THOUGHTS ON THINKING,
PERFORMANCE, & NLP

Note: This article originally appeared in *Alternatives* (a local New Orleans paper), August, 1990.

The New Yorker, August 6, 1990, page 37, upper right hand corner. Great cartoon. A desk marked personnel; a job interview. Behind the desk, holding a piece of paper in a tiny hand (probably a job application or resume): a giant apple with a face. In the chair across, being interviewed: a giant orange with a face, two tiny arms two tiny legs. On the apple's wall, a picture of two apples with coats and ties. Very corporate. The caption; apple speaking: "As an orange, how much experience have you had working with apples?"

My experience in Neuro-Linguistic Programming has often been that of an orange explaining himself to a long line of apples. "Neuro-WHAT?" is what people have been saying to mefor the entire dozen years I've been at this. I explain. They usually say, "Is that like ..." No, it isn't like that–whatever that might be. It isn't like anything else, really. NLP is a

model of how people think, learn, perform and communicate. It's made up of lots of chunks which have been excavated from lots of other places, but when they are put together they become different than all of those; very different. NLP is NOT: a technique, a theory, a psychotherapy, a New Age fad, a manipulative tactic, a sales tool, a cult, a computer program.

Actually, NLP IS what is known as a Meta-Model, a model of a model. In this case it is actually a model of how to make models out of what people do. In the early 1970's John Grinder, Ph.D., a linguist, and Richard Bandler, Ph.D., a computer programmer, gestalt therapist, information scientist (genuinely busy guy) began studying what made people extremely effective in their chosen fields, i.e. experts. They started

with psychotherapists because they were interested primarily in how people influenced one another through communication. Later they went on to study sales people, managers, religious leaders, politicians, and more. Because they started with psychotherapists, those were the people who got the first solid new information and began using it. This led to many people mistakenly assuming that NLP was another in a long line of therapies (there are over 350 "brands" of psychotherapy being practiced in the U.S. today). It isn't that at all. It's simply a model. The special value of a model, as opposed to a theory, is that a model need only be useful. It simply has to work. That's how we judge its value (a theory, on the other hand, doesn't even have to make any sense, much less produce results).

So, modeling is finding out how people behave when they are doing some particular thing we're interested in. The most important thing to remember is that effective communication patterns, and behavior patterns, of anyone can be "unpackaged" down to the component pieces, then analyzed, tested, and understood. The goal of this process, usually, is first to develop a model of how the communication and behavior patterns really work. In other words, to find out what

makes the expert so good. The model could include rules, attitudes, beliefs and values, capabilities, individual behaviors, environmental

constraints, internal thoughts and images, sequences or programs of behaviors (strategies), and more. Once all of this is deciphered from the expert, the usual next phase is to develop a training package so that other people can learn to duplicate these components. This could, for example, be a list of instructions or training procedures.

Simple, huh? Of course not! If it was, everyone would already be doing it. That's why we need NLP. It is also what makes it so universally valuable. These modeling procedures can be applied to anything people do. The difficulty comes in when we realize that most of us "don't know what we are doing" literally. We may be good at what we do, but that doesn't mean we really know why, or how we got that way. Most of what we

learn, we learn by trial and error, with lots of practice and experience. Stepping back and taking an overview to see how it all works is a very different sort of process; one that leads to some really surprising discoveries about ourselves.

Think about driving your car, for example. Most adults do this nearly automatically. But if you stop to think about all of the processes involved, you begin to realize what a truly complex set of tasks driving really is. Physically, you must operate the steering wheel, two or three foot pedals, perhaps a gear shift, plus all the other menu items on a typical dashboard (lights, air conditioning controls, radio, etc.). Visually you must attend to two or three rear view mirrors, the front and side windows, everything going on in the cars around you, all the gauges on the dash, and any of the possible myriad hazards that can, and do, come up from every direction. You even need your ears (which most of us use the least well of all our senses, as far as I can tell). Once you master the operation of the vehicle you don't really have to pay attention, consciously, to most of what I just listed. Usually we pay attention to the passenger we're talking with, which station the radio is on, what's on sale in the window we just passed, the most attractive person on the

sidewalk to our right, and what we're going to have for dinner tonight (especially in New Orleans). So if you stop now, and try to describe exactly how to do just one normal operation, say changing lanes (what to watch for, where to look, when to begin, how far and how fast to turn the wheel, whether to push down on the gas pedal, whether to shift, when and how far to turn the wheel back to its normal position, and the rest) it has become a more complex task. Sort of like thinking about walking–just thinking about it can get in the way of doing it.

But we wouldn't say, just because we can't thoroughly explain something, that we can't do it. But, if we can't explain it, how can we teach it to someone else? That is where

NLP comes in. Knowing how to observe someone's behavior, and catalog it, is the specialty of the NLP'er. Also knowing how to ask the best questions, to get underneath the obvious down to the truly essential. Remember, we learn most of what we learn by

trial and error, which means lots of extra time, wasted steps, and often an inefficient result–even when it looks pretty good. In fact, it turns out that almost everything we do is filled with

unnecessary steps. As people, we are seldom taught how to act or think efficiently. In NLP we look and listen for the key ingredients that make an expert efficient, and slice out the rest. We call this streamlining process "modeling elegance."

So NLP is a model that helps people understand how to efficiently think, learn, perform and communicate. We do it by breaking things down into their necessary component pieces, then building them back up to the most efficient and elegant procedures we can devise, based on what works. Learning these processes takes time and effort, but so does everything worthwhile. In the long run, both time and effort are conserved through directness and efficiency. Whether the goal is to be a better manager, a better salesperson, a better doctor, nurse, therapist, or dentist, a better teacher, athlete, or mate–the thinking and behavior that produces results can be modeled. The first step is learning the processes and asking the right questions. The result in the past decade and a half has been a revolution of thought in several fields, and the increased effectiveness of many thousands of people, in many thousands of activities, around the world. NLP is now being applied to the longest range problems and activities people engage in. And the

highest levels of thinking and performance possible. We are trying to help create a world to which people want to belong.

What's interesting to me is that some people, even after this kind of broad-based and far-reaching explanation will still ask me, "So what should I do to become thoroughly motivated, make more money, have wonderful relationships, control all of my emotions all the time, quit smoking, lose weight, learn to play the clarinet, choose the RIGHT personal computer, clean up the environment, and cure my acne–all by next Tuesday–what's THE

ANSWER?"

Again, The New Yorker, same issue, page 35, upper right hand corner. This one a cartoon of two archaeologists in the excavation of underground ruins of a what was once a great and powerful civilization. One has a clip board, taking notes. The other, reading hieroglyphics from a wall next to some fallen pillars, says: "And then, at the height of their power, they seem to have succumbed to a mysterious people known as 'the bottom-line types.'"