This introduction to Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) basics and terminology is very broadly based on information provided by Robert Smith MBA, an NLP Master Trainer. It has, however, been heavily edited, re-written and augmented for content, language, and specific applications of the NLP model. It should be considered by the reader as an extremely simplified overview of basic concepts and terminology ... and an idiosyncratic one at that.

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Introduction

The term, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) was coined in the early 1970s by Richard Bandler (a computer scientist and Gestalt therapist), and Dr. John Grinder (a linguist and therapist). Bandler and Grinder popularized a process known as ‘modeling’ that purportedly enabled them to systematically study three of the world’s arguably most innovative psychotherapists: Dr. Milton Erickson, (often considered to be the father of modern hypnotherapy); Fritz Perls, who coined the term ‘Gestalt therapy’ to identify the form of psychotherapy he developed with his wife Laura Perls in the 1940s and 1950s; and Virginia Satir, the “mother” of modern-day conjoint family therapy.

In reality, Bandler and Grinder spent relatively little time with Dr. Erickson and much more with Dr. Satir, who comparatively is rarely mentioned in NLP literature (although this is changing somewhat as time goes by).

NLP is also heavily derivative of the work of anthropologist, Gregory Bateson; linguist Noam Chomsky and such notables as: Robert Dilts, David Gordon, and many others.

Bandler, Grinder and their associates wanted to know what made these remarkable therapists so effective in order to understand, systematize and train others in their approaches. What is offered today as NLP is a sharply divided, contentious and continually controversial. In spite of these distractions it is still a potentially useful product of the work of many people related to this somewhat unfortunately labeled model.

Surprisingly quickly, Bandler and Grinder split ways and NLP has continued to fragment further to this day.

The underlying principles addressed by NLP are not new; they are naturally occurring in human behavior and we all do them (albeit mostly unconsciously, and inconsistently) ... but NLP sought to gather them into an integrated system, which could be more easily taught (marketed) in much the same way process improvement has been parsed out into various “schools” (TQM, Lean, Six Sigma™ and others). The basic underlying principles remain essentially the same, but emphasis, nomenclature and ‘packaging’ is more divergently labeled and defined.

A Cynic’s Disclaimer

Despite all the hype and controversy (including the “debunking of the debunking,”) NLP isn’t magic; and while it is accurate to say a great deal of it has not been rigorously empirically verified, this is also true for most of the nearly 400 counseling models extant.
Nonetheless … approached with healthy skepticism it can be quite useful; most especially in focusing and directing awareness in a more structured and purposeful manner, and in more frequent systematic and deliberate language awareness and use.

Keep in mind that it’s very easy for anything that easily lends itself to being referred to contemporaneously as “magic” and “hokum” to become dogmatic in nature, especially once people start making money from it. Particularly ironic, is the fact that this often greed driven and rancorously contested model was intended to help people, but too often it either is portrayed, or actually becomes the antithesis of the thinking and values that underlies the work itself (NLP strategies to supposedly get you to buy a car … give me a break).

**How can NLP help?**

NLP can be a useful way of thinking about human communication and while it is closely related to various forms of psychological “therapy” models it is not a model of therapy. This is a very important consideration in our environment, where there is very much a professional line between “counseling” and “therapy.”

To our advantage, NLP has beneficial uses in a much wider range of applications than in therapeutic environments and enables increased awareness and control of oneself; better appreciation and understanding of the subjective realities of others and their resultant behavior, which in turn enables increased empathy and rapport. Used as a tool (rather than a belief system) it can incrementally improve understanding and effectiveness in virtually all communication situations.

Perhaps the best functional definition of communication is the result you produce through communicative behaviors. If what you are doing is not producing the results you want … it’s important to do something different.

When applied in a rational, respectful and caring way, these principles also assist in more effectively helping people with work and life issues in ways that can be simpler, more self-directed and often less intrusive than its more traditional counterparts. It can also work very well in conjunction with other models in current use within VR, such as Motivational Interviewing (MI), that share a very similar set of underlying assumptions. While there is not a great deal of literature on the relationship between NLP and MI, what is readily available appears to comfortably support this assertion.
Basic NLP Operational Principles

NLP largely consists of a set of potentially useful, selective communication strategies and an operational philosophy to guide their use. It is based on three primary operational principles.

1. **Know what outcome(s) you want/need to achieve.** This means knowing specifically what it looks like, sounds like, feels like, smells like, etc. It is not some vaguely defined “happy place.”

2. **Pay Attention to what you are getting:** Paying attention means better understanding though increased sensory awareness in order to know if you are moving towards or away from your intended outcome. In other words, if you know what you want it’s very important to pay attention to whether what you are doing in order to get it (your strategy) is actually working.

3. **Flexibility of behavior:** It’s normal and natural not to get what you are seeking the first time around, especially with more complex outcomes. When this happens, you can either get frustrated and give up ... or vary your behavior until you succeed or until you find an acceptable substitute. For every single effective strategy, you can bet there are dozens of things that should work, but don’t. Whichever alternative you select, don’t continue to do what doesn’t work ... harder. In a battle between you and the world ... generally, the world wins.

Oddly enough, these are also three strategies (quite independently) found to be associated with successful leaders in the decades-long, exhaustively vetted, empirical research done by Dr. Paul Hersey and his (at the time) research assistant, Ken Blanchard, in the widely known model, Situational Leadership™. It also comes very close to a culture-free definition of “mental health.”

**Outcomes**

It’s important to have specific outcomes defined, because if you don’t know what you need (in positive, sensory-based terms), chances are you won’t get it, except by accident. NLP stresses the importance of selectively communicating with conscious purpose. In order to more reliably achieve intended outcomes it helps to act and speak in a focused and deliberate manner; NLP teaches a series of linguistic and behavioral patterns to aid in this.

Of particular importance in our environment, NLP stresses the importance of continuous orientation to the person or people with whom you are interacting (including yourself), in order to determine if what you are doing is working. Without being “person-centered” it simply does not work.

Flexibility means you vary your behavior until you get the results you are seeking. This variation in behavior should not be random in nature. It’s most effective when it involves the systematic application of structured strategies, based on situational dictates (those with whom you are communicating, and the context in which the communication occurs). That being said, there is always something to be said for doing something “weird” when normal isn’t getting results. Remember, weird for you may be completely normal and even appreciated by others.
NLP Principle 1 - Achieving Outcomes

The importance of knowing the desired outcome(s) of any important interaction is essential. You can’t reliably get to a destination when you don’t know (clearly) what that destination is, and why you are going there (the outcome of reaching your destination).

Often people don’t have conscious outcomes in mind when they communicate with others. Frankly, a lot of the time that’s just fine. Humans are social animals, and just interacting with each other is often a very important outcome regardless of the “content (interaction for its own sake).” But when the intended specific outcome is important, your strategy is equally important.

Often we may not have a clear idea of what we really want nor need; more often we know what we don’t want (which is seldom very helpful). Yes, there are circumstances where avoidance (focusing on what you don’t want) is a good choice (bears, poisonous snakes, toxic people, etc.), but it is not a very effective general life strategy. NLP stresses the importance of moving positively towards those things you want, rather than away from what you don’t want. Once a desired outcome is specifically determined, you can begin to focus on those things that contribute to achieving that outcome.

Practical Outcomes

NLP details certain “well-formed” conditions that outcomes should meet. The first of these is that the outcome be stated in positive terms. This means the outcome must be what you want, rather than what you don’t want. There is no such thing as a neurological negative. For example, as you read this try not to think about pizza. You can only engage in the process of doing.

Outcomes must also be capable of being satisfied (I may want to be able to move freely through time and space, but it probably isn’t going to happen no matter what I do, or how hard I try).

The second well-formed condition for outcomes is that the outcome must be observable in internal and/or external sensory experience. There must some sort of evidence procedure. Without this there is no way to assess progress towards achieving the intended outcome. With evidence it’s possible to reliably determine whether or not you are making progress.

I suspect for marketing purposes, NLP tends to focus unaccountably on speed. Unfortunately this causes people to conclude if they don’t immediately get the outcome they want, their strategy is somehow flawed. This is a thinking error.

Many things take time to come to fruition. For example, rarely can one develop a truly deep and enduring relationship in a matter of minutes, or complete college in a single year, or learn a new musical instrument in a few months. Sometimes outcomes have to be broken down into “pieces” that lead to the final outcome. And, in many cases, outcomes remain in motion (such as managing anger more effectively, or becoming more comfortable in social situations).
Third, the desired state must be *sensory specific*. You must be able to describe what it would look like, sound like and feel like if you achieved your desired outcome. The really interesting part of this last bit, is finding that getting what you want, (a very specific thing) and getting a desired “state” (arguably a more generalized thing) is the difference between having only *one* thing you find satisfactory, as opposed to *many* potential things.

For example, one of the great surprises in life is to find what we need where we least likely expect it. I became a parent at 57, to someone society refers to as a “special needs” teenager. This was not a previous “want” for me, I assure you. However, I am continually surprised and delighted by how badly both of us *needed* it. This one, completely unexpected event, is perhaps the most transformative experience of my now six-plus decades of life. Who knew?

I throw this in here as an antidote to NLP’s rather single-minded focus on control. Or, as Dennis the Menace once said, “*It’s hard to tell how deep a mud puddle is by looking at the surface.*”

While this concept often gets short-shrift in NLP, it is certainly basic to the work of Milton Erickson, et al. It’s the enduring *curiosity* about, and *openness* to the world in general.

Fourth, the outcome or desired state must be *initiated and maintained by you*. This places the responsibility with you and not with someone else. It’s not a well-formed outcome when the expectation is that someone else does something because you want them to. All you can do is have an outcome in which you can change yourself or your behavior, so as to hopefully bring about a specific desired response in yourself or someone else.

Fifth, the outcome must be *appropriately and explicitly contextualized*. This means that outcomes can’t reasonably be stated as universals. ‘All the time’ or ‘never’ just doesn’t work, but specific outcomes in specific circumstances *do* work. The idea is to create more choices and never to take choices away, or reduce the number of possible responses. The goal instead is to make the most probable effective choices or responses available in the appropriate circumstances.

Freaking out when I see a bear in a zoo is not an optimal response. It’s not good for me, and probably a source of some consternation on the part of the people around me, and perhaps even for the bears; freaking out when I see one coming in my tent in the middle of the night … *is*.

Sixth, the desired outcome *must preserve any positive product of the present state*. If this is not the case then substitution or outright rejection is most likely to occur. Understand, even behavior which may *appear* to be irrational from the outside serves a positive purpose. The key is to understand the positive purpose and preserve it, while finding alternatives that are less likely to produce unwanted side-effects (such as being reasonably cautious about interacting with strange animals that *are* potentially harmful, instead of being phobic about all dogs).

Seventh and finally, the outcome or desired state must be *ecologically sound*. Consider the consequences for yourself and for others and try not to pursue outcomes that lead to
harming yourself or them (unless, sadly, that is your desired outcome). Even the most “positive” outcome won’t work if it is somehow incompatible with the gestalt of who you or other people are. It might (and I stress *might*) be better were I a chipper, eternally optimistic and trusting sole … but it ain’t gonna happen in this life time. Attempts to elicit this “positive” state from me are not ecologically sound, and I will almost certainly reject them as such.

Pursing positive outcomes does not mean constantly seeking “normality,” safety, calmness and peace, or even happiness. Anxiety, fear, guilt, anger, adversity, confusion … are all important parts of the checks and balances that help us cope with the world, and they are quintessential aspects of the human experience. Each of these “negative” states is potentially useful, and even quite beneficial, depending upon the context. Being without fear is not bravery; it’s stupidity and potentially lethal. A person without guilt or remorse maybe reasonably described as a sociopath, depending upon their behavior. If you do something lousy to someone, and you feel badly about it afterwards… good for you; it means you have a conscience.

Now another preachy caveat … with all the emphasis on getting your outcomes we can lose track of the purpose of helping professions, which is to help others get what they need. Humans are self-centric. This is not a bad thing in and of itself; it’s necessary for survival and deriving some satisfaction from living. But a single-minded focus on just getting what I want is called selfishness. The best outcomes are those where everyone involved benefits. This is called enlightened self-interest.

If you are an endlessly selfless person in the helping professions, you will burn out. If you are only concerned with your own needs, you are probably a narcissistic jerk.

**NLP Principle 2 - Sensory Awareness**

We all engage in sensory “uptime” and “downtime.” Uptime refers to when we are predominantly *externally* aware; paying far more attention to what is happening around us, than within us. Downtime is when our awareness is primarily focused *internally*, on our own thoughts and feelings.

Qualitatively, both of these states are equally important. Situationally, they are not.

When asked a question for which one does not have a readily available answer, most people go into downtime to try to find an appropriate response (“*How do you feel about returning to work?*”). This is useful and necessary. When speaking in front of a group of people, excessive downtime results in heightened anxiety, loss of contact with the group, and in general, being less effective; this is neither useful nor necessary.

In day-to-day conversation people are often only partially aware of the other. Instead of listening and observing, they are more aware of rehearsing a response, orienting to their emotional or cognitive response to what the other is saying, daydreaming, etc. When engaged in communicating with others, excessive downtime means we will miss a great deal of what is happening with the other person, which can be quite unproductive.
Once you know your desired outcome you must have sufficient sensory awareness to know if you are moving in the right direction. And just because you can repeat what someone says (Active Listening) doesn’t mean you are really paying all that much attention. NLP focuses on increased awareness of others in specific and organized ways. This involves the ability to discern and interpret language patterns, eye movements, changes in voice tone and changes in muscle tone, skin color and breathing rate and location (low in the abdomen, high in the chest, etc.).

And while these patterns and their demonstrable relationship to actual neurological functioning are hotly contested, they are quite easy to check out. Just ask. I know, duh.

“When I asked you about those things you think make it difficult for you to consider working, it appeared as though perhaps you were seeing something in your mind’s eye … is that so?”

The NLP practitioner uses these and other indications to determine what effect they are having on other people. This information is feedback as to how the other person is responding.

Again, through the morass of method, if you take away only this one thing ... paying attention, then ... well done. Engagement trumps technique.

**NLP Principle 3 - Changing Behavior**

The third operational principle of NLP is to vary your behavior until you get the response you want.

Of course, this is easy to say (but not so easy to do). If what you are doing isn't working, then do something else. Use your sensory awareness to determine if what you are doing is leading you in the desired direction. If what you are doing is leading towards your intended outcome, continue. If, on the other hand, what you are doing is leading away from your intended outcome or simply leaving you sitting in one place and spinning, find a suitable alternative.

Be aware, personal comfort is not the guiding criterion here. It doesn’t matter if it should work; if it doesn't, it’s not the other person’s problem, it’s mine, and I need to change what I am doing, even if that creates some personal discomfort. Oh, and remember, when you get what you want ... stop. Countless times I have seen people achieve their stated outcome, not notice it, and then mess it up by pressing on.

And don’t discount the power of acceptance. Deliberately and affirmatively accepting something is a perfectly rational and well-formed outcome. If I accept that I am an older man, I am spared the embarrassment of red sports cars and hair plugs ... money better spent on more useful things. And more to the point, I can re-focus my attention on what my age means in positive terms (I like being called, “sir.”). Soon I will face having to use hearing aids. I can either rail against this inevitability, or accept it and move on. Now, that doesn’t mean I am not going to whine about it (whining is quite therapeutic, if unfortunately annoying to others).
NLP Presuppositions

There are certain presuppositions underlying NLP. These are things that are presupposed in effective communication. Some of them are detailed below. Below the headings each presupposition is explained in somewhat more detail.

1. The meaning of communication is not what you say, or even so much how you say it ... it is the response you get.

2. The map is not the territory and everyone’s “map” of subjective reality is at least somewhat different. Even when we share common experiences, it doesn’t mean those shared experiences mean the same thing.

3. Language is a secondary representation of experience. Because it is secondary, there is almost always the need in critical communication to understand what the other is saying in more detail. Someone who tells you they feel “bad,” is not telling you much you can use to respond appropriately. You will have to get more information about what “bad” means to them, and what (if anything) they would like you to do about it. Be delightfully surprised how often people just want someone to really listen to them and not “fix” things.

4. Mind and body are parts of the same system and affect, and in turn, are affected by each other. How you feel impacts how you think; how you think impacts how you feel.

5. Being flexible is good (including being sufficiently flexible to be stubborn and inflexible about some things). The law of requisite variety, also known as the first law of cybernetics (cybernetics is the science of systems and controls in animals, including humans, and machines), states that in any complex system the element or person in the system with the widest range of available behaviors or variability of choice will control the system. Simply put ... the more choices you have, the more likely you are to get what you need.

6. Behavior is geared towards adaptation. We do what we do, because it is the best adaptation to our circumstances we believed to be available to us at the time.

7. Present behavior, regardless of its outcome, represents the very best perceived choice currently available. Sounds like the same thing as number six doesn’t it? It’s a good exercise to figure out the difference, if there actually is one.

8. Behavior is to be evaluated within the context in which it occurs. It is either effective or ineffective in that context, but that says little about how well or poorly it might work in another context.

9. Assumption of Resources. For the most part, people already have the resources necessary to get what they need. However this includes the resource to understand and accept I need some assistance from others, from time to time. And all of us are teachers, mentors and guides, and when someone simply lacks the skill, knowledge or ability to achieve what they wish education can be an appropriate response. This not an, “I am a rock” philosophy; it is quite the contrary; most complex outcomes require the collaboration, cooperation and assistance of other humans.
This is particularly pertinent to disabilities. I take pride in, and enjoy being as independent as possible. That being said, I have developed strategies to get people to let me be when I have it, and to feel comfortable assisting me, when I don’t. I am comfortable accepting help when I need it, because I know that disabled or not, we all need help from time to time. This is not weakness, it is just being human.

10. ‘Possible in the world’ or ‘possible for me’ is often a matter of how. Again we come back to resources and education. As a young man, one of dearest friends lost his left arm, just below the elbow. He was a farmer. Of course his physicians told him he would have to seek alternative employment because he could not farm with prosthesis. He didn’t agree, and for the next ten years he farmed (including mechanic work on his equipment), and started a custom farming service, eventually ending his working career as a sales professional for an agricultural company. People who didn’t know him thought him brave and miraculous; I just knew he really liked farming.

11. The highest quality information about other people is behavioral. It’s not what they say; it’s how they say it, and what they do. Understanding something at an intellectual level is no assurance of translating that understanding into behavior.

12. It is useful to make a distinction between behavior and self. Inherently “good” people can behave badly; intrinsically “bad” people can behave positively. Humans are pretty clumsy, and most of us suffer from periodic disconnects between brain intention, and speech or other behaviors. And socially we run the gamut from slick as Teflon™ to painful awkwardness.

13. There is no such thing as failure; there is only feedback (unless, of course, you give up). The surest paths to failure are giving up after one or two tries, or never taking the risk to try at all. All failure really means (unless it results in your death), is that what you are trying isn’t working and you need to find something else (being dead makes that last part problematic); however, putting more energy into an outcome than its worth to you is silly. Life is short; pick your windmills.

**NLP Axioms 1 - meaning equals response**

In communication it is usually (and incorrectly) assumed that you are somehow transferring meaning to another person. This simply is not true. You have information that ‘means’ something to you inside, and you intend for the other person to understand it, preferably in a manner that most closely approximates your meaning. You behave in certain ways (talk, move, do things, etc.) that you believe will accomplish this, and they react to what you say and do.

No matter how carefully you speak, there is no guarantee they will respond as you intend the first time, or ever. Welcome to the wonderful world of communication.

Frequently a person assumes if they ‘say what they mean to say,’ their responsibility for communication is complete. Any resultant disconnects or confusion becomes a function of the listener. Effective communicators realize their responsibility doesn’t end when they finish talking. They also realize that, for practical purposes, what they communicate is what
the other person thinks they say and not necessarily what they intended to say. You can almost assume the two are at least somewhat different.

I tell my son it’s time for him to go to bed. He nods in agreement. Communication has been achieved. I come back a few minutes later, and he is not preparing for bed. I repeat, “Time for bed.” His response is, “Now?” I didn’t fail to get him to go to bed; I just got feedback that I needed to be more specific as to when. Once I adjusted my behavior based on his feedback, he went to bed.

In communication what is most important is what the other person thinks you say and how they respond … the sense it makes, or doesn’t make to them. This requires the speaker to pay attention to the response they are getting.

It also ends up with you asking a lot of potentially annoying questions, such as, “When I said, Christmas tree … what came to mind?” Boy, you would be surprised at the variety and emotional baggage associated with “Christmas Tree!” What is bright and shiny and happy for one person, ranges from disappointing to absolutely disturbing for others.

If it’s not the response you want, you need to vary your communication until you get the desired response, or at least close to it; again, that being said … sometimes you get something different than what you were aiming for, but also sometimes better …

When I was in college, at one point I was quite interested in a specific young woman. My outcome was to get her to go out to coffee with me; that was all. Granted, this is a modest outcome but at the time it was very important to me. We spent some time interacting sitting on my car, and just as I was getting ready to ask her out for coffee, she leaned forward and kissed me. This was not the outcome I was aiming for … it was better.

Never allow the fixation with one outcome blind you to the endless possibilities of alternative outcomes that are different, or even better. See, humans aren’t really that smart, and many times we don’t always know what is best for us. Being aware means noticing that it’s entirely possible to get more than you bargained for (the kiss … and the Kodiak on the trail).

But back to our story … this “assumption” of the transference of meaning is at the heart of many, if not most communication mix-ups.

There are several major sources of ‘misunderstanding’ in communication. One of these arises from the fact that each person has a different life experience associated with each word in the language they use. Frequently, what one person means by a word (their complex equivalence for that word) may be something utterly different from what another person means when they use that same word. When I say “sushi,” I think … yummmylicious; someone else may respond with horrified disgust; same word … same definition … completely different response.

Another common misunderstanding arises from the failure to realize that a person’s body most frequently communicates more information than their words, and that we may respond to these “cues,” and what we believe they mean, as much (or more) than we do to what is actually said.
Exercise some caution here. Misguided assumptions, such as “when a person crosses their arms and leans back, they are defensive” implies something about most non-verbal behavior that just typically isn’t true (that non-verbal cues have specific, consistent meaning). Sure, a three year old knows what waving bye-bye means, but this is a far cry from thinking you can discern what I “mean” when I cross my arms, or frown, or any other of a host of non-verbal behaviors. I cross my arms in front of me a lot because I have a profoundly damaged spine and I am in chronic pain ... sometimes crossing my arms helps. Often I frown when I am concentrating.

**NLP Axiom 2 - Maps and Territories**

People do not (for the most part) operate on reality ... they operate on their “map” of reality. Good communicators realize that the representations they (and others) use to organize their experience of the world ('map') are not the world ('territory').

It is important to distinguish between several semantic levels that make up these maps. First there is the actual world. Second comes the person’s experience of the world. This experience is the person’s ‘map’ or ‘model’ of the world and is different for each person. Every individual creates a unique model of the world and thus lives in a somewhat different reality from everyone else. Not only is it different, it is continually changing as we move through time.

For the most part we operate on our experience of the world, and the generalizations we have formed from them (sushi good, beets bad). This experience may or may not be commonly shared or even factually supportable ... but it doesn’t mean it isn’t real for you. You would be shocked at how many times I have had to defend the fact that, while I love virtually all vegetables, I absolutely loathe beets in all their various incarnations. I can easily accept people finding raw fish distasteful, but why do I have to like beets?

To the extent that your experience has a similar structure to the actual physical and socio-cultural world, it is often more useful. However, it must be said that some of the greatest examples of human progress are the results of people who violated this principle ... so it’s generally best to avoid absolutes. Think of the “non-standard” thinking that produced the paintings of Van Gogh, or Einstein’s, Special Theory of Relativity.

A person’s experience, and the resultant “map” or representation of the world determines how they perceive and interact with the world and what choices they perceive as available to them. Many NLP techniques involve selectively altering limited representations of the world to make individual maps richer and more useful.

It’s just that “richer” and more “common” are not necessarily the same. I don’t want to adopt the maps of people who weren’t born disabled. I want to understand them, of course, but not live there. It’s not that I have any issue with their maps, but mine is unique because my experiences in life have been unique, and being disabled has been a major driver in the process of becoming who I am. And sometimes it’s not possible. I am partially color blind. I understand that I don’t see the world as other do, but I have no way of understanding the difference. The fact remains ... I am not broken ... just different.
NLP Axiom 3 - Language and Experience

Language is the representation of experience. It’s always partial, always incomplete and generally highly imprecise. It can, and often is, used as much to hide as to illuminate. Humans struggle to find a balance among being independent, dependent and interdependent. I want you to know the things about me that I want you to know, and not those things I wish to keep private.

Language is at a third semantic level. First, there is the stimulus coming from the word itself. Second is the person’s personal representation of experience(s) of that stimulus (how they interpret the word). Third is the person's description (generalization) of the experience of that word, by way of language.

Language is not experience, per se, but a representation of it. Words are symbols used to represent things we think, see, and hear smell or feel.

People who speak different languages use different words to represent what those who use other languages also experience. Irrespective of your native language, coming unarmed, face-to-face with a grizzly bear is probably a very similar experience, whether you describe it in English, or Hindi.

There is huge variation even in the use of a “common language.” Look at English ... not just as it is used outside the US, but also regionally. We define it as a single language but it isn’t.

Also, since each person has a unique neurology, culture (and/or sub-culture) and personal experiences (and how they made sense of those experiences), when we assume these meanings (words) are equivalent, problems in communication inevitably arise, e.g., sushi versus fried catfish, when talking about going out for a “fish dinner.” We may think we are talking about the same, or similar things (fish dinner), but in reality we are frequently worlds apart.

NLP Axiom 4 - Body and Mind Affect Each Other

Mind and body are parts of the same complex, integrated system and affect each other. There is no separate ‘mind’ and no separate ‘body.’ Both words refer to aspects of the same whole or gestalt. They act as one and they influence each other in such a way there is generally little meaningful separation (Why do I keep thinking about a guillotine when I re-read this sentence?). Try really think about biting into a lemon (see it, smell it, etc.), as you read this. I bet your body responds almost as though you had, even though the “reality” is that you are just reading words on a page.

Anything that happens in one part of a complex integrated system, such as a human being, will affect all the other parts of that system. This means that the way a person thinks affects how they feel, and the condition of their physical body affects how they think. A person’s perceptual input, internal thought process, emotional processes, physiological responses and behavioral output all occur within the context of both the integrated internal “system” and the external environment. Whew … we are complicated little muffins, aren’t we?
In practical terms, this means that a person can change how they think or feel, either by directly making a behavioral change, or by changing their physical response or other feelings and perceptions. Similarly, a person can change their physical response or their emotions by changing how they think about something. We can also learn from others who appear to have more functional responses (such as those people who don’t experience frustration when they feel they are not being understood, and instead, do something else).

**NLP Axiom 5 – The Widest Range of Behaviors or Choices Controls the System**

Control in human systems refers to the ability to influence experience in the moment and through time.

The person with the greatest flexibility of behavior ... that is, the number of ways they have of thinking, acting and interacting ... will generally be in more control than those who lack this ability. Choice is always preferable to no choice, and more choices are always preferable to fewer choices.

This also relates to the third general principle of NLP mentioned previously. This principle is that a person needs to vary their behavior until they get their desired outcome. If what you are doing is not working, vary your behavior and do something else. Almost anything else is better than continuing with what doesn’t work. Keep varying your behavior until you find something that works. It’s normal and natural for something not to work the first time, or even multiple times. Such is life.

**NLP Presupposition 6 - Behavior and Adaptation**

Behavior is geared towards adaptation. Initial adaptation is determined by the context in which that behavior originates.

Reality is largely defined by how you organize and think about your perceptions of the world. The behavior a person exhibits is an adaptation to that perceived reality. All of a person’s behavior, whether effective or ineffective, is an adaptation that originated in a point in time.

Practically everything is useful in some context. All behavior is, or was adaptive, given the context in which it was learned. In another context it may not be so effective; this why context or “frame” becomes such a significant factor in NLP. Context is the “frame” that determines meaning. A bear in the zoo and a bear in front of you on a narrow trail in the woods is just an issue of “context.” These two situations do, however, call for a different response.

**NLP Axiom 7 - Present Behavior is the Best Perceived Choice**

Behind every behavior is a positive intent. A person makes the best choice available to them at any moment in time, given the person they are and based upon their life experiences and the available choices they perceive. If offered a better choice they will often take it, unless that alternative choice is perceived as having equivalent or stronger
negative consequences, or is in some way not ecologically sound (such as an alternative that violates strongly held beliefs or values).

In order to change ineffective behavior it is necessary to have other choices, which are perceived as having greater benefits and fewer risks or negative outcomes. NLP has techniques for helping people generate additional choices. The goal is always to add choices, not to take them away. Less bad is still a positive outcome. Perfection is illusive.

**NLP Axiom 8 - Context of Behavior – Want versus Need**

Behavioral choices should serve to increase the individual’s ability to have greater flexibility, and creativity in reaching their desired outcomes. Very often we focus on what we want (a new car) as opposed to what we need (whatever it is we think a new car will give us).

People are often disappointed to find that what they wanted was not really what they needed. Perhaps most of us cannot fathom how someone can be rich, successful, powerful, and still be miserable. The only way that situation makes sense is that those things may have been what the person wanted, but not what they needed, or that they came with unexpected negative consequences that were greater than the experienced gain.

We also often wonder how people who have none of those things and exist with privation and other myriad forms of unpleasantness, manage to achieve happiness and contentment. Same answer ... somewhere in there, they are getting what they need. And, it may be as simple as how they choose to think about it. Think about the difference between choosing to live very simply from a materialistic point of view, and being ‘poor.’

I grew up very ‘poor,’ although that isn’t really how I experienced it. My siblings were scarred by what they perceived as privation and the accompanying shame and embarrassment. I had a very enjoyable and generally rewarding childhood. We each had the same living conditions, but for whatever reason I experienced and interpreted them quite differently.

I understand my son is profoundly disabled, but this is not how I experience him. Yes, just like everyone else, there are things he can do and things he can’t. I experience him as complex, almost fearless, kind, loving, obstinate, clever and manipulative, enigmatic, creative and artistic and endlessly surprising. I know he experiences me as wondrous, funny, and a little scary sometimes and absolutely at the center of his life. And we are both endlessly interested in the other. And while communicating across the considerable physical, cognitive, linguistic and cultural gulf that separates us is challenging for both of us, it is also hugely rewarding.

**NLP Axiom 9 – Having the Resources to Change**

Most often, people have all they need to make changes they want to make. The task is to locate or access those resources and to make them available in the appropriate context.
What this means in practice is that people generally don’t need to spend significant amounts of time and effort in trying to gain intellectual insight into their problems or in developing new resources to deal with them. Generally, they already have all the resources they need to handle their problems. It’s just that those resources often exist in different “contexts.” A person may be very comfortable and flexible in doing something like mountain climbing (scary, and potentially lethal), but very ill at ease and apprehensive in social situations (usually non-lethal). Yes, the contexts are different, but the resources are there.

All that is necessary is to access these resources and make them available in the circumstances in which someone is not achieving what they would wish. While eliminating “stage fright” by engaging someone in talking about and re-experiencing circumstances in which they feel confident and comfortable may initially sound odd, logically it actually makes sense. It becomes a matter of shifting existing resources to different contexts in which they are needed.

I was teaching my son to make his own sandwich. He complained it was “too hard.” Instead of arguing, I took him into his own room and showed him a Lego house he had constructed, unassisted. It was a complex structure, with multiple rooms, windows, doors, accent trim ... complicated. It took him many hours and required enormous patience and persistence on his part. Hum ... dealing with complexity, patience, persistence ... these are incredibly valuable resources.

Then I took him back in the kitchen and showed him: a jar of peanut butter, two pieces of bread, a jar of jelly, and a flat knife. He gave me a dark look, and proceeded to work his way through successfully making himself a sandwich. His first efforts weren’t pretty (neither are most people’s), which annoyed him, but that annoyance became motivation to make better sandwiches. All I did was connect the considerable resources he obviously had in making the Lego house to the much simpler task of making a sandwich. He still prefers to have someone else make his sandwich, but then, don’t we all?

**NLP Axiom 10 - The “How” of Possibility**

With obvious exceptions, if someone else is capable of performing some behavior (such as being comfortable in speaking in front of groups), then you are too. The process of determining how you do it is called ‘modeling,’ and it is the process by which NLP came into being in the first place.

**NLP Axiom 11 - Behavior Speaks Louder than Words**

Listen to what people say, but pay more attention to how they say it and what they do as they are speaking. If there is any contradiction between the two ... then rely on the behavior, not what they say. Look for behavioral evidence and don’t just reply based on people’s words. “You say you are interested in this job, but you are frowning and shaking your head and that confuses me a bit. What are you thinking right now?”
It's relatively easy to deceive ourselves and others with words, but much more difficult to do so with behavior. When you notice incongruence between words and physical behavior, this is a flag that something is up.

**NLP Axiom 12 - Distinguish between Behavior and Self**

It's useful to make a distinction between behavior and self. In other words, just because someone fails at something it doesn’t mean that they are a failure. Behavior is what a person says, does or feels at any moment in time. This is not a person’s *self*, however. A person’s self is much greater than their various behaviors.

**NLP Axiom 13 - Feedback, not Failure**

It is more useful (and a lot less painful) for a person to view their experience in terms of a learning frame than in terms of a failure frame. If a person doesn’t succeed at something, that doesn’t mean they have failed. It just means that they have discovered one way not to do that particular thing. They need to vary their behavior until they find a way to succeed, or decide at some point the effort/value ratio isn’t cutting it.

**NLP Techniques and Definitions**

The NLP model consists of a set of various techniques (which continue to grow in number) and strategies to effect change. Some of the basic techniques follow, along with their definitions:

**Calibration**

The process of pairing what a person says, with observable behavioral cues. It also refers to continuously engaging with the other, and determining which sensory system the individual tends to favor when accessing and representing their experiences (this again, a hotly contested NLP concept). In practical terms, calibration is orienting us to the other, a fundamental requirement for meaningful “person centered” work of any kind.

**Rapport**

A logical extension of calibration, rapport in NLP is a combination of engaging the other, by understanding and entering their subjective reality to the extent possible and necessary for a specific interaction, primarily through the use of *mirroring*; reflecting back language use, physiological behavior (such as body position, breathing, facial expression, etc.) and *pacing* (matching movements, breathing rate and location, and other movement or rate-based related behaviors). Rapport means being fully engaged and congruent with the other, which tends to create a physiological and psychological state of connectedness, or rapport.
Reframing

Meaning arises out of context. Reframing is largely a process used to separate problematic behavior from the positive intention of the behavior by changing contexts. New choices of behavior are established that maintain the positive intent but don’t have so many ineffective by-products.

For example, reframing an experience tagged as “failure” to what was learned (in a positive way), and focusing on the fact that I simply found one way that didn’t work to get what I wanted, and subsequently moving on to other alternatives that might work better. Alternative one, my self-esteem and confidence plummet, and I feel lousy. Alternative two, and I figure out what happened and why, and move on to something else.

Essentially, reframing is changing the context of an unpleasant or problematic experience in a manner that helps change its residual meaning, and that opens more options. Reframing is also very useful in identifying resources, and reframing them into different contexts where they are needed.

At a simple, practical level, when I get frustrated or upset at work, I make a picture of my beautiful wife and son to remind me what I am working for, and I feel better. Work doesn’t necessarily change, but my experience of it does by reframing what it means to me. It’s a relatively simple mental exercise, but it works … mostly.

Strategy

A set of explicit mental and behavioral steps used to achieve a specific outcome. This is represented by a specific sequence of behavioral and representational systems (vision, hearing, touch, etc.) used to carry out the specific steps need to reach the desired outcome. We can often learn more effective strategies by closely observing those who are getting the outcomes we seek; what do they do, say … how do they act? This is consistent with one of the predominant sociological theories that humans learn their “roles” through observation and imitation (Role Taking Theory). It is also consistent with the basic, underlying NLP principle of “modeling.”

Associated state

This is being fully in the “here and now” so as to experience the richness of the present. For past states this involves being “in” the past experience from the first person point of view while you are looking back in time, such as viewing a time when you were young and relatively powerless from the point of view of how that situation looked and felt through a child’s experience.

Dissociated state

This is re-creating a past experience from the perspective of being an onlooker or observer. It means not re-experiencing the original experience, but instead, examining it through the dissociation of an observer who is not actually having the experience. Using the earlier
illustration, it can be remembering an unpleasant childhood experience from the perspective of being an adult. Perspective is context, and a different context results in a different meaning.

Dissociation can be very useful, and very troublesome. It is useful to be able to temporarily (and deliberately) dissociate when thinking about unpleasant past events, but chronic disassociation can lead to a myriad of emotional and psychological issues (repression). In extreme cases, such as the result of trauma, it can actually fragment personalities by “walling off” and separating certain memories and parts of one’s personality.

**Double kinesthetic dissociation**

Essentially, this is watching you, watching a “film” of you in a past experience. This technique is often used in cases of phobias and extreme psychic trauma. The goal is to re-examine the experience without the extreme discomfort of re-living it. Again, change the context and the meaning changes. It is, however, equally useful for helping someone think about something new that is very different from their current store of experiences. Being able to consider something radically different is made easier by reducing or eliminating the emotional reaction through this approach.

**Anchoring**

This is the process of associating an *internal* response with an *external* trigger, so that the response may be quickly (and sometimes covertly) re-accessed, simply by activating the trigger. More classically, this can be thought of as “stimulus-response” conditioning. It’s how we learn about “hot stoves.” It’s why you can recall a particularly pleasant experience, and re-experience the feelings associated with it.

An example of this as a tool, is using a specific phrase or voice tonality when rewarding good behavior in a young child. If done well, using this “anchor” is very likely to trigger the good feelings and other benefits in completely different contexts. For example, we often react to specific vocal characteristics of people we like, when meeting strangers who use the same characteristics. The stranger becomes pleasantly familiar.

Sadly, the same is true for negative anchors. We all know, “the look” that signals disapproval and we are all triggered to that “look” even when it is inadvertent, or directed at someone else. Does the name, Pavlov ring a bell?

Anchors may be naturally occurring or set up deliberately. They may be established in all representational systems (vision, sound, touch, etc.) and serve to produce both positive and negative internal states.

**Stacking Anchors**

This is the process of associating a series of events with one specific anchor so as to strengthen the intensity of the subject’s response to a specific anchor. Sometimes it takes a lot of positive resources to overcome a truly intense negative situation or memory. One
won't do. Stacking uses the *cumulative* effects of multiple positive experiences to counteract one negative one of significant intensity. Again, this is essentially the process of identifying resources and connecting them to different contexts where they are needed.

**Collapsing anchors**

This is the process of neutralizing, or reducing the effect of negative anchors by triggering two incompatible responses at the same time, such as successfully inducing laughter when someone is angry. They can’t maintain both states simultaneously.

**Chaining anchors**

This is a process by which a series of anchors is created to lead sequentially from an undesired state through a series of intermediate states to a desired state; essentially creating a pathway comprised of positive anchors.

**Sensory Sub-modalities**

This is one of the more controversial of NLP concepts. It is the sub-classification of external and internal sensory experience. Each of the five primary senses has sub-modalities. For example, color is a sub-modality of vision; tonality of hearing, texture of touch, etc. Just as context is a primary determinate of subjective meaning, sub-modalities are contextual “cues” that help determine meaning in sensory awareness.

Having someone re-experience something they represent as “dark and cold,” by imagining that experience taking place in a sunny, warm environment ... *changes* the context and therefore potentially the meaning of the experience. Dark to light; black and white to color; heavy to light, putting pleasant music behind a bad visual memory, etc., each of these sub-modality changes, changes the frame, which changes the meaning.

**Summary:**

In spite of all the weirdness that surrounds NLP, and used as additional set of tools to what you already know and do, it can be quite useful. It provides a more structured way of engaging more fully with others, and being more purposeful and aware of the results of what you do.