CONFLICTOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The Neuro-Linguistic Programming Approach to Conflict Resolution, Negotiation and Change

Eduard F. Vinyamata Tubella

Abstract

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) can bring new perspectives and new results to any endeavour involving personal (i.e. internal) and interpersonal communication. The organisation of information to achieve results is at the core of NLP and also a frequent goal for interpersonal conflict managers such as arbiters, mediators and negotiators. This article sheds light on one particular NLP tool, namely chunking.

Chunking is a direct application of the NLP Meta-model, a communications model used to find and challenge linguistic distortions in the client's language. Chunking deals with information size and direction. Information can be chunked up or down in size and can be moved laterally to find alternative examples of a concept at the same level of information.

In a conflict resolution or mediation setting, chunking up can be a guide to reach an initial agreement level, a compromise between the parties. Chunking down, on the other hand can be used to deal with specific problems and find a leverage point to make a breakthrough. Overall, NLP technologies such as chunking can bring performance, alternative methodologies and solutions at times where the highest academic approaches are not enough.

Keywords

neuro-linguistic programming, conflict resolution, chunking, information management

INTRODUCTION TO NLP AND HOW IT RELATES TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) can bring new perspectives and, most importantly, results, to any endeavour involving personal (i.e. internal) and interpersonal communication.

The author learned this precise fact first hand, on returning from an NLP Licensed Practitioner course and going back to Social Psychology in Harvard in the summer of 2009.

We were presenting our final papers to the class to get comments from both teacher and classmates on our chosen topic and focus. The first student of the afternoon stood up and explained she'd like to write about flying-related phobias. A personal experience had kindled her interest in the topic: on her last plane trip she was seated next to a man who was terrified of flying. Trying to help, she had asked him: "How is your relationship with your mother?"

A classroom full of bright people found that line of questioning perfectly reasonable. Including the teacher, who congratulated the student on her, ultimately fruitless, efforts.

Meanwhile, experienced NLP practitioners were permanently eliminating clients' phobias in less than 30 minutes, no intimate questions asked. Perhaps, then, NLP technology could bring performance, methodology, solutions

and attitude even in instances where the highest academic approaches simply did not.

NLP started as an exercise in modelling excellence. Richard Bandler and John Grinder studied the best therapists of the 1970s looking for the unconscious strategies that set the best above and beyond their peers. They were looking for what Robert Dilts, one of NLP's main developers, defines as "the difference that makes the difference" (Dilts, 2009). The result of this initial modelling work is found in the two volume book "The Structure of Magic", by Richard Bandler and John Grinder.

Today, a few decades later, John Grinder still defines NLP as "the modelling of excellence and the application of this modelling" (Grinder, 2009). Robert Dilts goes into a bit more detail by listing the result of 40 years of such modelling: a broad set of "tools for dreamers, methods, skills, models that help people live their dreams" (Dilts, 2009).

The organisation of information to achieve results is at the core of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and one of the areas of knowledge at which NLP excels. The organisation of information in such a way is also a frequent goal for interpersonal conflict managers such as arbiters, mediators and negotiators. People in all of these professions, then, will surely find excellent tools to add to their professional toolset. One of these NLP tools, chunking, is outlined on the following pages.

A word of caution before we begin: This is an introductory text meant to awaken the interest of the reader in the possibilities of the NLP approach applied to Conflict Resolution. It is not a deep study of the NLP tools put forward and none of the technologies, methodology or ideas presented are originally from this author. To find more about each of them, go to the references, which contain the original sources and the authors I mention throughout the text, who deserve all the credit.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE META MODEL & CHUNKING

What is chunking?

To answer that, we must first take a small step back and look into one of NLP's axioms: "The map is not the territory" (Bandler and LaValle, 2006).

Citing the Licensed Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming® training manual, "The basic principle here is that people end up in pain, not because the world is not rich enough to allow them to satisfy their needs, but because their representation of the world is impoverished" (Bandler and LaValle, 2006). NLP practitioners work on ways to enrich their clients' maps, their representations of the world. This is done by using the Meta Model, and one of the many applications of the Meta Model is, precisely, chunking.

Chunking deals with information size and direction. Information can be chunked up or down in size and can be moved right or left. A visual aid of two arrows crossing each other at the centre is usually used.

We can place a specific representation of the world, an idea, an argument etc., at the central point where the two arrows cross each other. Let's look at an example, with the idea of a house.
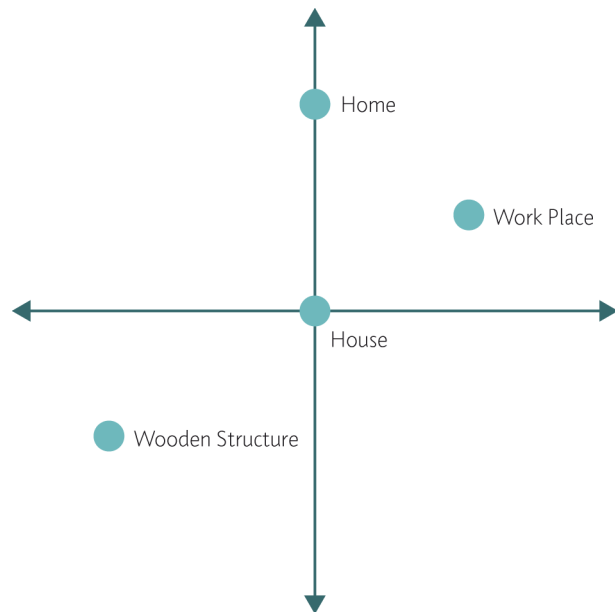
We can "chunk up" an idea by moving it towards its perceived purpose or its bigger picture. In the case of a house we could increasingly chunk up the idea to a shelter, a living space, a home, an outward expression of ourselves, and so forth, up to the highest, most abstract level of information we can think of.

Alternatively, we can "chunk down" an idea by breaking it into smaller pieces: exploring specifics and details. Out of an idea of a house we could look into its structural configuration and materials, surrounding soil composition and so on, down to the most concrete and specific level of information we can think of.

Finally we can move the idea laterally, through all the possible examples of it at the same level of information. In our starting house example, we could differentiate between its uses (business, storage, residence). If we "chunk down" the idea of house to its construction year, for example, we can move laterally by decade of construction. We can do the same in terms of architectural styles and periods, or concepts such as size or number of floors.

Yet another example: the idea of a cat. It can be chunked up as a feline, or further up to explain it is an animal. It may also be chunked down to its details, such as breed, fur colour or type. Much like in our house example, lateral chunking would open up a catalogue of variations on a given level

of information. For example, if we chunk down the idea of a cat to its breed type, we can distinguish between Persian, Siamese, Somali, etc.

In a conflict resolution setting, chunking up allows us to ultimately reach an agreement level. Communicating on a meta level of information, agreements might be easier to achieve, which is not only a starting point, but might be used to lead the resolution process towards further agreements. Meanwhile, chunking down sometimes helps when dealing with a big problem, or when looking for leverage with which to make a breakthrough. Further detail shows how this could work in a mediation setting.

THE NLP PROCESS FOR CHANGE & CHUNKING

The NLP Process for Change decorates, together with a dozen more illustrations and ideas, the NLP training rooms. It is simple:

1. Build the desired state first;
2. Elicit the present state;
3. Choose and apply the intervention

(Bandler and LaValle, 2006).

To both build and elicit states (step one and two) we will use the concept of chunking, so an imaginary negotiation situation would follow this structure:

1. Start by chunking up (finding a desired state);
2. Follow by chunking down (finding a leverage point from the present state);
3. And end by choosing and agreeing on a new goal.

We complement the aforementioned NLP Process for Change by checking the ecology of our new found goal, testing it and future pacing it. These last three steps are all an integral part of NLP interventions in general and are explained at the end.

Overall, the process involves many new concepts for the uninitiated, but it is in fact quite simple when taken step by step. This will become clear as we work on an example, defining each concept on the way.

CHUNKING UP TO CHANGE OUR MINDS

The very first exercise NLP practitioners learn is to feel good for no reason at all. The idea behind the exercise is that when people feel bad they do not make good decisions. We do not want ourselves or our clients making bad decisions, so we learn to feel good for no reason at all. When it comes

to solving problems, Albert Einstein said something along the very same line of reasoning: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them".

That is precisely the approach to conflict resolution in NLP: it first clearly identifies what the conflicting issue is and then "we 'chunk it up' one level above the conflict to find consensus with respect to 'higher level' positive intentions" (Dilts, 1997). Such positive intentions are always there, according to another NLP axiom: "There is a positive intention motivating every behaviour; and a context in which every behaviour has value" (Bandler and LaValle, 2006).

We can look at a hypothetic example of a young couple. She wants to have children. He does not. At this level of thinking, their positions are opposed. What happens when we chunk up each of their points of view? For her, having children could be a way to access the full range of experiences their relationship has to offer. For him, not having children could be the way to get the most of their present relationship stage. When chunked up, their positions are no longer in full opposition.

As higher levels of interest are elicited, intention and behaviour start to separate and ultimately, common ground can be reached. In this hypothetic example, chunking up from opposite points of view led to the realisation that both members of the couple could agree on the fact that their relationship had become the foundation of their happiness. Such an agreement "(...) does not mean that either party has to accept the method with which the other is attempting to satisfy the positive intention, nor does it mean that either party has to compromise their position" (Dilts, 1997). However, when positive intentions are recognised as such and an agreement is found, we can move on to the next step in the process.

CHUNKING DOWN TO FIND LEVERAGE

Ian Ross gives an interpretation of the chunking model that is especially clarifying at the chunking down step: "The purpose of this step is to establish the main barriers that currently affect the resolution of the problem or the achievement of the outcome" (Ross, 2004). Once the barriers have been established, a leverage point will be identified. A leverage point is "the one thing which, if it were resolved, would have the effect of negating the impact of all the other barriers" (Ross, 2004).

In practical terms, the first thing to do to chunk down is to ask what stops this from being resolved. This question will inevitably chunk down the conflict to its details, probably as several roadblocks or barriers. Yet this process will spring directly from a previous agreement frame, rather

than from the kind of thinking that originated the problem. Moreover, the idea is not to work on the problems individually, but to find (as when chunking up) common ground. Ross puts it in the following way: "What is common to all these problems?", "What drives all these barriers?" (Ross, 2004).

Following up on the hypothetic example, the woman could chunk down her demand and identify the following problems: "I don't want to be an old mother" or "I want us to build a family", among others. The man could chunk down his demand and identify the following problems: "Children are expensive" or "Children are time consuming", among others.

Identifying all the problematic details each party can come up with helps to understand the other side of the argument and perhaps raises points that had not been thought of. Doing this from an initial agreement frame, not stopping to go deeper into each problem but focusing instead on finding the commonalities in all of them, puts our clients in the best position to give shape to an agreement. At this point, lateral chunking, or the exploring of alternatives, might give us even more resources to reach an agreement. To come to a solution Dilts suggests "a mixture of the two existing choices, but should include at least one alternative that is completely distinct from the two in conflict" (Dilts, 1997).

Regarding our hypothetic example, we could reach a mixed solution, for example to have children but not yet. We could work on redistributing economic resources to be able to pay for a nanny. We could also come up with a completely different alternative, such as getting married and enjoying a trip around the world, as a first step to building a family. Whatever the new goal is, it should "satisfy the common intention and the individual positive intentions with the greatest positive impact systemically" (Dilts, 1997).

CHECKING FOR ECOLOGY AND FUTURE PACING

Whatever solution this process leads us to, it must not only resolve the conflict, but must also be aligned with each person's environment or community. In NLP, this verification is called "checking for ecology". In this context it boils down to working out whether the agreement will positively affect the client's family, friends, job, economy, health, etc, so any agreement will have to be adjusted or reworked altogether if it is detrimental to the client's ecosystem.

Checking for ecology is only one of the conditions that NLP practitioners take into account to determine the validity of the desired states or the desired outcomes of their clients. The rest of the conditions are beyond the scope of this article, but are greatly in detail on the Licensed Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming® course.

Once a solution has been validated for ecology, the last thing to do is to test it. In NLP, everything is tested before being approved. One way to test the acceptance of the new goal or agreement is to 'future pace' it. Future pacing is "the process of mentally rehearsing oneself through some future situation to help ensure that the desired behaviour will occur naturally and automatically" (Bandler and LaValle, 2006). Helping the client do that in the most effective way is, again, beyond the scope of this text. It is covered in the Licensed Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming® course, which also gives the tools to calibrate our client's conscious and unconscious responses to the tests.

References

BANDLER, Richard,. LAVALLE, John; LAVALLE, Kathleen (2006). *Licensed Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming®*. Training Manual. NLP Seminars Group International.

DILTS, Robert (1997). "Resolving Conflicts with NLP" [online article]. UNLP. [Date of consultation: January 17, 2011].
<http://www.nlpu.com/Articles/artic11.htm>

DILTS, Robert (2009). How would you describe NLP? [Youtube video]. UNLP. [Date of consultation: January 17, 2011]
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCEFD4a6524>

GRINDER, John (2009). What is NLP? [Youtube video]. UNLP. [Date of consultation: January 17, 2011].
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJzO5x6ko6w>

HARRIS, Kevin (1995). "Collected Quotes from Albert Einstein" [online]. Standford University. [Date of consultation: January 17, 2011].
<http://rescomp.stanford.edu/~cheshire/EinsteinQuotes.html>

ROSS, Ian (2004). "NLP in Business: Modeling Conflict Resolution" [online article]. Vievolve. [Date of consultation: January 17, 2011].
<http://www.vievolve.com/ModellingConflictResolution.aspx>

Recommended citation

About the author

Eduard F. Vinyamata Tubella
vinyamata@gmail.com

Eduard F. Vinyamata Tubella holds a Media Major from the Universitat Ramón Llull and studied Interpersonal Communication at New York University and Social Psychology at Harvard University. He is licensed and certified as Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming® by Richard Bandler and the LaValle team. Eduard F. Vinyamata has over 13 years of international experience in media and marketing, most as an entrepreneur. He is currently working as a research consultant and co-founding partner at Bamboo.