Introduction: Coaching and NLP — a perfect match?

"A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination"
Nelson Mandela

In this section, I shall discuss the two disciplines of coaching and NLP and how they complement each other. Then I shall present a specific NLP coaching model that I shall be referring to throughout the book.

Coaching and NLP share a fundamental purpose: to help people live happier and more fulfilling lives. However, they are rarely taught together, which I find strange.

I believe that NLP is the secret that makes coaching so powerful. It takes the mystique of the great coach and breaks it down so it can be learnt by anyone, taking the implicit approach of coaching and making it explicit and understandable. In support of this belief, I find that most of the best coaches I come across have also studied NLP.

The two disciplines are effectively made for each other. In this book I shall show both why this is the case and how, on a practical level, they can be melded together to create something more powerful than either on its own.

I shall begin with very brief histories of the two disciplines, for readers unfamiliar with them.

A very brief history of coaching…

In the 1970s in California, a tennis coach who had been influenced by the 1960s' generation tried a new permissive approach to his job: he basically let the students have a go and didn't interfere with too much 'teaching'. The results were so powerful that a TV documentary was made about him – it tried to mock his methods, by getting him to teach a woman with no tennis experience. But she learnt very fast. The coach, Tim Gallwey, wrote *The Inner Game of Tennis* and a number of other books in the 'Inner Game' series. The principle was transferred into business by a British student of his, John Whitmore, who wrote *Coaching for Performance*.

Meanwhile, new trends in both therapy and business were evolving.

In the 1960s a therapist called Carl Rogers began to challenge the medical approach of Freud and developed what he called 'client-centred therapy'. The principle behind this approach was to treat the client as an equal and hold him or her in what Rogers called 'unconditional positive regard'.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as the field of business became professionalised, and business schools and MBA programmes began to spread across the world, organisational models began to mushroom. Peter Drucker, a professor at NYU, became the founder of a new profession: the business philosopher.

These new approaches to sports, therapy and business – the inner game for sports, the Rogerian therapeutic relationship, and a more structured approach to career success – combined to create a new field called 'coaching'. There are now over 120,000 coaches working across the world and a number of coach-accreditation bodies, the largest of which is the International Coaching Federation. Coaching both formally and informally is a feature of many of the world's largest organisations, including HSBC, GSK and the BBC.

Life coaching has also become a huge growth area. It is a central tenet of this that the coach 'coaches the client's entire life': coaching is no longer simply a business tool but a holistic means of personal development in personal and even spiritual life.

...and of NLP

NLP stands for neuro-linguistic programming. NLP studies the mind, and how it programmes itself (and can be re-programmed) using languages (verbal language, but also the languages of physical sensations, gestures, etc.).
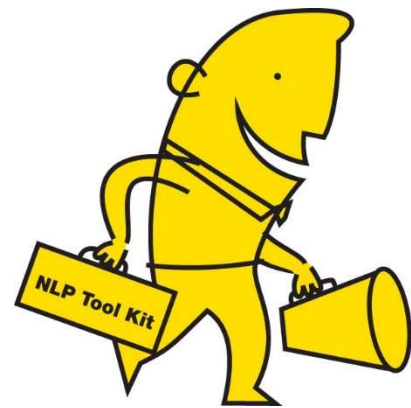
At the University of California in Santa Cruz in 1972, Richard Bandler, a mathematics student, and John Grinder, a linguistics professor, informally studied the work of Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, and family therapist Virginia Satir. The two therapists claimed to follow very different methods and yet they actually seemed to do exactly the same thing within the client sessions themselves – challenging limiting beliefs of their clients with very similar questions. Bandler and Grinder analysed the language patterns of these questions and produced a model enabling non-therapists to use these questions.

NLP has blossomed since then, with a range of people adding insights and techniques, most of these for personal development, though NLP has also very successfully transitioned into the business world. This blossoming has been without the guidance of a unifying professional body – the founders could not agree on what form such a body would take. NLP has grown organically into a global psychological discipline without any clear boundaries. The benefit of this approach has been an enormous flow of creativity; the disadvantage is a lack of a commonly agreed approach to a teaching syllabus, standard practice and accreditation.

The presuppositions of NLP

One feature common to most schools of NLP is that they share a set of 'presuppositions', beliefs about people and change. The ones that follow are those most relevant to coaching and provide an excellent starting point for looking at the two disciplines in depth and seeing what they can add to each other.

- **People have all the resources they need** – Many NLP techniques are about transferring 'resources' (=useful things; more specifically, in coaching, useful states of mind) from one context to another. For example, if someone is fearful of selling but is very comfortable and

charming in a social situation, they have the resources (charm and ease) necessary for selling; they just need to be able to mobilise them in the sales situation. NLP will help them do this.

▪ **There is no such thing as failure, only feedback** – NLP was influenced by early computer programs that taught themselves games like chess, which learnt – very effectively – this way. This attitude towards learning and change is ideal for human beings too. It is much, much better than the alternative, where something going wrong can lead to someone labelling themselves as 'a failure'.

- **All behaviour has a positive intention** – Self-defeating behaviour may seem to have no 'positive intention' at all. However, separating the behaviour from its root cause can have profoundly useful implications. NLP believes that human behaviour always starts from a positive place; although the behaviour may be self-defeating now, the intention behind it once had a positive purpose, and unless that original positive purpose can be met in an alternative way, the person will not be able to stop the self-defeating behaviour. A simple example is shouting at people, which is negative behaviour; however, if that person used to shout as a child and found it an effective way of asserting boundaries, then unless that person can find a new way to assert boundaries, the shouting behaviour will continue.

- **A map is not the territory** – This presupposition may sound obvious, but there is an important truth behind it. People often have very fixed views of what is 'reality', but actually they mean *their interpretation* of reality. These views can clash, sometimes with disastrous consequences: numerous wards between different religious groups are examples. NLP is curious about how people form these maps, about how we can develop our own maps to make them more flexible, about how we can communicate with people who have different maps, and about how we can help people who seem to be victims of their own inflexible maps.

- **In any interaction, the person with the greatest flexibility has most influence on the outcome** – NLP values flexibility highly – as does coaching. A good coach is a flexible coach, one who is not bound by preconceptions and can see things from the client's point of view. And both NLP and coaching seek to give the client more flexibility, broader 'maps' of who they are, how they world works and what they can achieve.

- **Mind and body are one system** – The old split between mind and body – which goes back to the seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes ('I think therefore I am') – is a dangerous illusion. Instead, the two are inextricably linked. We can use our physical state, facial expression or posture to directly affect our thoughts and feelings. Many powerful NLP techniques are based on this.

- **You cannot not communicate** – Whether we want it to or not, our state of mind is expressed in our body posture, facial expression, voice tone (etc.) and will send messages to other people, who will form judgements accordingly.

- **It is easier to change yourself than others** – As therapist and philosopher Viktor Frankl put it, 'The last of human freedoms is to choose your attitude in any set of circumstances'. When we change our response to other people's behaviour, they seem to change almost

miraculously! NLP firmly believes in the principle that people need to take responsibility for their lives and not blame others for their condition.

- **Energy follows intention** – One of Timothy Gallwey's key points was that trying desperately for an 'outcome', such as a better serve, often yields no results, as the 'internal chatter' starts up and the serve actually deteriorates. He suggests a better process: imagine having your desired goal, spend some time really focusing on it, and then leave your unconscious mind to direct your energy and just relax. The result? Success. This model is replicated in NLP.

- **It is often easier to influence through implication than injunction** – An injunction is an order, like a traditional sports coach yelling at someone to watch the ball. People resent being told what to do. NLP coaching is full of techniques for getting around this. Many of these are 'hypnotic' – a term whose meaning will become clear in this book.

- **Clients aren't broken** – **they work perfectly** - A client who becomes very angry or upset will do so with amazing consistency – i.e. they work perfectly at getting the result, even if those results are not desirable. NLP provides tools to analyse patterns of behaviour and to change those patterns, if the client wishes it.

- **Choice is better than no choice** – (Perhaps not always true in the modern retail environment!) When a client believes they have no choice in a situation, they can become desperate. One of the key roles of coaching is to bring about clients' awareness that they do have choices – including the choice to change themselves. Once a person realises they have choice, this is of itself very empowering and gives a send of having freedom to act.

- **If you always do what you have always done, you will get what you have always got** – Although this may again seem obvious, common sense is not always practised, especially in stressful situations, where people often revert to a preprogrammed 'default' response that gets the same old negative result. This presupposition encourages trying something different, the essence of being an effective and flexible human being.

- **The meaning of the communication is the response it gets** – This is an excellent concept from NLP co-founder John Grinder. It places the responsibility for the communication firmly on the shoulders of the person communicating. If the other person doesn't 'get it', then that means you didn't communicate effectively.
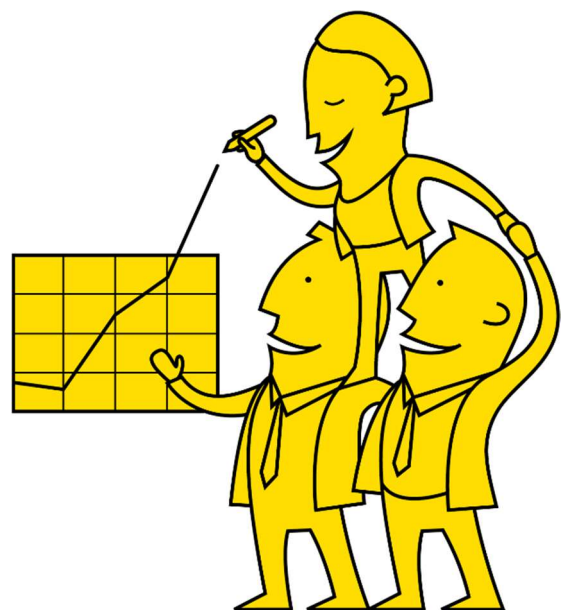
The fit

I hope the above has given a good feel of the spirit and mindset of NLP to anyone unfamiliar with the discipline and has been a good reminder to NLP-savvy readers. So, what does NLP bring to coaching? The coach faces a number of problems that NLP solves.

- Coaching has been described as a dance, led by the client. Yet there is not enough material in coaching training on the basic mechanics of this kind of dancing. How exactly do you pick up the lead from the client? Techniques of rapport – especially in their more sophisticated forms – lie at the heart of NLP, and provide clear guidance on this topic. And if, on occasions, the coach needs to lead the client, how is this done in the right spirit? NLP has the answers.
- A core skill of coaching is to gain an understanding of the client's 'inner world'. NLP provides a way of doing this, without imposing complex and contentious 'big' psychological theories. Instead, it gives the coach detailed tools for observation and for making useful and often powerful deductions from those observations.
- When coach and client see the need for change, NLP provides a huge range of tools to make this happen. Sadly, deep change in human beings is not imply brought about by a realisation of the need for it: people almost always need some kind of process to bring that about. NLP has created, tested and refined a huge number of such processes to cover almost any conceivable coaching requirement. My favourite ones will be covered in this book.
- The presuppositions contain beliefs that are very helpful for the coach.

Coaching, in return, provides much for the NLP practitioner keen to use his or her skills in professional context:

- Coaching provides a clear structure for the change process: the form of the sessions, the contract between client and coach, timings, settings and even costs.
- It puts the client at the heart of this process. This is where the client belongs, but sadly NLP is sometimes carried out in a different spirit, where the client has clever things done to them by a charismatic and sometimes aggressive individual. Such fixes are inevitably short-term: lasting change comes from within (encouraged and assisted from outside) rather than being imposed from outside. The coaching framework ensures the client stays in charge.
- It provides professionalism. Coach training and accreditation is a rigorous process and as such provides security for clients and a professional code for coaches.
- Beyond professionalism, coaching provides an ethical framework. Part of the excitement of NLP lies in its decentralised, 'let a hundred flowers bloom' approach – but the catch to this is a lack of an overarching agreement of what constitutes ethical practice. Coaching provides such an agreement.

So – the perfect fit?

Maybe not quite perfect. There are also areas of conflict.

NLP processes are directed. NLP coaches find themselves telling people to do things – 'put a piece of paper over there, stand on it, imagine a time where you were perfectly happy…' If coaching is an improvised, client-led dance, NLP can be a complex, prearranged ballet, choreographed not by the coach but by the 'big names' of NLP, who have crafted and refined the moves in the light of long experience: the processes are the way they are because they work.

I will show later how this difference can be got around.

At a deeper level, the roles are reversed, with coaching, with its rules and formal accreditation structure, providing the dos and don'ts, and NLP providing the curiosity and experimentation. But I hope that this book will show how these two spirits can reinforce each other rather than clash, and that any tension between them is a creative one.

Cynics say that coaching provides boundaries without depth, and NLP provides depth without boundaries. Fine: let's take the best of both of these, and give our clients (and ourselves) both boundaries and depth. The result, NLP coaching, will be something of great transformative power.

The six levels of coaching

As a coach, you will find yourself working in a range of contexts – with different clients or the same client at different times – from nerves about an upcoming presentation to deep anxiety about the meaning of life. These contexts require different coaching approaches.

Robert Dilts has developed a model for this, called Coach to Awakener. It is based on another NLP model of Robert's called the Logical Levels, which I need to outline first. The Logical Levels is a way of analysing the factors involved in human motivation – and human limitation – into six very different aspects. These are:

- Mission or Spirit
- Identity
- Beliefs and Values
- Capabilities
- Behaviour
- Environment

Mission or spirit is our relation to the larger context in which we live. People with a mission dedicate their lives to something that is larger than themselves, to something to which they feel connected and that shapes their view of themselves and guides their decisions. This is clearly a powerful motivator, and lack of mission can be a powerful limiting force on someone.

Identity is 'who we really are'. It is about our boundaries – where we end and the world and other people begin. It's about our deepest 'sense of self', a realisation we first made in infancy, that we are separate individuals needing to survive a whole host of dangers, and that we often spend the rest of our lives making sense of. Identity is precious and often vulnerable but at the same time can be

perceived as being set in stone, to a point where people have no notion that it can be changed. People will give up a lot – in the case of martyrs for a cause, everything – rather than face any challenge to their identity.

Beliefs and values are how we decide that something is possible or impossible, important or trivial, worthwhile or reprehensible. *Beliefs* are statements that we think are true but cannot check or haven't bothered to check. Many beliefs are acquired during childhood, either adopting the beliefs of parental figures or based on life as seen by a child. Often when these beliefs are examined by us as adults, they turn out to be wrong. They often take the form of generalisations (all *x*s are *y*) or statements about what is possible or impossible (for us or for 'people' in general).

Values are the key principles that are inherently important to us, such as honesty, compassion and hard work. They can be argued about in words ('honest is important, don't you think?'), but their true test is how we feel about them – especially if we have broken the rules they imply.

Our *capabilities* are our skills and knowledge – the ability to speak, walk or read; the ability to write books or to coach with NLP.

Behaviour is about what we actually do, and the habits behind those actions.

Environment refers to the physical contexts within which we act – and are motivated or limited.

In terms of personal growth, development can take place at all of these levels. Many people find it helpful to isolate a level on which they need to progress. Do you need to go on a spiritual retreat or just brush up on your sales skills?

Dilts created the Coach to Awakener model by taking the Logical Levels and applying it to coaching. Looking at the different levels…

Environment
At this level, the coach is kind of a guide. We can point out facts to clients. We can recommend books, websites and courses, and also make introductions.

Sometimes changes to someone's surroundings can be the intervention they need in order to change. For example, a client who said he was depressed spent much time focusing on his beliefs and identity, but it turned out that he was living in a draughty room in a broken-down house. I pointed out the effect this was having on him, and he decided to move somewhere better. The change in his whole character was remarkable.

Behaviour
At this level, the NLP coach acts more like a traditional performance coach. Coaching has many habit-building techniques: examples include reading a book one evening rather than watching TV. Without these, skills (see below) can be abstract and not very helpful. Habit and practice gets them 'in the muscle'.

Goal setting belongs in this category, as does preparing people for difficult situations, walking them through events such as giving a presentation or asking for a date.

Capability

At this level, the coach can be a teacher, providing the client with information and teaching them NLP techniques such as anchoring.

In executive coaching, the coach can also do part of what a consultant does, pointing out relevant business models and helping the client frame their issues in light of them.

There is, I feel, a dividing line above capabilities. Beyond this, things become much more intense and, as a result, more challenging.

Beliefs and values

Here, the coach can act as a mentor. Mentors are different from teachers: they don't only show you how to do things, but *why*. They can show you the mindsets you need to succeed in your chosen area. Part of this is done unconsciously: clients will pick up on a good coach's attitudes – and the beliefs and values behind them – without any active 'pushing' of these. But the NLP coach can also actively don their mentoring hat and be explicit about their beliefs and values, especially those most relevant to the client's issues. This is a bit of a departure from the conventional coaching model, but I shall explain later ow the two can be squared.

There are many NLP techniques aimed at resolving limiting or conflicting beliefs, some of which we cover in Part II of this book. They can be hugely powerful.

Identity

Dilts calls coaching at this level sponsorship, and observes: 'Sponsorship involves promoting the unique identity of the client'. He goes on to say:

> Sponsorship involves seeking and safeguarding fundamental qualities and potentials within others, and providing the conditions, support and resources that allow that person to express and develop their unique aptitudes and capabilities to the fullest degree.

I find that talking early in the coaching process about coaching at this level often of itself brings about great change in clients. People aren't used to being given this kind of respect, Carol Rogers' 'unconditional positive regard': maybe it is something they have never experienced, even as children.

Coaching at the level of identity can be hugely powerful, but it can also be dangerous. A smooth persona can hide a deeply troubled individual, who may suddenly become disengaged and even aggressive if their identity is under threat. The blander kind of coaching will leave this persona undisturbed (just a bit better organised): coaches may find themselves wandering into this challenging area and need to be prepared.

To coach at this level requires a high level of personal integrity. Gandhi said, 'Be the change you want to be in the world', and this is the perfect motto for this kind of work. The challenge of becoming ever more such a person is an ennobling and exciting one.

Mission or Spirit

The top of the logical levels is that of mission or spirit. Dilts says that at this level the coach is an awakener:

> Awakening others involves supporting them to grow at the level of vision, mission and spirit…opening up new vistas and possibilities…and providing contexts and experiences which bring out the best of that person's unawareness of purpose, self and the larger systems to which he or she belongs.

The coach can work with people to help them, or an organisation, develop a sense of purpose and direction.

The coach can also share meditation practices, which provide a method for people to have a very personal 'spiritual' experience. This is sometimes presented as a simple capability, learning a relaxation technique to avoid awareness in some situations. But I believe it goes much deeper than this. Please note, I have no specific spiritual agenda in saying this: the job of awakener is to awaken, after which the client will make their own spiritual discoveries if they so wish.

Mindsets and levels

It is worth considering the different mindsets that the coach needs to be in to coach most effectively at the different levels (as you will see in this book, altering your own state in reaction to the state of the client is at the heart of good NLP coaching):

- **Environment** – The mindset for the coach at this level is a practical one.
- **Behaviour** – At this level the coach is like a 'curious student', asking the client to explain to them how they are going to accomplish the tasks that lie ahead.
  - The coach can sometimes morph into a performance coach at this level, helping the client build good habits for themselves.
- **Capability** – The state for the coach at this level is that of teacher of adults, explaining content clearly and using appropriate examples.
- **Beliefs and Values** - There are two 'states' necessary here:
  - That of mentor is embodying your own beliefs and values with integrity, as in the Gandhi quote.
  - When working with conflicting or limiting beliefs and values, the coach needs a state of clarity and compassion: this is very sensitive material for the client, and it is important for the coach to respect and honour the client for allowing him ir her to be trusted in this fragile area.
- **Identity** – The unconditional positive regard of Rogers: caring for who someone *is* rather than what they do.
- **Spirit or mission** – The awakener holds the excitement and intensity that goes with the realisation of this powerful motivating force.
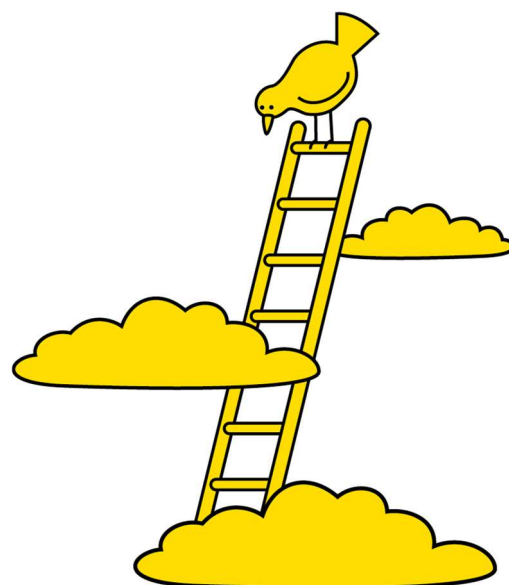
The Coach to Awakener model provides a unifying methodology for coaching. It has many implications and applications for the coach, which I will attempt to address throughout this book.

Coach to Awakener

Coaching at the level of…	I act as a(n)…
Spirit/mission	Awakener
Identity	Sponsor
Beliefs and values	Mentor
Capability	Teacher and/or consultant

Behaviour	Performance coach
Environment	Guide

To continue reading, simply purchase How to Coach with NLP by Robbie Steinhouse.
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