



DIFFERENTIATING NLP PRACTITIONERS AND META-COACHES

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- Is there a difference between being an NLP practitioner and a coach?
- If there is, what is the difference?
- What new awarenesses, distinctions, and models enables a person to move beyond being a practitioner to the facilitation of coaching and on to Meta-Coaching?

We believe that there is a difference, *and an important difference*, between a practitioner of NLP and a coach. This difference actually begins in Neuro-Semantics and is furthered developed in Meta-Coaching training. To adequately describe and explain this difference we first provide a definition of both NLP and Coaching, list the differences that we see between these modalities, offer some practical examples of the differences, and explain why we think that they are important differences to keep.

An Operational Definition of NLP

What is NLP? The elevator speech that I (MH) use is this:

NLP is a cutting-edge communication model designed to enable people to run their own brains and manage their own states.

That's it in a nutshell. The longer version goes like this:

NLP is a communication model that describes how we use words and behaviors as symbols, symbols that communicate meaning, meanings that put us into mind-body or *neuro-linguistic* states. In this, NLP is not about language or linguistics as such, it is about *neuro-linguistics*. That is, about the neurological effect in our physiology that our symbols as mental maps create. The processes or patterns that enable us to do this are the

human *programs*, and using them is *programming* ourselves for more resourceful ways of thinking, feeling, responding, communicating, relating, creating, managing, etc. This explains the initials NLP, *neuro-linguistic programming*.

As such, NLP is a great model that empowers a trained and competent practitioner to do many things. First and foremost, it enables a practitioner to run his or her own brain and develop state management skills. From there a skilled practitioner can run many scores of NLP patterns that help others take charge of their own lives. In the book, *The Sourcebook of Magic* there is a collection of 77 of the central NLP patterns.

Now NLP, as a cognitive-behavioral science it is based upon transformational grammar, gestalt therapy, family systems, and numerous other models. The combination of all these models lead NLP to focus on specific patterns or techniques for “running one’s own brain.” A practitioner learns the overall model of how words works such magic in the human mind-body-emotion system and then numerous sub-models. Together these models describe the factors of *language* (the Meta-Model of language), *perceptual filters* (Meta-Programs), *the editorial frames of our mental movies* or maps (inaccurately called “sub-modalities”), and the *layers of frames and states* (Meta-States). These four meta-domains of NLP make up the foundation of NLP Training (see *User’s Manual of the Brain, Volumes I and II*).

From all of these models emerge scores upon scores of patterns which put into step-by-step format a *technique* that enables us to run our brain in a specific way to create a specific outcome. Once a practitioner has a working knowledge and skill level of these patterns, the focus typically becomes that of identifying the problem, using the Meta-Model of language to index and specify the problem, and then choosing one of several patterns to run with a client to bring about a more resourceful response.

In describing NLP, and what a practitioner does and his or her focus, this highlights a *highly directive* process that’s a mixture of teaching, directing, questioning and exploring, counseling, and consulting. This makes NLP very powerful so that it is frequently accused of being “manipulative” and this makes it very different from coaching.

What is Meta-Coaching?

In contrast to the direct consultative and instructional nature of NLP, *coaching* is much more facilitative. It explores and uses exploration in the form of questioning as the way to enable a client to come to his or her own answers. In this, coaching does not run patterns or processes on people, but rather explores experience with a client to get to the heart of things so that *the client* comes up with the answers and outcomes.

The central tool in coaching is that of *facilitating* thinking, feeling, and acting. The facilitation mostly takes the form of questions, questions which enables a client so that he or she sets the goals and outcomes of the coaching and also the values and criteria by which success and progress will be measured. In Meta-Coaching we define *facilitation* as the critical ingredient that enables the client to unleash untapped resources and to mobilize those resources for the

desired outcome. So unlike therapy and consulting that typically focuses on problems, coaching focuses almost exclusively on solutions, on inventing challenging and exciting outcomes, and enabling the client to take full ownership for making it happen.

The reason for this focus on facilitating rather than teaching, training, consulting, mentoring, counseling, doing therapy, etc. is that coaching works with an unique population. Are you aware of Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*? This model describes experience from the lower needs that begin with survival needs (food, water, air, sleep, sex, etc.) to the needs of safety and security, love and affection, self-esteem and self-regard and then on to the higher needs (what he called the meta-needs) or self-actualization needs. This gives us a separation between two kinds of motivation, two kinds of growth, and two kinds of clients.

At the lower levels, people operate from what Maslow called *the deficiency needs*. Here motivation is all about satisfying or gratifying a need to make it go away. The problem here is change, challenge, disequilibrium, pain, distress, etc. and the solution is getting rid of and fixing the deficiency so that a person can re-experience homeostasis.

At the higher levels, people operate from what Maslow called *the expressive or growth needs*. Here motivation is all about finding, activating, and expressing one's full potentials. The problem here is lack of challenge, lack of change, equilibrium, status quo, gratification of all needs, etc. The solution at the level of the growth needs is change, challenge, growing, developing, and creating and embracing disequilibrium. In this, there could hardly be a greater difference between living at one or the other of these levels.

Obviously, the professional modalities and fields of consulting, counseling, therapy, and even training and mentoring is primarily for those who are *trying to fix something*, to gratify a need, and to bring closure and satisfaction to the basic human needs. For that, they need someone who is an expert and who can help them solve problems. For that they need someone who can give them *expert advice*.

How very different it is for those living at the level of the growth needs. People at this level do not need and, for the most part, do not want someone to give them advice. Self-actualization, in fact by definition, involves figuring out things on our own. It involves the actualizing of our problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, enjoying the embracing of ambiguity, problems, challenges, and the enjoyable experience of reaching inside ourselves and stretching to new heights.

Now, some of these values and experiences occur at the lower levels. That does occur, and when it does it often begins to create a taste and desire for self-actualization. Yet that is not the primary focus of consultants and therapists, practitioners, etc. It is, however, the primary focus of coaches. That's what makes coaching *an unique field* and one that uniquely addresses the area of self-actualization needs.

So How then does NLP differ from Coaching?

There are numerous differences. Here we have summarized them in the following points.

1) *Fixing or Remedial versus Facilitating or Generative*

NLP practitioners focus on *fixing what's wrong* whereas a coach *facilitates* a person to work on enabling something to work even better. Both of these areas are vital and important *and* different. A skilled practitioner will focus on problems and on fixing problems. Their expertise lies in being able to effectively and efficiently fix those problems. That is what clients pay them for, knowing what to do and how to do it.

Coaching, on the other hand, is not about fixing. It is about questioning so that a client gains self-awareness, the kind of awareness that helps the client find unique, personal solutions that is congruent with his or her own values and beliefs. It is about enabling and empowering a client as he or she develops the skills to probe through the symptoms in the exploration of the problem, identifying the frames, and specifying the process to use.

2) *Doing to versus Co-Creating:*

Because of the nature of the lower needs and what people need, and because of the historical focus of NLP on *doing things to people*, one of the mind-sets that have developed in NLP practitioners over the past thirty-years is that of doing things *to* people. A NLP practitioner meets a client, gathers a little information and then runs patterns and does things *to* a client. The practitioner is directive, in charge, and controlling. Is there any wonder that NLP got a reputation for being “manipulative?” (Actually, NLP is not manipulative, but there are people who do use the model in a manipulative way.)

In contrast, in coaching a coach works with a client to *co-create* a new solution. The focus is on a coaching conversation in which the coach asks the kind of probing questions that empowers the client to find and create his or her own answers. An effective and professional coach, in fact, will resist any temptation or seduction from the client to provide answers or to do things *to* them. The profession of coaching is committed to the idea of working side-by-side with a client and doing things *with* them.

A professional Meta-Coach meets a client, gathers lots and lots of information, probing, exploring, questioning, meta-questioning, mirroring, reflecting, asking more questions. In this process of an engaging conversation, the client establishes his or her agenda, values, visions, and plan for change. Often, and maybe usually, the coach does nothing directly *to* the client in terms of running patterns. The coach *facilitates* awareness, insight, emotion, motivation, actualization of a plan, celebration, and continual refinement through feedback.

3) *Short-term “one off” sessions versus longer-term programs*

As an NLP practitioner, most of us have been trained and have learned to focus on *immediate* solutions. In fact, the prototype of the *Movie Rewind* pattern that presents a “ten-minute phobia cure” pattern has, traditionally, set NLP up to be a model and NLPers

as those who “work fast.” An unfortunate consequence of this is that many in the field of NLP have come to value “speed” as a criteria that’s applied across the board for all problems and areas. Fitting with this many if not most practitioner work with people on single “one off” sessions.

By way of contrast, Meta-Coaches typically work with clients for a 3-month period in a “coaching program.” Because coaching is about teasing out potential and new behaviors, it utilizes behavioral reinforcement and shaping. These new behaviors are shaped over a period of time and in a variety of contexts. In the Meta-Coaching system, an eight session coaching program is offered graduates entitled, *Coaching to the Matrix*. This program allows a coach to work with a client or a team to empower the eight matrices of the Matrix model robust.

4) *Tasking versus Non-Tasking*

While many forms of therapy use tasking, NLP typically does little or no tasking with clients. Practitioners more traditionally think of their work as making the change with a client and that the client doesn’t have to understand what they are doing, let alone understand why. Clients trust that expertise to the practitioner.

Coaching differs radically from this. Coaching makes tasking one of its *core* practices. A Meta-Coach will be co-creating *action steps* for the *action plan* from the moment the coaching conversation begins and will then review such at the end of the session to create *from the client’s goals* a set of action plans for the next week or two or possibly month and then use those action steps to create an action plan. From there the coach will use these implementation steps as the content for feedback and testing in the following sessions. In coaching, success is all about what the *client* does, not the coach.

5) *Non-reinforcement versus Reinforcement*

Because NLP practitioners typically focus on doing things *to* people, they do not have their mind on noticing or activating the client to *do* things that they can then reinforce with positive reinforcements. Yet this is precisely what a coach does. A coach who isn’t taking the responsibility for the client’s outcomes focuses instead on *reinforcing* what a client does well (according to the client’s criteria) in order to mirror back and to enhance the client’s own awareness of what’s working and not working. In this, the coach focuses on holding the client’s outcome and criteria and using it for validation.

6) *Expert versus Explorer*

Because NLP sets practitioners up as the expert about a specific expertise that the practitioner has studied, researched, and had plenty of practice with, it is not unusual for the practitioner to be an expert in numerous content areas. This is especially true with the model is applied to an area of deficiency needs.

By way of contrast, because coaching is not about deficiency needs, but about self-actualization needs, this favors the coach stepping into a position of the facilitator of the

client's growth and development. And as such, the coach moves into the role of explorer, asking the kind of probing questions that evoke and even provoke a client for figuring things out. The coach is not seduced nor paid to demonstrate his or her genius, but that of the client.

An NLP practitioner will generally take responsibility for the success of the session, takes ownership of the processes and patterns, and is the expert in knowing NLP patterns and models. A Coach works, from the first moments, to release responsibility of the process to the client and focuses primarily on creating the conversational atmosphere that allows the client to take charge.

7) *Instructional versus Facilitator*

NLP also tends to be instructional, that is, it provides step-by-step instructions for how we can achieve a given outcome. In NLP many "strategies" have been modeled and invented from everything to motivation, spelling, managing, conducting meetings, selling, parenting, curing phobias, changing personal history, etc. Once certain expertise has been modeled and formulated into a strategy, practitioners use them instructionally, and so a practitioner will tend to fit the client to the pattern or technique.

The approach of the coach is the opposite. The coach seeks to fit the coaching to the client and so the idea of *co-creating* the new inner game that the client wants lies at the heart of Meta-Coaching. In coaching, we assume and operate from the premise that the client has all the answers, does all the work, and is his or her own best expert. The expertise of the coach is entirely at the process or structural level of facilitating the self-actualization and change processes, and will often involve the co-creation of new patterns and processes.

8) *Magic and magical thinking versus Strategic and reality oriented*

When NLP began, the metaphor of "magic" dominated. The first NLP book, *The Structure of Magic* used the term "magic" metaphorically to speak about the very different "logics" involved in the world of mind and communication. Yet the existence of the ten-minute phobia cure and other processes that do work very quickly has created a tendency in the field to lean toward the cognitive distortion known as "magical thinking." This refers to the childish thinking that creates superstitious beliefs that the world is simple, that there are certain magical words, rituals, prayers, etc. that suddenly gives one control over the universe.

The field of Coaching has no similar patterns. Why not? This is probably due to the difference again between deficiency and growth needs. With deficiency needs, how long does it take to satisfy the need for hunger or thirst? How long does it take to learn some of the basic social skills of empathy, concern, taking second position, etc.? If it takes any time at all, the time spent is usually involved in dealing with the interferences—with the things that are in the way and that need to be eliminated (limiting beliefs, toxic thoughts, traumatic memories, etc.). And this explains why some patterns can work with incredible

speed.

When we move to *the growth needs*, however, we move into a different dimension. Like the growth of a garden, there is a time element involved in maturing and developing is much longer. Coaching involves this kind of relationship to time. It involves the planting of new seeds and the germination process, and then the cycling through testing, re-evaluating, testing again, implementing, refining, redesigning, testing, implementing, etc. This involves setting forth milestones on the way to one's goal and strategically working with an action plan to design, plan, reinforce, test, use feedback, accountability, etc.

9) *The Certainty of Labels versus the Embracing of Ambiguity*

Whenever NLP or any other model is applied to the lower deficiency need, we need to engage in diagnosis, analysis, and prescription. When there's a problem, then we have to deal with its symptoms (to ameliorate some of them and to embrace and tolerate other symptoms) and distinguish what's symptomatic from what's causational. This explains why diagnosis tends to move toward the use of labeling and classifying problems and people and why the DSM-IV and other diagnostic tools predominate in the field of therapy.

Coaching avoids all of this for the most part because it begins, not with problems that need fixing, but *the challenges of self-actualization*. Coaches begin by embracing the ambiguity of not knowing and of uncertainty because there are fewer set forms or ways that self-actualization occurs. Because self-actualization is unique to each person inasmuch as it is about any given person becoming all that he or she can become and tapping his or her unique talents and gifts has to be custom-made for each person.

While there is some analysis for understanding where a coaching client is at the beginning of the process and some analysis of his or her meta-programs and meta-states, there is little diagnosis in the traditional sense of the term. Even a 360-feedback analysis is about how others experience us and is not on the same order as a medical diagnosis.

10) *Structure rather than Content versus the Integration of Content with Structure*

Traditionally NLP has been taught in a way that says "content" (the details of a client's story) doesn't count. To this end, NLP has even used X and Y or "yellow" or "blue" as the name of the problem and is often able to avoid content completely. This was a very healthy response to the over focus on content and the thinking that content was the problem in traditional psychotherapy.

Yet the original purpose by the founders of NLP in down playing content was not to completely discount the details of a person's experience or thinking, it was simply to avoid getting caught up in the details to the point of missing the structure. We have corrected this tilt in that direction in Neuro-Semantics by highlighting that both *content* and *structure* are relative terms anyway and that it all depends on what level you're

working. Often content does count and when it does, it needs to be addressed.

In Neuro-Semantics and Meta-Coaching, we have integrate content and structure in *the Matrix Model*. This model enables us to work with three *processes* or structures that govern human experience (state, meaning, intention) and to work with the specific content or mapping that we have created in the developmental areas of self, power, others, times, and world. As such, this gives a coach (or anyone working with the Matrix model) the ability to step in and out of content and structure (story and form) depending on the need and purpose of the coaching.

Then ten differences differentiates how an NLP practitioner operates from that of a coach. Yet in recognizing these ten differences, this does *not* mean that we dis-value NLP or do not use it. We do. The Meta-Coaching system includes six revolutionary models to address the demands of coaching and the first one is the NLP communication model.

Summary

- Does coaching differ from being an NLP practitioner? You bet it does! And it does in numerous ways. We have here numerated ten ways Coaching differs from being an NLP practitioner. These are not absolute, but do indicate the different nature of these two modalities.
- In a single summary statement about these differences we can say the following, *Coaching is about working with people to unleash their potentials by facilitating the mobilization of their resources respecting that they are the world's best expert on them and on the full actualization of their potentials.*
- Although it wasn't designed to, over the years NLP has mostly been practiced as a way of using cutting-edge patterns to do things *to* people to help them deal with various problems so they become more resourceful. Coaching is designed and is practiced by Meta-Coaches as working *with* clients to co-create their designed outcomes, holding that agenda, and then *facilitating* the necessary change to make that possible.

Authors:

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