



The funny side

Daniel Wain gets serious with **Shelle Rose Charvet**

“Only God can demand blind faith,” Shelle Rose Charvet believes. “Everyone else has to prove their case.” And she certainly does all she can to prove hers.

I join her at the start of a four-day training programme hosted by the NLP School in London. It's a beautiful, sunny afternoon, just after lunch and, outside, the leafy, hazy expanses of Regent's Park couldn't look more enticing. Inside, however, the 40 or so delegates on the LAB profile practitioner training seem totally content where they are. There's no sign of a post-prandial energy slump, thanks largely to Charvet's energetic, interactive delivery.

LAB stands for 'language and behaviour'. The profile – created by Rodger Bailey – is based upon a set of NLP 'meta-programmes' that codify the habitual patterns we display; for example, our preference for overview or detail, or where we tend to place our attention during conversation. The training run by Charvet is the second of four modules in the NLP School's accredited NLP practitioner programme.

Here on the first day, she's examining the meta-programme that distinguishes 'towards' and 'away from' patterns of behaviour. For Charvet, the key is to recognise one's own default pattern and that of whomever one is trying to influence. "It's all down to context," she says. "What's most appropriate or effective? Is a person influenced by external language, where they're told what to do, or internal, where they are asked or invited to do something? External communication only works with externally-motivated people. That's why a parent's command to 'tidy your room!' is rarely effective with internally-motivated kids."

Charvet always assumes people are internal unless she receives evidence to the contrary. Hence her recommendation to follow the 'guess and test' approach: make an initial assumption, do or say something to test it and, if it doesn't work, try something else. "Particularly where credibility is important, always assume the other person is internally motivated," she says when we speak together at the end of the day.

"For example, when I start any training such as this, I don't say 'I've got this great tool that you're going to love, so stop what you're doing and use



this instead'. Rather, I frame it as 'I'd like to present some ideas to you and see which ones resonate. Please test them against your own standards and beliefs, and feel free to question, even heckle'. That's much more effective." Hence why, despite an impressive track record, she tends to downplay her own abilities and expertise.

"When a conference chairman introduces me as this great guru, he's setting us all up for disappointment," she says. "When you're put on a pedestal, there's only one way you can go. And it's not up."

And Charvet has considerable form on the international conference circuit. The 2009 president of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, she's also earned 'certified speaking professional' designation from the International Federation of Professional Speakers. This year alone, she's appearing in Canada, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, India and Japan, as well as making several visits to the UK.

Indeed, she's back this September to deliver the keynote at the *TJ* conference. Please forgive the blatant plug, but she should be worth seeing. Feisty and funny, she was once memorably described as "Einstein meets Lucille Ball". Although, with typical self-deprecation, Charvet adds: "I've got Ball's grasp of nuclear physics and Einstein's comic timing."

A certified NLP trainer and founding president of the Canadian Association of NLP, she set up her own company, Success Strategies, in 1982, based upon "helping people figure out why other people do what they do, so that you can influence more of them to do what you want them to do".

Success Strategies offers training, coaching and consultancy based upon advanced NLP approaches and Charvet's development of the LAB profile. She's extended Rodger Bailey and Ross Steward's initial work into the areas of customer service, sales and marketing, recruitment and team communication. The company's client list now includes AstraZeneca, The Body Shop, Deloitte, IBM Europe, Microsoft, Nokia, both the European Parliament and Commission, UNESCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Charvet outlines some of the business issues that Success Strategies has helped address: "Taking the pain out of implementing organisational change,

shortening the sales cycle, improving customer satisfaction, designing powerful and effective marketing campaigns, improving negotiation results, teaching staff how to deal more appropriately with customers, simplifying personal and career counselling, creating high-performance teams by managing people's strengths."

Underpinning all of these diverse challenges is the fundamental need to understand what Charvet calls "the below-conscious triggers" that motivate people. "It's all about understanding what makes people do, or not do, certain things," she explains. "And usually these motivators are outside of their own awareness. To identify them, one needs to ask two key questions: what's important to the other person and why is that important to them? Smart leaders use these questions all the time, whether recruiting, selling, marketing or negotiating. They find out what messages work with which people and why."

For Charvet, people and groups of people are much more complex than we might think: "They simply don't run one pattern at a time. They use complex sequences of combination patterns when they make decisions about what they will buy, what they will decide and what they will, or will not, do."

Coming from a marketing background myself, I recognise the truth of Charvet's assertion that all successful sales strategies develop solutions to meet customers' deep unspoken needs.

"You need to go to their bus stop," she says, "meet them where they are, not where you'd like them to be or where *you* are. If I don't know what motivates others, I'll use my patterns, based on what motivates me. That won't get either of us anywhere. And once I'm at their bus stop, I then need to figure out how to invite them to get on the bus."

In case any of this is beginning to sound worryingly Machiavellian, Charvet is quick to clarify her position: "This has to be based upon true and deep respect for the other person. You have to have their interests at heart, as well as your own. They have to understand what's in it for them. Manipulation may work in the short term, but it's corrosive and self-defeating in the long run."

So how does Charvet describe what she preaches and teaches? "It's a methodology," she says, "based upon a philosophy of how to live one's life."

"I never stop experimenting, developing, trying new things. For example, I'm still working on improving my public speaking and presentations. What I do may appear spontaneous, but most of it is carefully planned and constantly refined."

This may be due to her love of theatre, stand-up comedy and improvisation. This is a lady who carries a red clown nose in her handbag. No, seriously, she does.

"I've got Ball's grasp of nuclear physics and Einstein's comic timing"

“Conflicts are usually due to a lack of understanding and self-knowledge”

“Technical expertise is always necessary,” she believes, “but never sufficient, regardless of what you do. Working without people skills is like going to work naked.”

She first recorded her ideas in the 1995 book *Words that Change Minds: mastering the language of influence*. “Having developed the use of the LAB profile, I kept waiting for someone to write a book about it. When no one did, I thought I should.” It’s now an established text on several business school programmes in both the US and UK.

Charvet is fascinated by linguistic communication and cultural differences. Not surprising, perhaps, given her background. Born in London, her family emigrated to Canada when she was young. “We were the only Jewish family in the school,” she recalls. “I had no innate sense of self or culture but needed to learn them, to become a citizen of the world.”

Bilingual, she gained a social sciences degree, in French, from the University of Ottawa and then became a grant officer for the Canadian government. “I joined a youth development organisation, part of the social programme instigated by Premier Pierre Trudeau,” she explains. “Living and working on a native Indian reservation in the north of Canada, I was suddenly confronted by this huge cultural difference. I’m Jewish and the only reason Jews aren’t talking is because they’re dead. On an Indian reserve, people don’t use words to communicate; they use silence. It took me a long time to stop filling up the air with words. Finally, the thought hit me: ‘Who needs to talk anyway?’”

A pertinent example I cherish from seeing her in action explains the cultural and non-verbal communication subtleties of the shrug. “There’s the one-shouldered Gallic shrug, which says ‘I don’t care’. Then there’s the two-shouldered Jewish shrug, which conveys the very different message of ‘I don’t know; why the hell are you asking me?’”

Her cultural education continued when she became an HR manager for the same youth development organisation, but this time responsible



for the Prairies and North West Territories region. “A geographical area larger than Europe,” Charvet adds. “So many of our challenges were around communication. I realised how one could make such a difference to these young people’s lives through training their leaders to communicate effectively. Conflicts are usually due to a lack of understanding and self-knowledge. One of the most important things on this planet is to know oneself deeply before communicating or interacting with others.”

In the early 1980s, she discovered NLP, fell in love and moved to France, where she spent seven years working as a business communication trainer and consultant. Her travels have clearly had an impact both upon her philosophy and the way she trains.

“The North American style is very anecdotal, based upon storytelling,” she says, “whereas in France, for example, training tends to be far more structured. I like to think I blend both. Particularly if you’re introducing people to new ideas, you need to give them a structure to follow while doing all you can to add colour and bring it alive.”

Upon her return to Canada two decades ago, Charvet says she faced another culture shock. “In Europe, I was used to being booked up a year ahead,” she explains. Back home, selling investment →

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in people wasn't that easy. Indeed, in the aftermath of the latest economic collapse, Charvet predicts that the L&D business in Europe, including the UK, will soon reflect life across the Atlantic.

“We can't maintain the pitch of crisis for much longer,” she says, “but what companies want and will tolerate over here will have changed for good. The days of buying three of these courses and four of those are gone. Decision-makers and budget-holders are becoming more senior, smarter and sceptical. They want to know why they should invest in training and development, and what they're going to get out of doing so.”

Charvet sounds like a fully-paid-up exponent of proving the RoI case, but “data and figures aren't actually the issue,” she says. “Rather, I think the L&D profession needs to recognise that what they do is only a means to someone else's business end. We need to stop being prisoners of our own point of view, and go and live life from the point of view of those we're trying to influence. If they can't see the benefits to them and their business of investing in L&D, why should they?”

“A vast amount of training doesn't give the buyer or the consumer the results they want, usually because immediately following ‘the event’, people have any learning knocked out of them by fire-fighting reality. If we're really going to achieve longer-term behavioural change, and surely that's the business we should all be in, we need to get the CEOs and CFOs to think about the future rather than the present.”

For Charvet, much is about managing expectations and aspirations. “We can't let them think we can just pull rabbits out of hats. The business has faced a problem for 20 years but expects us to come in on Monday and fix it. No wonder, then, that we fail. We need to challenge the business: do they want a real, lasting solution or a band aid and an entertainer?”

Charvet believes that L&D professionals need to see themselves as “in the business of getting real results for our customers, rather than in the training business. Our challenge has to be to make ourselves relevant, and our cost irrelevant. If we're addressing



an urgent and important issue, that needs solving now, with millions of dollars at stake, the trainer fee is irrelevant. If motivation, accountability and reinforcement of the learning are all embedded in the programme from the start, no one bugs you about RoI because it's totally transparent”.

We live in a consumer age, she says, where power has shifted to the customer. “Organisations need to talk to, and treat, people differently,” she believes. “Look at all the Class A action suits. People are rebelling.” She also cites the example of Dave Carroll, the musician whose guitar was damaged by United Airlines and who exacted revenge by creating the YouTube sensation *United breaks guitars*. “Who's got the power now?” Charvet asks.

It's the crux of her second book, written 15 years after the first: *The Customer is Bothering Me – how to change attitudes, improve results and grow your bottom line*. She insists it's essential reading for all L&D people seeking to make an impact.

Also worth a look is Charvet's entertaining blog (www.theshelleblog.com), which covers subjects from toilet tales in Tokyo to the psychology of the Mac v the PC. There's also her “macho factor test”, which enables you to grade yourself and others on a scale from “macho free” to “mega macho”.

As humorous as many of her stories are, though, we ought not to miss the deadly seriousness of Charvet's underlying message. Particularly those of us trying to make the case for L&D and faced with less than total and utter blind faith. **TJ**