are then carried across boundaries to create new patterns, resulting in changes in behaviour and perception.

Methodology

A process of Clean Language supports the five stages. As Penny Tompkins and James lawley point out in their trainings, modelling is the methodology and metaphor is the medium, while Clean Language is the means.

Grove identified the purpose of ‘clean language’ as being threefold: for the therapist to keep their language clean so that client’s language can emerge; for the therapist to use clean language to enable the client to access their own internally held experience; and for the client to find their own answer.

Some of the operating principles were influenced by the NLP presuppositions: life and mind are systemic processes, all behaviour has a positive intent, the importance of being process-oriented and focusing on the client’s subjective reality, and recognizing that as a system becomes more complex more flexibility is required.

Modelling is the methodology and metaphor is the medium, while Clean Language is the means.
Clean Language is used to enable clients to attend to their metaphoric expressions – verbal and non-verbal, including spatial, kinaesthetic – so that they can explore, see, feel and change their own unique way of perceiving. While Grove was the originator of Clean Language, Tompkins and Lawley codified the syntax, vocal qualities, non-verbals and clean questions through their modelling. The coach listens and watches for the client’s metaphors – assuming they describe the client’s way of being in the world – and asks questions that don’t introduce any of the coach’s metaphors. There are nine basic clean questions:

1. And is there anything else about (client’s words)?
2. And what kind of (client’s words) is that (client’s words)?
3. And that’s (client’s words) like what?
4. And where is (client’s words)?
5. And whereabouts (client’s words)?
6. And then what happens?
7. And what happens next?
8. And what happens just before (client’s words)?
9. And where could (client’s words) come from?

Here is an example where a coach (C) facilitates a manager (M). Italics are used to highlight the format of the basic Clean Language questions, not to signify emphasis.

C: And what would you like to have happen?
M: I want to understand why our organization is not more successful.
C: And when you want to understand why your organization is not more successful, your organization is like what?
M: You could say it’s like a machine.
C: And what kind of machine?
M: [Pause] It’s like a combine harvester, I suppose.
C: And is there anything else about that combine harvester that your organization is like?
M: It’s flexible with interchangeable parts depending on the type of crop.
C: And is there anything else about it being flexible with interchangeable parts?
M: Timing is so important. Too early or too late and you miss the opportunity. It’s no good harvesting until the crop is ready.
C: And then what happens?
M: We go through the whole cycle again.
C: And where could that cycle come from?
M: It’s the natural order of things. [Pause] That’s it. We have to educate the new recruits in the nature of the cycle. They try to rush things or they give up too quickly. If they knew about the cycle…
Coaching skills

A coach using Symbolic Modelling needs to be able to attend to client-generated verbal and nonverbal metaphors, communicate via Clean Language, facilitate clients to self-model and be guided by the logic inherent in the client’s symbolic expressions. More specifically, this modelling-in-the-moment involves clearing the mind, acute listening and observing, being able to retain and recall information, backtracking, thinking systemically and at multiple levels, knowing the clean questions and how to ask them in order to identify and develop the client’s metaphors, and developing resource states that emerge. In the process the coach helps the client understand the underlying structure of their thinking rather than getting bogged down in content, works with client’s desired outcomes, recognizes, acknowledges and develops the client’s changes.

Penny Tompkins says, ‘NLP – the structuring of subjective experience – is behind my head all the time I model metaphors. However, I seldom use NLP techniques any more. Instead, I use a Clean Language approach to keep my attention open to the unexpected’.53

Not knowing is ‘trusting the information in the system’.54

Practice

Like NLP, Symbolic Modelling was initially developed in therapeutic contexts though, with a focus on generative change, it was never restricted to remedial change. Like NLP modelling, Symbolic Modelling is used to model successful strategies, change limiting metaphors and create new metaphors (Figure 10.1). And so like NLP, Symbolic Modelling has in recent years been used in personal, executive and organizational coaching. It is especially useful for working with the more abstract/intangible issues of identity, purpose and double binds.

In a recent interview James gave examples of how he and Penny have used Symbolic Modelling and Clean Language to assist companies. The interviewers summarized the three areas where companies have benefited from this methodology:

1. Knowing about the function of metaphor allows managers to consciously choose the ones they use. This helps them make themselves understood and to understand others.

2. Understanding how people process language allows companies to clarify hidden goals, visions, plans, strategies; make documents supportive of, and congruent with, the intended message; designing questions to get
to hard-to-gather information; improving questionnaires and forms so they help rather than hinder the respondent; removing unwanted bias or inconsistent messages embedded in texts; present information in a variety of ways so as to appeal to a range of preferred styles of taking in information; and make use of metaphor to convey strong messages.

3. Devising change programmes that are centred on improving what is already working rather than focusing on problems, solutions and wholesale change. This involves a generative and outcome-oriented approach; it considers the ecology of the wider system, develops qualities that are already there and looks for qualities that need to be preserved. The change agent asks questions such as: Which qualities do the individuals and the teams demonstrate? How can these be enhanced and used elsewhere? Who do you admire or look to for inspiration? What needs to happen for you to take on some of those qualities?

![Figure 10.1 Ways of applying Symbolic Modelling](image-url)
James and Penny’s work is highly regarded. Angus McLeod says:

Clean Language and Symbolic Modelling provide exquisite language for maintaining and assisting states-change at a deeper and more organic level than conscious thought and provides a systematic approach for right-brain integration which the other models may stimulate from time to time but do not underpin as a strategy of change.57

Penny and James continue to explore the emergent knowledge and behaviours of complex systems – people and organizations – in order to facilitate change even more effectively. The Clean Language website58 offers a wealth of explanations, research, applications and case studies relating to the uses of modelling metaphors in businesses and large organizations.59

In her inductive and phenomenological approach to exploring professionals’ coaching needs in the organization in which she coached, Sally Vanson60 also used Symbolic Modelling and Clean Language questions as a research tool ‘to get richness and depth… to the responses of the people I was working with’. See Chapter 9.

**Meta-Coaching**

Now let’s look at a second innovative NLP-based approach to coaching that grew out of Michael Hall’s Meta-States Model.61 During its first years, NLP focused on the level of primary states and responses. DeLozier and Grinder62 conceived of a ‘controller’ state at a higher logical level, a second-order level or executive state; Dilts, too, was interested in meta-responses to sensory representations.63 Then Hall studied more closely the process whereby we become aware of our states, their precise sensory qualities and the meanings we give them.

Hall modelled the way these higher levels of thought and feeling govern experience; in other words, he modelled neurolinguistically the way in which people think and feel about primary states (eg fear) and thus experience and create ‘states about states’ or meta-states (eg embarrassment about fear).

How is this relevant to coaching? Self-reflexive consciousness (meta-cognition) is vital because coaching is about facilitating a client’s performance, experience, learning and actualizing of goals. In coaching change, the coach enables the client to reflect on potentials they previously may not have believed they had and on beliefs and feelings that may be holding them back. Despite psychologists’ interest in meta-cognition, little has been done to model the multi-level structure and experience of self-reflexive
consciousness in order to explain how meta-cognition actually occurs and how it can be enhanced.

**Theoretical context**

In his levels of abstraction model, Korzybski described how people summarize (or abstract) from the outer world via their sense receptors and again abstract as they say sensory-based words; then they again abstract using evaluative words, about which they again abstract with more evaluative words. Korzybski described these different experiences as second-order abstractions, third-order abstractions and so on. *Reflexivity* described the mechanism that drives these levels of abstraction and the meta-level thinking/feeling experiences. When we reflect back onto ourselves, our minds no longer focus on things ‘out there’ but on things inside.

Whereas NLP was launched with Korzybski’s cognitive behavioural distinction (‘the map is not the territory’), the Meta-States Model brought in Korzybski’s ‘structural differential’ (or level-of-abstraction) model relating to the effect of one state upon another (‘first-order effects’ vs ‘second-order effects’ such as pitying pity). The Meta-States Model also incorporated the insights of Bateson and his associates, especially Paul Watzlawick.

The difference between the types or levels of change, according to Watzlawick, is that a first-order change is that which occurs within a frame. Second-order change is when we move to a ‘meta-level’ and change the frame itself. Bateson proposed that meta-messages always modify lower-level messages. He used the term *meta-function* in relation to complex human experiences and explored the logical levels of learning. As we saw in Chapter 7, *feedback systems* were a key feature in his systems thinking.

Based on the above sources Hall enumerated the principles of meta-level processing.

**Meta-level principles**

1 *Hierarchical levels function as a self-organizing system.* The higher levels arise out of the lower ones and feed back information into the system to influence the lower levels. As a system with feedback properties the system is *cybernetic*; it feeds back on itself and changes itself.

2 *As a cybernetic system, new features emerge* as information moves up logical levels. The emergent property does not exist only as the sum of the parts but new properties arise within the system.

3 *Self-reflexive consciousness* is one such new feature that emerges. *Reflexivity* describes the mechanism that drives second-order abstractions, third-order abstractions and so on and creates meta-level thinking/feeling experiences. When people reflect back onto themselves, their minds no longer focus on things ‘out there’ but on things inside.
4 Higher frames govern experience – including subsequent thoughts, feelings, ideas, beliefs, expectations, solutions – and so a person who sets their higher frames takes charge of their subsequent experience.

5 Higher levels are more encompassing and impactful than lower levels; they organize and control information on lower levels.

6 The ability to identify a higher frame enables us to change it and set a new one. This installs a new self-organizing attractor at the top of the neuro-semantic system and thereby transforms the system.

7 Higher-level frames are set by the cultures, languages, families or professions of the individual and are normally out of their conscious awareness. Higher frames govern experience. So when people have high-level, unconscious negative thoughts and feelings their relationship with themselves becomes disturbed in the sense that self-condemning or self-repressing thoughts feed forward into unhealthy or unwanted actions, reactions and behaviours.

8 The paradox of meta-level solutions. When people transcend from state A (e.g., anger) to state B (e.g., calm), they set state B as a frame over state A and include B inside A. This gives calm anger. They have put the anger inside the state of calmness, thereby changing the internal logic of the nervous system. Hence the paradox of meta-level solutions: people can rid themselves of unwanted thoughts, feelings and behaviours by taking on a ‘higher’, more positive state.

9 Setting a new frame requires neurolinguistic energy and repetition. In order to set a new frame of meta-state, people need to do more than just think about it. They need to use language, repetition and involve the whole mind–body system.

States about states are generated by accessing one neural network (e.g., the network generating the state of ‘acceptance’) and applying it to the functioning of another neural network (e.g., the network generating the state of ‘sadness’). The result is a neural network that involves the interaction of two previous networks.

The Meta-States Model

This model explains how individuals follow the feedback loop of information into their neurolinguistic states as they represent information from the outer world. They then frame or meta-state that information as they feed back to themselves more information about that information; they feed back to themselves layer upon layer of ideas, beliefs and understandings.
Each new progressive layer sets the frame for the previous layers. Then they feed forward that information back down the levels of their mind, brain and neurology. This literally in-forms: it forms the individual on the inside and so creates various energy manifestations. This feed-forward process manifests as emotions or somatic movements in the body and in behaviour. The feed-forward loop of energy is what happens as the individual responds to stimuli in the outer world.

The feedback loop constructs information as it maps out an understanding of the world; the feed-forward loop converts that information into energy. The first is information encoding of triggers and stimuli; the second is the energy response to those triggers.

The first is the stimulus coming into our system; the second is the response to that stimulus. Each time a person has thoughts and feelings about their experience they create layers of meta-states or frames; this layering creates their belief system (beliefs embedded within yet higher beliefs). Repetition crystallizes into frames of mind, personality patterns or meta-programmes.

The primary states and meta-states distinction parallels the distinction in neuroscience between primary and secondary emotions; Damasio explains how dispositional representations trigger body states we call primary emotions and alter cognitive processing whereby we become consciously aware of the nexus between object/trigger and emotional body state. Thus we get the feeling of the emotion.

The formulation of neurolinguistic feedback and feed-forward loops of information and communication—and semantic reactions (how the mind–body–emotion system responds to meaning, not only to external stimuli) – implies the role of memory and is supported by findings in neurobiology. There are detailed explanations of how feelings are related to perceptions, including of bodily biochemical states or unlearned reactions to stimulus outside or in body or memory, through the construction of meta-representations of our mental process.

As thoughts normally causative of [bodily] emotions appear in the mind, they cause [bodily] emotions, which give rise to feelings [in mind], which conjure up other thoughts that are thematically related and likely to amplify the emotional state... Associative learning links emotions with thoughts in a rich two-way network.

Also informing the Meta-States Model was Assagioli’s psychosynthesis model and form of therapy that was based on the principle that clients can learn to step outside a problem state to think deeply about it from the
standpoint of the ‘higher self’ and Searle’s evidence that groups of people construct higher-level realities. From Frankl and from constructivism generally came the central concept of humans as meaning makers. Like other constructivist approaches (see Chapter 8), the Meta-States Model emphasizes the subjectivity of human learning and changing; however, it differs from other constructivist approaches in that it grounds all learning and changing in emotional state.

Some ‘pure’ NLP people regard meta-stating as the same as the NLP technique for collapsing anchors. However, as Michael Hall sees it, the difference is that meta-stating involves the client, with self-reflexive consciousness, making a move to a higher level of meta-cognition and thus setting the frame for the lower levels. Instead of collapsing states, the process of meta-stating creates a coalescing of states, the higher into the lower and the lower becoming embedded in the higher. Meta-stating requires a fuller use of language to help the client reframe and texture beliefs than the usual NLP prompts, ‘What would you like to experience instead? Describe fully what you would see, hear, feel, smell and taste. What words would you say to yourself?’

Finally, the Meta-States Model addresses how self-reflexivity, in the sense of self-awareness and insight, actually occurs.

**The Axes of Change Model**

In the fields of psychology and coaching there are various explanatory models of adult learning, decision making and change but none details the intra-personal mechanisms needed to ‘get a person into the critical action stage’.

In 2004 Michael Hall had started thinking about change in terms of levels of change and learning. He had researched the literature on therapeutic change, especially the Transtheoretical Model of Change. Hall noticed that this model did not fully explain how to get people to think, feel and act differently; he wanted to deal with the problems of resistance and relapse. He and Michelle Duval modelled her coaching using transcripts and video recordings.

After one Meta-Coach training – where Michelle did live coaching in front of students demonstrating the value of keeping the energy in the coaching conversation – participants kept asking Michelle about the process of what she did and how she knew what to ask and when. Then Michelle reflected on her experience with real clients in private practice and, using transcripts of about 20 live client conversations, she modelled herself as
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a coach. Third, as she and Michael stepped back and brainstormed they came up with the four meta-programmes that Michelle was tracking and coaching to. Fourth, Michael brought his research on the existing change models to bear on the insights they were getting. Thus the Axes of Change model came out of these four component [creative] processes that were happening simultaneously. It involved inductive and deductive processes on the part of Michael and Michelle.

This is how Hall and Duval postulated that there are not only steps and stages in the process of change but also levels of change that need to be taken into account for a full, robust and effective change model. They distinguished four levels of change, from lowest to highest: modifying existing skills and behaviours, learning new behaviours and beliefs, changing identity or sense of self and experiencing a whole new way of living. Thinking about change in terms of levels of change and learning means that the coach needs to ask about and understand the level of change the client wants.

Hall and Duval observed that change usually involves discovering a new idea and having it alter the way we represent and classify information and this in turn leads to new responses in feelings, speech and action. This is the principle of conditioned learning: associating external triggers with internal states. After that, people move to a higher (meta-cognitive) level and learn about learning; this is a move from associative learning to conceptual learning.

Hall and Duval conceptualized change as a verb, indicating a process of moving from one state to another according to four mechanisms or variables. The four mechanisms (as in many other change models) are motivation, decision, creation and solidification. Each mechanism is an axis with polar thinking styles or patterns. These thinking patterns are perceptual filters or meta-programmes (see Chapter 2) and derive from 16 PF, Type Theory and the Taylor-Johnson temperament analysis. The resulting eight variables (Figure 10.2) are as follows and are supported in the psychology literature:

1. Aversions/move-away motivations;
2. Attraction/move-towards motivations;
3. Awareness/reflective understanding;
4. Decision;
5. Planning/creative design;
6. Action/feed forward;
7. Reinforcement;
8. Testing/monitoring and evaluating.
The Axes of Change Model enables coaches to identify where the client is in the change process and to address with precision the client’s state and stage. Its structure has been confirmed by modelling the questioning used by several effective coaches as they coached their clients through changes⁹⁴ and there is case-study evidence of its efficacy.⁹⁵

Hall and Duval believe that the Axes of Change model eliminates client resistance since the coach addresses variables 1–4 (above) and imposes nothing on the client. Relapse is prevented by the coach addressing variables 5–8 and enabling continuous improvement and learning.

**The Meta-Coaching methodology**

As you have seen over and again, the process of coaching is one of facilitating clients to actualize their goals; this involves helping clients identify and deal with thoughts and feelings that may have been holding them back. The focus on facilitating personal change through self-reflection and insight is shared by most cognitive-behaviour and solution-focused models of coaching⁹⁶ – only the specific methodology differs.

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**Figure 10.2** The Axes of Change variables
Based on the Meta-States Model and Axes of Change Model in addition to NLP, Hall and Duval developed a methodology that enables coaches to work with clients’ self-reflexivity in order to facilitate change of higher-level frames of mind and feed those changes forward through the mind–body–emotion system. The Meta-Coach is trained to identify and work with a person’s language patterns, personality style and perceptual filters, emotional states and the mental movies they make of their experience. At each stage the starting point was the step-back skill of self-reflexivity – enabling the client to enhance their ability to explore, notice, hear, think about and understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The skill levels taught and tested in the Meta-Coaching Training System exceed the competencies required for credentialling through the International Coach Federation (ICF).

**Skills**

The Meta-Coach starts with all the key skills that all NLP coaches use: rapport building, modelling the structure of the client’s experience, clarifying outcomes, active listening and supporting, precision questioning, giving and receiving feedback, tasking clients to take actions to develop skills, and holding clients accountable. Also among the 26 Meta-Coaching skills is meta-questioning that moves the client from immediate thoughts and feelings to exploring the structure of frames, beliefs and states about their inner experiences. These questions flush out higher-level frames and extend the precision questioning of the Meta-Model (see Chapter 2).

The coach asks questions such as ‘Given that you see, hear, and feel that, what do you think or feel about that?’, ‘And what’s behind that?’. Thus the coach shows clients how to ‘move up’ the levels of mind in order to understand and transform unwanted beliefs or frames of mind; they then set and embody new frames and feed them back down from the mind into the body in order to get the desired changes in thinking, feeling and acting.

The Meta-Coach also facilitates the client through the eight states of the Axes of Change model. The coach uses questions that awaken move-towards motivation for change, questions that challenge in order to build move-away motivation, probing questions that increase awareness of need to change and provoking questions that facilitate the client’s commitment to a particular course of action. There are questions that co-create the client’s plan first in their mind, questions that actualize the decision and plan by having the client try new ways of doing/speaking, questions that reinforce and celebrate success and feedback questions that solidify the gains and identify further behaviours. It is not a linear process but rather a ‘dance’ through the change process with the coach knowing where the client is and where to facilitate the process next.
Coaching processes

Two key processes derive from the Meta-States Model. The first is modelling and teaching the *step-back* skill for the client, the use of self-reflexive awareness by stepping back from one’s current mind–body–emotion state and thinking about the pattern/layering of thoughts and feelings behind that experience. The step-back skill is key to self-reflection and to the coaching process. The second key process is that of *accessing* a desired state that would make one’s first state more resourceful and *applying* it to the first. For example, accessing a state of calmness and applying that to one’s anger would create a meta-state of *calm anger*. One could extend this to gentle anger, respectful anger or thoughtful anger and with each meta-state one is texturing and qualifying the first state with higher-level frames of mind.

Case study in career development

A client who came for coaching was feeling very stressed about looking for work after being out of the workforce for many years. The coach used *probing* questions so that the client could become aware of her state and could articulate what she wanted from coaching.

The coach used questions to *challenge* the client and *awaken* her motivation to deal with this bothersome situation. With *probing* and *provoking* questions the coach enabled the client to see and articulate that she felt embarrassed about loving doing such ‘boring’ things as spreadsheets. In addition, the client had an untested belief that her age was working against her. She also came to realize and acknowledge that money was an issue.

Using a whiteboard, the coach guided the client in ‘unpacking’ her negative thoughts and beliefs until she got to a core and previously unconscious belief about her value as a person. When the client saw the layer upon layer of thoughts and feelings she was astonished at how effectively she had set herself up to feel stressed and unmotivated about going back to work.

Gently *provoked* by the coach, the client asserted that she had definitely had enough of living with those feelings. So the coach then used questions to *co-create* a solution; she suggested the client imagine miraculously waking up thinking and feeling differently and asked the client what that would be like. The client’s response was that she would be feeling excited about the future, so the coach asked her what she would specifically be seeing and saying, how she would be looking and sounding and what beliefs and frames of mind she would need to have about herself and her situation that enabled her to genuinely feel excited about the future. The client came up with 22 new and empowering beliefs and then, with anchoring techniques, she learnt ways to strengthen the feeling of excitement and to access it whenever she wanted it.
This Meta-stating process is a version of the Miracle Question that is used in Solution-focused coaching and laddering. Laddering is like chunking up to a positive intention and the linguistic pattern of the Miracle Question induces the client into a future-oriented state, creating the neurological potential for change to happen. The Meta-stating pattern used in this case study involved ‘unpacking’ the beliefs and feelings behind the client’s unwanted emotional states, eliciting new and empowering beliefs and enabling the client to learn how to access positive and resourceful emotional states; it employed feedback and feed-forward loops. It enabled the client to get out of the ‘stuck’ unmotivated state and take the action she wanted. The coach then used other language and neurolinguistic processes to test and reinforce the client’s new learning and behaviours.

Then, with a five-step process, the coach also assisted the client to strengthen the new neuro-semantic connections she was making. The client stated her intention, namely, ‘to get a job she liked and make ends meet’. She then restated all her new, true and empowering beliefs; articulated the decision she was now making (‘to like being me’) and noticed the positive emotional state that came with that decision. Then she turned that emotion into action steps (fixing up her resume and applying for jobs). This process, called Mind-to-muscle, enabled the client to turn her intention into a neurological (mind–body–emotion) pattern with which she would close the gap between what she wanted and what actually happened. With questioning, the coach guided the client to actively talk and walk through the five steps: identifying her intention, describing that intention as a set of beliefs, turning those beliefs
into a decision she was making right now, noticing the positive emotional state that came with those beliefs and that decision, and then turning that emotion into an action. This led the client to realize that to know something she not only needed to describe it with words but to fully experience it in her body.

**What do these approaches add?**

Did you notice similarities and differences between Hall’s Meta-States and Lawley and Tompkins’s Symbolic Modelling with Clean Language? Both model, explore and unpack meta-level phenomena – metaphors and/or thinking–feeling states – and both are useful for developmental coaching as they deal with abstract and challenging issues. Both Meta-questioning and Clean Language are about process, self-reflectivity, going to ‘deeper’ or ‘higher’ levels of mind.

The focus throughout the stages of Symbolic Modelling is on the client as perceiver; thus self-reflexivity is the theoretically supported methodology of Symbolic Modelling with Clean Language. You may wish to follow up Tompkins and Lawley’s discussion of ‘meta-comments’, which – like all their work with Symbolic Modelling – addresses the client’s ‘higher’ meta-cognitive processes to facilitate change. With Meta-Coaching, Hall and Duval address meta-cognitive processes by using questions to identify and change higher and hidden frames.

And can you see how systems principles are central to both? Symbolic Modelling and Meta-Coaching both conceptualize hierarchical levels and emergent properties of the self-organizing mind–body–emotion systems that explain and facilitate transformative change.

In different ways each of these approaches is even more systemic than NLP, which, through its emphasis on the TOTE model, is more linear in its conception.

Both Symbolic Modelling and Meta-Coaching work with the mind, body and emotion system conversationally and co-creatively rather than with the procedural/programmatic approach of using NLP patterns. Meta-Coaching incorporates more conscious-mind processing than in NLP coaching.

The Meta-States Model offers an enriched strategy model that begins with and goes beyond the TOTE (test–operate–test–exit) model… It can exceed the linear strategies models to address ‘higher levels of mind and meaning’.
Using Meta-Coaching, Hall, Duval and Salom\textsuperscript{105} address clients’ and organizations’ hidden cultural or meaning frames. Similarly, Symbolic Modelling enables coaches to assist clients to understand and develop verbal and non-verbal cultural metaphors.

In this chapter I have proposed that, perhaps even more than the NLP model of questioning (the Meta-Model), Clean Language and Meta-questioning enable the coach to elevate levels of attention and awareness; that is, to motivate, direct and enhance the client’s attention to hidden frames and unconscious patterns that are ‘cues that activate their behaviour’.\textsuperscript{106} And you will recall, a key skill and ethical responsibility of NLP coaches is to focus on process rather than content (see Chapter 2); Tompkins and Lawley\textsuperscript{107} address this ethical issue by showing how coaches can be effective without imposing on the client.
Working as a practitioner-researcher

Which questions have enough vigor for me to pursue a rigorous research project?

Following on from the discussion in Chapter 9 about the need for research in three areas of NLP coaching – the coaching process, impacts and comparisons with other approaches – here I pose some specific research questions. First, a little background to my interest in researching coaching practice.

Findings from a small practice

Do you recall that I raised the question (in Chapter 9) about how best to assess the outcomes of NLP coaching? Do we use standard questionnaire measures (of hope or well-being, for example) or do we elicit first-person accounts from clients as to whether their outcomes had been met? Or both?

Working in a small career coaching practice, I wanted to monitor clients’ outcomes and understand what worked and what didn’t. As you know, a key to NLP-based coaching is the principle of identifying the clients’ present state and desired state and outcome early in the coaching session or programme (see ‘well-formed outcomes’ in Chapter 2, p36). So over 10 years I kept detailed client notes, starting with their responses to questions I asked when first speaking (usually by phone) and then during and after each session. At the end of the coaching programme I noted their outcome/s and state. Thus data were collected at several points in time with a standard open-question format. I explained to clients that note taking enabled me to track the issues they raised, the interventions and the outcomes. Demographic, MBTI and occupational information was also entered onto a database.
My intention from the start was to use that information to (1) evaluate the extent to which clients’ outcomes were met; (2) learn what NLP processes, specifically, contributed to these results; and (3) establish how long it took clients to reach the outcomes they had for the coaching programme. This was doing ‘natural research’ as a practitioner-researcher, using a ‘convenience’ sample. I would obtain qualitative outcome evidence by comparing the client’s stated and observed outcome state, language, beliefs and reported behaviours with their intended outcomes (as discussed and recorded at the beginning of the coaching programme). I assessed clients’ outcomes by listening for and noticing their emotional state, verbal responses, state and physiology (attending, for example, not only to what the client was saying but also to the tone, speed and pitch of their voice, posture, skin colour and breathing) and then checking my perception explicitly with the client.

This approach combined qualitative and quantitative data and suited the person-centred, constructivist assumptions of the NLP model with which I worked as a practitioner (see Chapter 7). Before the coaching, I elicited, enumerated and recorded clients’ desired outcomes in sensory-specific detail and at the end of the coaching programme I observed and fed back to clients their stated desired outcomes and asked to what extent each outcome had been met. I then rated the extent of outcome-attainment as all, most, few or none (implying an ordinal scale of goal attainment).

The following list shows how to know if NLP coaching works:

- compare outcome state with presenting state;
- check with client/s whether their outcomes were attained;
- assess qualitatively using detailed client notes;
- research quantitatively using client database.

From longitudinal case studies of seven clients I learnt that typically career-coaching clients wanted to see, understand, expand or get feedback on their career options; they also wanted to deal with lack of confidence, fear and/or frustration and experience more enjoyment, confidence and/or fulfilment. The experiences of these clients supported the findings of studies showing how confidence, supports and a belief that they have real choices are among the key psychological resources that enable people to make career decisions and transitions.

While this ‘natural research’ had the obvious limitation of the researcher also being the coach, it served to highlight the question of whether reported successes of coaching programmes are explained by the clients’ commitment to the programme (client readiness factors), the methodology itself (specifically, the stimulus–response association created by the coach and coaching context), trust and transparency in the coaching relationship, the coach’s self-management and/or the level of skill of the coach.
Even with the limitations of my data it was, to the best of my knowledge, the first published outcome data from a private career-coaching practice. The findings compared favourably with published outcomes of Solution-focused coaching in general that ‘over 70 per cent of clients of solution-oriented counselling met their goals to their satisfaction’. Others have found that 60–80 per cent of clients in a wide range of settings report improvement.

A third way I monitored clients’ outcomes was by reviewing client feedback – in the form of verbal or written comments received – over the 10 years. That feedback revealed three recurring themes:

1. clients experienced positive emotions;
2. they could see and reflect on previously hidden inner motives, feelings, desires;
3. they got tools and strategies to make positive changes.

This preliminary research made me want to know more about what happens for the client during and after NLP-based career, executive, team and leadership coaching. What exactly makes NLP-based coaching effective? What coach, client and/or method variables account most for clients achieving their desired outcomes? And of immediate practical importance, I needed to know what specific coach practices worked best and were worth doing more of.

We support the appropriateness of qualitative and naturalistic rather than positivist research, yet the field seems much in need of substantive empirical work to support its claims.

Calling for good research questions

Apart from evaluating the impacts of NLP coaching we also need to look with a magnifying glass at the coach–client system and how clients’ strategies for learning, deciding, feeling and acting change. Studies of NLP coaching behaviours and process will continue to lead us to a better understanding of what happens for both the coach and the client – and between them – during and after the coaching programme. This includes articulating and refining the principles underpinning NLP coaching. If setting goals and taking effective action to achieve them is what coaching is about, then the better we understand how to motivate our clients, the better the outcomes.

Responding to calls for good research questions, here are some that can be addressed in organizational and private practice settings.
How NLP coaching works

Do you recall that one principle that underpins NLP coaching states: ‘As all communication potentially influences learning, the coach’s language, beliefs and behaviours influence the client’s experience of coaching and its outcomes. The coach’s awareness and skilful choice about their own language patterns, beliefs and behaviours, as well as sensitivity and curiosity about their influence on and interaction with the client’s internal representations, are key to an effective coaching outcome’? (Principle 8, Table 6.1.)

The following questions arise from this principle.

1 What, specifically, explains the beneficial coach–client relationship in NLP? Is it due to self-management (state management in NLP terms), which is ‘the core success factor in establishing impactful coaching relationships’?\(^{14}\) Or is the beneficial coach–client relationship affected by the language patterns, the questioning model, coach beliefs and/or other specific rapport-building behaviours? Do NLP coaches’ skills of attending and modelling enable them to establish and maintain rapport – and thereby work effectively – with clients of all personalities and developmental stages?

2 Under what circumstances (including coach and client characteristics) are there fewer positive or desired outcomes?\(^ {15}\) Do language patterns that work directly with the client’s unconscious mind have less, more or the same effect as those that also engage the client’s conscious mind? As Tosey points out, we need to examine the assumption that new strategies can ‘be installed’ by NLP coaches.\(^ {16}\)

3 Do certain perceptual filters (meta-programmes) enable change more quickly and easily? If so, how can coaching enhance a client’s meta-programmes?

4 How is the NLP coach’s mindfulness achieved, maintained and experienced by coaches and clients? Can previous mental maps really be put aside when entering a so-called ‘know-nothing state’?\(^ {17}\) How do NLP, Meta-Coaching and Symbolic Modelling approaches to mindfulness compare in terms of ease and effectiveness, as perceived by clients and coaches?

5 Is coaching with all the NLP skills (see Chapter 2) experienced differently from when only some NLP tools are used?

6 How do individuals experience NLP coaching in a team? What works and what doesn’t?

As we saw in Chapter 9, coaching behaviours are best addressed by case studies from the clients’, coaches’ and observers’ points of view; research on coach practices and impacts is best done from multiple perspectives.\(^ {18}\)
A trained, independent NLP coach can analyse the language and themes of recorded sessions. A second interviewer can check for interviewer bias and researchers can use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis of coaching sessions. First-person accounts and semi-structured interviews of coaches and clients after the sessions can also be used. Even cross-disciplinary studies with neurobiologists will help us understand the neurobiological principles or mechanisms that explain how NLP coaching works. And while much is now known about the neurobiological mechanisms of change, not so much is known yet about how language and neurobiology work or ‘how language transforms primary images, sounds and feelings’ as proposed by the NLP founders.

7 How does the mind–body–emotion approach of NLP coaching work – as distinct from mind- or brain-based approaches such as those of Rock and Schwartz? Does NLP coaching have the same, less or more effect on enhancing neuroplasticity than other cognitive behaviour and solution-focused approaches? Do the relationships between language and other neurological mechanisms help explain the ‘plasticity’ phenomenon? What can research with neuroscientists tell us about the neuronal (brain) mapping that occurs during NLP strategy work (and Meta-Stating and Clean Language processes) and how NLP-based methods promote change? The work of Rock and Schwartz is an example of collaboration between cognitive behaviour coaches and neuroscientists.

Impact studies: Does it work?

Fillery-Travis and Lane provide evidence that client attributes, coach attributes, coaching context and the coaching process are the four sets of factors in organizational coaching outcomes such as subjective reactions of client, coach, team; changes in knowledge, skills and behaviours; changes in business results.

Given that there is a distinct set of practices in NLP coaching (Table 8.1), it is important to ask whether using that particular set of skills makes a difference over and above the skills known to make a difference in coaching in general (as in International Coach Federation competencies). ‘If adequate research is to take place, concise, highly specified and empirically verifiable descriptions of the models of NLP need to be in place.’ You can see a great example of specifying the set of NLP tools used in Richard Gray’s evaluation of an NLP intervention for addicts, which was a before-and-after study. Another example is Hall and Duval’s precise designation of the components of their coaching model. The 26 Meta-Coaching skills in their model have been operationalized in terms of observable behaviours a coach
can demonstrate and which comprise ordinal six-level rating scales (see Chapter 12).

Some research questions regarding outcomes are:

8 Do specific sets of skills – such as Meta-model questioning, Clean Language, Meta-questioning, the step-back skill – achieve significantly better **objective outcomes** (according to standard, third-person, questionnaires) and **subjective outcomes** (according to first-person accounts)? One study by coaching psychologists has teased out the relative contributions of coaching method, goal setting and personality type to client outcomes by using an experimental between-subject design where clients were randomly assigned to similarly trained coaches who used similar coaching methods in single coaching sessions. In half the coaching sessions the coaches randomly offered goal setting. Both coaches and clients completed evaluation questionnaires after the coaching and the coaches also completed outcome questionnaires at two and eight weeks after the coaching. Qualitative feedback was also used in the analysis.28

9 For how long, and how easily, after the coaching programme do clients continue to demonstrate the ability to access desired states, strategies and behaviours? Do they generalize skills and strategies they learnt in coaching contexts to other areas of their life? How does that happen? With what effect? In the wider coaching community some researcher-practitioners have used a rigorous single-subject case study design and/or the use of several clients’ responses to open-ended questions in addition to first-person accounts and semi-structured interviews after the sessions.29 Researching with mixed methods involves case studies of several clients interviewed with open and closed questions at several points in time (prospectively, beginning at intake); it could even involve a phone survey of several clients interviewed at several points in time.

10 Do clients of NLP-based coaching demonstrate or report other, unanticipated outcomes such as hope, proactivity and well-being (as reported in the wider coaching literature) in addition to attaining their specifically stated coaching outcomes?

11 How effective is NLP coaching on team or organizational and business outcomes? Many coaches have reported such effectiveness but independent and systematic studies have not yet been done. Ideally, the answer would come from a large-scale study involving more than one practice and practitioner; it would involve clients of at least two coaches using the same methodology. Clients with similar presenting issues, age, experience with coaching and desired outcomes could be randomly assigned to different coaching approaches, and data on reported and observed outcomes can be collected from questionnaires and interviews. For example: in one study participants were randomly
assigned to either the study or the control group and, additionally, within each group participants were randomly assigned to different coaches trained in the same methodology, thus controlling for coach–client liking and interaction. This way any changes in the before and after measures of stress and quality of life perceptions could be more confidently attributed to the coaching methodology itself.30

12 To what extent are NLP coaching clients’ satisfaction and attainment of outcomes explained – as suggested in the literature on evidence-based coaching – by client readiness factors, by coach self-management, by the coach’s skill set and skill level, by the structure and length of the coaching programme, by the stimulus–response association created in the coach and coaching context, by trust and transparency in the coaching relationship and/or by other factors/variables?

13 What is the effect of the NLP coach’s skill level compared with the methodology itself? Ideally, a study of outcomes would involve more than one practice and practitioner; it would involve clients randomly assigned to one of at least two coaches who use the same NLP methodology, thus controlling for method, coaching environment, format of sessions, processes and tools used. The researcher would then analyse recorded sessions and skilfully ask both precise questions as well as open-ended questions31 in order to identify the specific skills and behaviours that make a difference to clients. The researcher can also use coach notes and client questionnaires administered by a third party after the coaching encounter.

Comparisons with other approaches

Jonathan Passmore’s research on counselling suggests that certain intervention models are better suited to specific challenges and – based on the experience from counselling – cognitive behavioural approaches may be the best way to address low self-esteem and poor performance but not for issues of life purpose.32 So questions to be addressed by research include:

14 How does the experience of coaching differ, among NLP and other cognitive behaviour and solution-focused approaches, with regard to what clients need and value within a coaching relationship (such as strong communication skills, accurate recall of information, ability to challenge while being supportive, directing client’s attention through questions, showing empathy and sector knowledge)?

15 Are there systematic differences in the outcomes among various cognitive behaviour and solution-focused approaches to coaching when controlling for coach and client characteristics? Are the client changes
in thinking, speaking, emoting and acting that result from, say, the NLP or Meta-Coaching methodology more lasting than changes achieved by clients coached with other solution-focused and cognitive behaviour models when controlling for variables such as desired coaching outcomes, past experience of coaching, client readiness and coaching setting?

16 How effective are Meta-model and Axes of Change questions compared with Motivational Interviewing with people whose managers believe they need to make changes but are ‘unmotivated’ or ‘uncoachable’?

A four-group design is where clients are randomly assigned to one of two coaches and one of the two coaching approaches. An example is the study by Zyl and Lee comparing the effects of the Meta-model questioning strategy in NLP with the effects of an empathy-responding strategy used in counselling. These researchers measured five dependent variables (outcomes) to assess the effects of the intervention, using transcriptions of the counselling session as well as clients’ self-reporting.

The limitation of such correlation studies is that they do not control for the possible intervening variables such as past experience with coaching and current levels of stress, optimism, quality of life perception, well-being, depression or anxiety. That is why some coaching psychologists advocate that coaching research should not be limited to them. Instead, an experimental design (with randomized control group) or a quasi-experimental design (where it is not possible to create a truly randomized control group but rather a comparison group) needs to be considered.

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<th>Table 11.1</th>
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<td>2 NLP coaches</td>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
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<td>2 Meta-coaches</td>
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<td>2 other Cognitive-behaviour or Solution-based coaches</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ideal is a longitudinal study of two NLP or Meta-coaches, two or more clients, in a time-series design such as that shown in Table 11.1. The key is to have empirically verifiable descriptions of the coaching models being compared and to collect as much data as is feasible on background and intervening variables that may affect the coaching outcomes irrespective of the coaching methodology used.

An alternative to randomized control studies is quasi-experimental studies that use comparison groups in naturalistic settings. Using a quasi-experimental research design Grant demonstrated that cognitive behaviour coaching was more effective than either cognitive or behaviour approaches alone.

To address impact questions we need both exploratory studies (using open questions and thematic analyses of rich data) and explanatory/quantitative research (ideally, a randomized control trial or RCT, which is sometimes called ‘the gold standard’ of evaluative research).

**Visioning the ‘gold standard’**

Grant and Cavanagh noted that while single case studies and group-based studies ‘make an important contribution, we need more large-scale, methodologically rigorous, controlled-outcome studies [as well as] increasing emphasis on objective quantitative outcomes measures and on investigating the relative efficacy of different approaches to coaching’. This ‘gold standard’ of research requires randomized control trials using as large samples as possible, where participants are randomly allocated to different interventions.

For example, Green, Oades and Grant designed a control study where the control group comprised people waitlisted for coaching. Pre and post scores were compared, using reliable and valid questionnaires that produced measures of symptoms, striving for personal goals, subjective well-being, psychological well-being, hope and mental health and tests of the statistical significance of the difference in scores of the two groups.

With such a study in mind, let’s start by thinking about background and process variables (independent and intervening variables) that, independently and in interaction, might explain the variation in outcomes (Table 11.2). With more exploratory research we will add to and refine this list. And, of course, we would designate with precision the components of the coaching approaches being compared. ‘One of the challenges in coaching research is to describe the coaching procedures used.’

We could have two coaches each of two modalities and would specify all the tools, techniques and interventions used by each. We would then randomly assign clients to each group, thereby controlling as much as possible for previous coaching and counselling experience, coach skills and
experience, socio-demographics and reason for seeking career coaching. We could use validated empirical tools/instruments that have been shown to reliably measure the constructs that we intended to influence through our coaching. We could perhaps start with a listing of recommended psychometric assessment tools for ‘investigators who wish to apply standardized assessments instruments to humanistic and/or transpersonal research’.

With methods of multivariate statistical analysis we may eventually be able to answer questions such as:

- What are the relative effects on clients’ outcomes of client change readiness factors, client’s liking of the coach, believing in the coach’s competence and the actual (observed) level of skill the coach has?
- What background variables and coaching process variables affect client outcomes (such as self-reported, observed or assessed changes in beliefs, self-actualization, behaviours and identity)? (Table 11.2)

**Table 11.2** Background, process and outcome variables in coaching outcome studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background variables</th>
<th>Process variables</th>
<th>Outcome variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recorded on intake</td>
<td>Detailed information in order to pinpoint what we are evaluating</td>
<td>Tangibles and intangibles$^{42}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Attributes of coach including level and range of skills</td>
<td>Client’s self-reported feelings, beliefs, actions (performance, self-actualization, well-being, confidence, sales statistics etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Client’s perception and feeling about coach’s knowledge, attitude, skills</td>
<td>Client’s feelings, beliefs and actions as observed by others$^{43}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Coaching environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Number and length of sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcode</td>
<td>Specific coaching skills used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral source</td>
<td>Format of sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-paying or employer paying</td>
<td>Timeframe of coaching programme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While large-scale studies may be neither a priority nor feasible at this time, it is useful to think about and envisage what they will entail. In due course NLP researchers could use randomized control designs and sophisticated statistical/multivariate analyses to address impact questions and also for comparisons among NLP and other coaching methods. By keeping in mind the ideal for outcome research we will work, consciously and unconsciously, towards making it possible in the future.

Even if NLP research in the near future is small scale, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies will generate practical research through complementary methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation, depending on the purpose of the research.44

**Rigour and vigour**

Have I managed to provoke you into thinking about what is and isn’t possible in researching NLP coaching?

We have talked about a range of studies not only for academic researchers but also for NLP-trained practitioner-researchers. The way forward is by systematically doing qualitative case studies in natural settings, including action research, as well as correlational and quasi-experimental research; both will further our understanding of coaching process and outcomes so that coaches can continue to enhance their practice. Even small-scale studies can meet criteria of being systematic, rigorous and transparent. A great example of the latter is Sally Vanson’s practitioner-led, action research into how, specifically, coaching could support professional development and promotion.45

What is needed is **rigour**: discipline, critical thinking, asking good questions, self-reflection and with peers in order to examine our own biases.46 And **vigour** in research means openness to new ideas, matching the purpose of research to appropriate methods and ensuring the research enhances coaching practice.47

*Many of us can cite numerous examples of vigor without rigor in coaching. Without rigor, vigor is undisciplined reaction. However, vigor can reflect the relevance and vitality of the enterprise… We need vigorous questions answered with rigor.*48

In the emerging field of research into NLP-based coaching – as in the field of coaching in general – there is a huge need for exploratory studies that will suggest questions about coaching practice. Diane Stober, US coach and academic, speaks of the need to reflect and ask ourselves, ‘Which questions have enough vigor for me to pursue a rigorous research project because they
have applicability and relevance, and bring energy and enthusiasm? And what rigorous evidence am I using or could I use with this client in this vigorous moment?’

Coaches in organizational and private-practice settings can also use practice-based evidence that comes from vigorous questions answered with rigour. It can be as simple as keeping client notes on what you did, with what outcome and what you could do differently next time. Also, it is important to learn from peer consultation.49

Now is the time for NLP to become the focus of what Linley50 calls ‘pragmatic science’, whereby relevant themes are addressed in a methodologically rigorous and robust way. So here’s a challenge for students and organizational coaches: Can you apply the principles of a ‘well-formed outcome’ (see Chapter 2) to a research project in your area of work?

And the last word is from Gregory Bateson: ‘Rigor alone leads to death due to asphyxia but creativity on its own is sheer folly.’51
Benchmarking and evaluating competencies

To ethically train coaches, coaching psychologists need a clear and evidence-based approach... [They also need to] understand which behaviours have impact and how they interact... [Such research] benefits organisations, coaching practitioners and trainees.¹

Recent conferences on evidence-based coaching have dealt with the cross-fertilization of ideas about coach training, benchmarking, research and accreditation between academic departments and independent practitioners. Various coaching bodies are developing competency frameworks, ethical guidelines and benchmarks for best practice, including the use of professional supervision.²

Benchmarking means looking for the best in the field and intentionally copying it; benchmarking is about finding the best examples of effectiveness. The benchmarking of competencies is a way to train, assess and compare coach behaviours. In this last chapter we look at how NLP modelling – of behaviours, ideas, concepts, beliefs – can enrich benchmarking. Lisa Wake then shares her experience of benchmarking NLP coach training and Paul Tosey explains how ‘research-mindedness’ will enhance the field of NLP.

The scientist-practitioner model for coach training and practice is vital for the development of the coaching industry.³

Competency-based NLP coach training

Very few NLP coaches are as yet using research to develop, test, refine their practice by having trained observers independently rate observed behaviours
in live or videoed coaching sessions. Most NLP trainers do ‘experiential testing’ where the trainer calibrates how the trainee creates rapport, elicits well-formed outcomes and so on.

As we saw in Chapter 4, many NLP coach-training programmes address the International Coach Federation (ICF) core competencies. When NLP competencies – such as Meta-modelling and setting well-formed outcomes – are defined for competency-based trainings they are often presented as sets of skills.

Australia has a system for state and federal accreditation of courses and qualifications that requires any course to be chunked into outcomes, competencies and assessment criteria. So to evaluate a coach’s competency level Jules and Chris Collingwood break the complex NLP skills/patterns such as setting well-formed outcomes into chunks of observable skills. To Chris and Jules Collingwood experiential testing means, ‘We the trainers know the patterns that meet the criteria; we have trained our unconscious minds and get internal responses; we have operationalized – but not consciously – a set of criteria and not a written list because if you make it too linear people miss the patterns. We don’t carve it up into too fine detail as this would result in it becoming too limiting.’

One of the applications of NLP modelling is as a type of benchmarking and NLP modelling can be used in coach trainings to measure and standardize competencies. Do you recall Joseph O’Connor talking (in Chapter 9) about modelling excellence in coaching in order to design his coaching programme? Modelling – with its rules and evidence procedures and list of steps – can be used to find out how anyone performs with excellence and effectiveness, including coaches who get the results they and other people want.

Bear in mind that the key modelling question is, ‘How do I/you/they do it?’ There are many ways to answer that, in terms of levels of detail you calibrate – skills, physiology, behaviour, beliefs, concepts, identity, symbols – and whether it is from first, second or third perceptual position. ‘How do you do it?’ was the question that Michael Hall and Michelle Duval’s trainees asked as they watched Michelle coach. So Michael Hall modelled Michelle’s live, recorded coaching sessions and identified over 120 questions that she used without making any comments or statements. And, like Joseph O’Connor, Hall and Duval modelled expert coaches in order to benchmark their skills.

**From modelling to benchmarking**

Benchmarks are measurements that can indicate the performance of a coach or a coaching programme relative to others. Benchmarking of coaching is the ongoing search for coaching practices that produce best results in one’s
own organization. It is the actual process of investigating best practices and includes talking to industry experts and clients, which means researching from multiple perspectives.\(^9\)

Hall and Duval use benchmarking to identify the behavioural equivalence of whatever coach state and skills they want to improve.\(^10\) They seek ‘to manage what coaches have traditionally not been able to measure, gauge or scale’. Listen to them talk about benchmarking coach skills:

If coaches are change agents it is critical that they have two things: first, a clear and comprehensive understanding about change as a process and second, the ability to translate that knowledge into practical and effective change skills. Claiming the ability to coach – or having a coaching certificate – is not the same as actually having the ability. That is where benchmarking comes in. To measure the actual competency of someone who claims to have the coaching skills we need to identify ‘best practice’ and to specify its critical elements. Benchmarking is used to close the gap between what we are currently doing and becoming the best-in-a-class. If this reminds you of modelling, you are right. Benchmarking describes a simple way to model the expertise of someone masterful in the performance of a complex skill. In benchmarking coaching skills we break them down into the key behavioural components which we can see, hear and feel. Then we plot a developmental pathway – in other words, identify a scale of performance – for that skill, from simple to complex to expert. We then give numerical values of 0 through 5, from absence of skill to high competence, elegance or mastery. This ordinal scaling provides information as to where a coach currently is, and what they need to do to move up a higher level of competency, with regard to each coach behaviour. We use our sensory awareness or modelling to identify and describe the behavioural equivalence of the six levels of competency for each coaching skill. Crucially, coach trainers are then able to give feedback to those sensory – see, hear, feel – criteria.

Table 12.1 shows Hall and Duval’s approach to scaling of competencies and it is followed by examples of scaling three core coaching skills: listening, rapport building and questioning.
Listening
0 – Coach tells, interrupts, talks over client, no eye contact, no tracking of content.
1 – Gets distracted, thinks what to say while client is speaking, mind-reads the client, conversation is irrelevant to client’s outcome.
2 – Talks 60 per cent of time, matches client’s words but also paraphrases, only partially tracks client’s language, emotional changes and physiology.
3 – Talks 30 per cent, eye contact, encourages, comments on client’s gestures, tracks client’s words and explores client’s understanding.
4 – Talks 20 per cent, extended silences, uses many awareness questions, invites client to reflect on own structure and inner resources.
5 – Talks no more than 10 per cent of time, acknowledges client’s communication with appropriate body language, asks about what’s not said, asks questions that probe.

Rapport-building
0 – Coach shows no interest, is not tracking the client at all and offers only judgements.
1 – Fiddles or listens with poor eye contact, does not follow up client’s statements; interrupts, blames or expresses own emotion.
2 – Matches client’s physiology, gesture, voice tone and tempo, listens for client’s content and encourages them to continue.
3 – Matches client’s words, listens intently, inquires about and comments on client’s emotions, gestures and physiology, summarizes and encourages.
4 – Matches client’s states and meta-programmes, engages the client by respectfully inviting them to access and apply their resources.
5 – Shares emotions of support and commitment to client’s outcomes.

Questioning
0 – Coach tells stories, gives personal judgements, no questioning.
1 – Asks closed or rhetorical questions, is ‘nosy’ about irrelevant details and content, makes few inquiries.
2 – Makes an inquiry that directs attention to a prescribed answer (‘Don’t you want to handle this situation using X?’) so person feels ‘controlled’ or ‘forced’ as evidenced by saying so or by not answering the question.
3 – Asks for information in an open-ended way so there’s no wrong answer (‘How do you best like to relax?’) to elicit in the client a response that is relevant and pertinent to their outcome and that shifts client’s attention to what will move them toward their outcome.
4 – Asks about client’s additional thoughts and feelings to invite attention to their current and desired experience and to have a second level of awareness (‘meta-awareness’) where client chooses thoughts, feelings, behaviours that give energy for finding something that solves things; invites client to talk about ‘solutions’ by collaborating with the client’s words and outcomes.
5 – Explores how client structures their thinking, challenges client to look at the governing ‘frame’ that creates forward movement and that the client evaluates as ‘getting to the heart of things’. Inquires about client’s words and gestures, thoughts, feelings, needs, fears, hopes; explores the client’s world of ideas, beliefs (believing), frames, goals. Asks in tone and words that give client the opportunity to explore their own answers. Ends a sentence with a tone that goes up in order to elicit a response.

As we saw in Chapter 6, best practice describes sets of competencies based on established theory, reasoning and empirical evidence. It is important to differentiate this definition of best practice from marketing claims of ‘best practice’.

Modelling enables coaches to identify competencies, states and frames of mind, which then inform the coach training and assessment. In modelling best practice it is useful to consider Dilts’s levels of change¹¹ (Table 12.2).

Table 12.2  Modelling multiple levels of coaching practice

| Spirituality: Mission, purpose |
| Identity: Role definition, colleagues, memberships |
| Beliefs and values: Frames of mind, meta-programmes that support or inhibit the coach’s capabilities |
| Cognitive strategies and capabilities: How they generate their coaching behaviour (eg use of posture, breathing, gestures, visualization, internal dialogue) and the structure or strategy of their whole coaching programme |
| Behaviours and actions: What are their skills and strategies, eg modelling, language patterns, flexibility to use alternative techniques? |
| Environment: The culture and location of coaching |
Benchmarking NLP skills in organizations

Organizations need to link investment in coaching programmes to organizational outcomes; and NLP modelling can be used for benchmarking organizational capabilities such as leadership as well as for benchmarking coach capabilities as discussed above.

Lisa Wake describes here her approach to benchmarking an NLP Practitioner certification programme.12

A National Health Service trust in the UK commissioned the programme for nine managers who had responsibility for supporting the work of the Centre for Learning, Development and Innovation. The role of each attendee included coaching and developing other staff.

The programme involved 65 hours of pre-course assisted learning on CD and 65 hours of face-to-face teaching over eight days. The programme was modular by design, allowing for integration of learning between each module. Assessment of competencies occurred throughout the programme and included behavioural demonstration of the skills learnt, attitudinal demonstration of the philosophies that support the conceptual framework of NLP and theoretical knowledge base through written assessment.

The programme covered the core components taught at practitioner level. It was agreed that evaluation of the programme would take place pre and post course, and again at three, six and 18 months post course, to assess the level of personal and professional outcomes achieved and provide feedback to the organization on measurables that have resulted from the programme. The evaluation methodology was qualitative by design and utilized a personal development measurement tool recommended by a partner organization, Easington District Council, who was actively involved in benchmarking business practices.

Pre-course goal setting: In the pre-course goal setting, each delegate wanted to become more familiar with the technology of the learning that they were about to undertake, particularly with the terminology, theory and principles that underpin NLP.

Most delegates, in their professional goals, wanted to enhance their communication skills in relation to specific communication ‘challenges’ that they were facing in the workplace. Because all delegates were working in roles that involved influencing change processes, there was a high degree of learning need in this area, whether this was through greater flexibility in facilitation and coaching skills or a more proactive leadership style.

The personal goals were in alignment and supportive of the professional goals set. Many were related to improved personal relationships through greater self-awareness and confidence, particularly in handling conflict and difficult problems.
Post-course evaluation: An evaluation undertaken immediately post course considered whether the stated objectives had been met and the practical application of learning points between each of the modules.

Each delegate had achieved their objectives set at the beginning of the course and most of the group had found that the course had exceeded their learning expectations. ‘Professionally, I am more confident, more motivated, more focused on task and now have available to me an extensive toolkit of techniques and the ability to use them to help me become an excellent practitioner and agent for change.’

Course assessment included a written integration paper on the material learnt, inter-course practical assessment of application of the learning, and inter-modular feedback of learning points applied through a process of reflection and review. Each delegate demonstrated a high degree of competence and all were certificated as Practitioners of NLP.

Most delegates identified much greater awareness of their own communication processes and how effective they can be in influencing others; they said, for example: ‘I am much more aware of my own language and non-verbal communication and feel better equipped to listen to what others are saying and how they are saying it and what their physiology is telling me. I am now more confident about when to suggest such techniques and “how to do” them if asked for advice. I am much better at defining positive outcomes; and doing the ecology check each time is a useful technique.’

The learning themes that proved to be most useful were the use of perceptual positions and positive languaging prior to and during change processes.

Delegates were also asked about ongoing learning needs, and the majority of people wanted ongoing supervision or follow up to enable the sharing of learning experiences. A study group was set up to facilitate this. Some delegates were revisiting their CDs to reinforce their learnings.

Three-month evaluation: A further evaluation was carried out at three months that looked at the application of learning in the workplace and how this had been applied. At this stage, delegates had been proactive in using the more complex material and had been quite adventurous and creative in how it was being applied in the workplace. Confidence was stated as the major driver in enabling this application to occur, and delegates recognized the deep level of learning that they had made.

Delegates were also asked about the unsuccessful application of learning points, and these varied across a small number of techniques, ie submodality change, anchoring, eye patterns and recognizing representational systems, parts integration and time code work. Reasons given for not applying the learning points were mainly about lack of opportunity, and in one instance there was lack of confidence about the technique.
Regular updates and opportunity to revisit the material were considered important in the ongoing help required.

**Six-month evaluation:** Most of the skills learnt had been applied since the course completion, with this being attributed to increasing levels of confidence that were enhanced by ongoing practice. One person was able to clearly demonstrate unconscious competence in the material: ‘It appears to be becoming second nature. I was writing a presentation and said, “What is the positive intention of change?” NLP is influencing me in my everyday life.’

Where learning points had not been applied, this was often attributed to lack of opportunity, although one person did state that their own internal negative thought processes had got in the way.

The ongoing study sessions were identified as being of high value and some delegates are considering advanced learning in the material.

**18-month evaluation:** Four of the nine respondents completed the evaluation at this stage; two respondents had been promoted to other roles outside the organization and the remaining three did not reply. The most noticeable difference in this evaluation was how the delegates had implemented the learning into their coaching roles: ‘Application of well-formed outcome-orientated goal setting with clients that I have been mentoring and coaching; work with clients on limiting beliefs; strategy elicitation when clients have been successful in achieving an outcome – including mapping this out visually so that they can pick up on strategies that they were not conscious of and use them again; anchoring techniques; perceptual positioning.’

**Summary:** Over a period of six months, all individuals were able to successfully apply their learning and had achieved their objectives to a greater level than originally stated in their outcomes. Over 18 months, those that replied reported continuing use of their skills in their coaching work, particularly around belief change.

Each member of staff has accessed greater self-belief and this in turn has added to their own role at work. Application of learning has been at both conscious competence level for skills that are less familiar and at unconscious competence level for many other skill sets. It is important to note the value of ongoing support for delegates to assist ongoing application of certain elements and to take learnings to the next level.

Additionally, each person has gained much from their own personal outcomes and has been able to replicate their learning across contexts.

**Further benchmarking:** The same programme and evaluation process were repeated in a construction company, Keepmoat. Each of the delegates on this programme had already attended a three-day mentoring skills course that was underpinned with NLP techniques and principles. Similar findings were also found in this project.
Delegates reported an increase in their own self-awareness, and an increase in their skills as coaches: ‘The training has helped me to understand better the techniques available for communicating with and coaching/mentoring colleagues and employees. Some of the work has given me an insight into what I already unknowingly do, both positive and negative. I do feel more comfortable and competent to deal with issues requiring a more personal and supportive, but not instructive, approach. Mentoring skills have improved and developed. All the NLP practitioners are influencing Keepmoat’s management style.’

An action-learning group emerged from this practitioner programme with the delegates identifying that the most commonly used techniques were anchoring, perceptual positions and belief change. The group identified that there were four main areas where skills could be applied in the business: coaching and mentoring; training courses; business planning; and setting goals.

**Research-mindedness**

Paul Tosey’s innovative NLP Research Project is galvanizing students and practitioners in the field, so I asked him to share his thoughts on the relationship between practice and research. He responded by talking of the importance of ‘research-mindedness’:

In our critical review of NLP\(^{13}\) we have argued that an increase in research-mindedness amongst its population of practitioners is likely to be important for the survival and growth of NLP as a field of practice. We are, essentially, talking about an extension of NLP’s fundamental ‘attitude of curiosity’, not suggesting that NLP has to be proven or disproven through laboratory experiments.

What are some of the elements of this research-mindedness? They comprise qualities that should be familiar to NLP practitioners.

First is an awareness of relevant recent knowledge and research findings. It is suggested in NLP trainings that practitioners should be wary of operating out of past patterns that might be outdated, yet there is a tendency for NLP courses and literature to recycle knowledge from the 1970s and before. This is why we welcome the trend in recent NLP literature for authors like Bolstad,\(^{14}\) Churches and Terry\(^{15}\) and Wake\(^{16}\) to discuss relevant research findings. It would help also to address myths or misconceptions about what various pieces of research cited in NLP trainings actually say. One example is Mehrabian’s\(^{17}\) notion that communication is 7 per cent verbal, 38 per cent tone of voice and 55 per cent visual, which Mehrabian
stresses applies only to communication about feelings or attitude and should not be generalised to all face-to-face communication.\textsuperscript{18}

Second is evaluation, through applying the classic NLP question, ‘How do we know it works?’ If NLP practitioners forget this they can come to rely on the mere assertion that it does work. We are concerned that the ‘trail of techniques’ left in the wake of the early developments in Santa Cruz has been over-sold and under-tested. Even though NLP has involved a great deal of informal research by its thousands of practitioners who have been encouraged to test NLP in practice for themselves, it is difficult to rely on this as evidence, not least because it is so prone to classic flaws of self-deception. Evaluation can be done through action research by individual practitioners as well as through formal research studies.

Third is reflexivity, which essentially means taking a meta-position with regard to NLP as a field. Practitioners are deeply interested in innovations and efficacy of NLP as a technology yet rarely seem to examine NLP from historical, sociological and cultural perspectives. For example, we have suggested that NLP could be regarded as a social phenomenon that is part of the self-help movement in America that dates back at least to the 1930s. Reflexivity would also be enhanced by being open to debate and dialogue about the field.

Fourth is a shift from categorising research as something alien to NLP to the acceptance and active encouragement of research as part of the ethical duty of any profession to review and develop its practices. Statements like ‘There’s a whole body of people called “researchers” who will not associate with the people who are practising!’\textsuperscript{19} appear

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{rigour_vigour.png}
\caption{Rigour and vigour}
\end{figure}
to have influenced some NLP practitioners’ attitudes towards research. Yet many people in the NLP community are genuinely interested in how research findings can inform and improve their practice. Indeed there is a strand of research-mindedness that runs through NLP from its very beginnings, through the studies of Perls, Satir and Erickson, and which is being built upon today by the European Association of Neurolinguistic Psychotherapy, the NLP Research and Recognition Project in the USA, the International NLP Research Conference at Surrey in 2008 (in partnership with the Association for NLP) and through PhDs such as Day that are investigating NLP in established universities.
Conclusion

Just as I was completing this book I was at a party and met a woman who was an organizational training and development consultant. She had recently completed a PhD and was teaching senior managers in a graduate programme. When she heard the topic I was writing on she quickly volunteered that she was very suspicious of NLP. When asked what gave rise to that suspicion she admitted it was only on hearsay and she had no personal experience of NLP. However, she was familiar with many other approaches to coaching and quizzed me, ‘So what has NLP got?’ Her question reminded me of the one about whether NLP techniques were a bunch of Christmas stocking fillers or a substantial and effective methodology for enabling people to change how they think, feel and act. I answered by summarizing what I had learnt from researching the questions posed in the Introduction to this book.

- **What exactly is NLP-based coaching and in what contexts is it found useful?**
  It comprises around 23 core practices based on the modelling of effective change strategies. According to some current NLP researchers, these practices reflect clear principles of mind–body–emotion interaction and to be effective they all need be all used; to use only some NLP tools violates the systemic principles on which the NLP approach is based. There is much anecdotal evidence that when most or all NLP skills are used they are effective in addressing a broad range of issues relating to personal, professional, team, leadership and organizational development.

- **What is the ‘magic’ of NLP?**
  It is the speed and ease with which the NLP coach can calibrate patterns in the client’s thinking, emoting, speaking and acting and then respond to the client’s experience using distinctive linguistic and state management skills, among others. However, systematic and independent research on the process and outcomes of NLP is only just beginning.
Does NLP coaching meet coaching industry standards?
Many NLP coaching organizations have demonstrated that they meet the standards of the International Coach Federation.

What principles underpin NLP coaching and to what extent are they supported by established theory and research?
One useful formulation is of nine systemic principles that underpin NLP change work and which were informed by established psychotherapeutic practices. There is now substantial neuroscientific evidence of the reciprocal influences of physiology, emotional state and behaviour. However, some long-held assumptions of NLP are unsubstantiated empirically and more research needs to be done. For example, we need explanations of how language works in this model.

How does NLP fit with psychology, often considered the science of human behaviour, emotion and thought? What does NLP coaching share with other solution-focused and cognitive behaviour coaching approaches and what is its uniqueness?
As with other approaches to coaching psychology, NLP works with the links between cognition, affect and behaviour. Many of the ideas and practices in NLP coaching are shared with other cognitive behaviour and solution-focused approaches. As well, there are around 20 distinct ideas and practices the emphasis on which distinguishes NLP coaching; they include the way NLP coaches use language with purpose, precision and subtlety (Table 8.1).

Is NLP ‘atheoretical’?
NLP-based coaching brings together a disparate but significant body of established knowledge and theory; however, the theoretical origins have only recently been made explicit. Tosey and Mathison have cogently made the case for a transdisciplinary framework for NLP change work and have pointed out that many major knowledge systems, such as Darwin’s theory of evolution, draw on diverse theoretical explanations.

What are some recent developments in evidence-based NLP coaching practice and what, if anything, do they add?
Symbolic Modelling and Meta-Coaching are both based on explicit and coherent principles. They both flesh out hidden frames of mind and body and facilitate self-reflection, insight and transformational change. Some researchers such as Mathison believe developments such as these are part of the healthy move from strict adherence to the approach of either of the founders of NLP.
What does an agenda for research into NLP coaching look like?

It starts with asking clear and specific research questions in relation to the NLP coaching process, its impacts and how it compares with other coaching methodologies. The agenda includes the question as to whether it is more useful to use all NLP systemically rather than to pick and choose techniques along with those from other approaches. A range of research methodologies, demonstrated in the wider coaching literature, will help address these questions. Some NLP practitioners are starting to embrace the researcher-practitioner approach, addressing the challenge of contributing not only to the survival and growth of NLP but to the wider field of coaching psychology.

On the basis of these answers, does NLP coaching deserve to be taken seriously?

I believe so and I asked the woman at the party to imagine encouraging her HR professionals, managers and team leaders to explore this systematic method of mapping and responding to their own and others’ experience.
Endnotes

Introduction


7 www.neurosemantics.com


17 Passmore, J (2007a) Personal communication, 24 November 2007


Chapter 1 NLP and coaching

2 Bostic St Clair and Grinder, J (2001) Whispering in the Wind, J & C Enterprises, Scotts Valley, California, italics added
3 Bandler, R & Grinder, J (1975) The Structure of Magic, Vol 1, Science and Behaviour Books, Palo Alto
   This book presents the principles of modelling and how it is done.
Chapter 2 Catching a coach at work

For a comprehensive overview of NLP skills and patterns see:


4 Bandler, R and Grinder, J (1979) *Frogs into Princes*, Real People Press, Moab, UT, p 79


6 Bostic St Clair, C and Grinder, J (2001) *Whispering in the Wind*, J & C Enterprises, Scotts Valley, California, p 29


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