

“How do you do that?”

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Modelling the excellent abilities of others to get amazing results

Using techniques they created, the originators of Neuro Linguistic Programming were able to model and reproduce the results achieved by renowned therapists. They went on to model the expertise of many successful professionals in other fields. Wouldn't modelling the excellent abilities of others be a valuable addition to your skills?

Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) is the science and art of excellence. It is a collection of beliefs, tools and techniques that enables individuals to break out of old ways of thinking and be more of the person they want to be. Its application in the world of business can have transformational effects on teams and the people who work in them.

Undeniably there's also a kind of “New Age” mysticism surrounding some people's perception of NLP. This is not surprising given the miraculous transformations it achieves. Yet the truth is that NLP has its origins deep in the scientific disciplines of psychology and linguistics. Its purpose is simple – to enable almost anyone to perform at the level of a master – a master communicator, negotiator, journalist, project manager or whatever.

The Origins of Modelling

John Grinder and Richard Bandler (the originators of NLP) studied and analysed the patterns of communication, beliefs and behaviours they found in the work of top therapists of their time – Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir and Milton Erickson. Their first book “The Structure of Magic”¹ implied that, at a deeper level, there was something understandable, learnable and systematic about how these remarkable people did what they did.

Remarkably, Bandler and Grinder were able to reproduce the therapeutic results that these masters were achieving. They were able to structure the insights they'd gathered and transfer them to others, in a fraction of the time it would normally have taken, so that they too could be “master” therapists.

¹ R. Bandler and J. Grinder, “The Structure of Magic – Volume 1” Palo Alto, California, Science & Behaviour Books, (1975) [ISBN 0831400447](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0831400447)

Now we all know that the world of business is far removed from the fields of therapy that were the original focus of modelling (although sometimes...business therapy, hmmm...) so you're probably wondering – what's in this for me then? How can I make use of all this?

Well – the real discovery was that it's possible to unpack exactly how someone does what they do to get their results. Then it's possible to install that way of doing things into another person so they can do it too. It is even possible to model your own excellence in one area of your life or work and transfer that to a less successful area. Wouldn't that be valuable?

Conscious or Unconscious Competence?

Whenever we decide to learn to do something, we first operate at the level of **conscious incompetence**. We know we don't know.

Of course, before we even knew about the capability we were **unconsciously incompetent** – we didn't know we didn't know.

Then, as we begin to learn, we progress to be **consciously competent** in that capability. We know we can do it and exactly how it is done.

Your challenge in modelling the “expert” is that they may be truly excellent but not know how they do it. They may be operating at a level of **unconscious competence**. The trick is then to help the expert unpack their unconscious competence into a more conscious format so that you can model it.

To understand this, just think back to your experiences of driving a car after you'd passed your test. You knew that you could drive a car and yet you still had to focus a lot of conscious attention on the task – precisely when to change gear, indicate and turn.

Contrast that with the experience you may have of driving now. How is it different? Do you hold a meaningful conversation with others whilst you're driving? Do you think about what you

need to do at work when you arrive, or what to get at the shops? I'm sure you could do all these things and more and that's because you're now **unconsciously competent** at driving a car – you no longer need to think about the individual operations and would probably struggle to teach someone else without many frustrating arguments.

Interestingly, a number of years ago I went on a "defensive driving" course and one of the things I was asked to do by the instructor was to give a running commentary as I was driving along – what was I doing, observing, thinking about, planning to do and so on. I can tell you that it had the effect of bringing "driving" back to being something I was doing consciously and it was an interesting experience. Driving (when you're doing it properly) is a complex business and it's a good job my unconscious mind takes care of it most of the time!

The Basic Steps of Modelling

Unconscious competence is much more than a list of tasks or steps that an expert takes. In modelling you need understand three key things about them:

- ★ Why they do it – their beliefs about it and what's important to them about it
- ★ What they actually do – their external behaviour
- ★ How they do it – their internal processes

A major part of any modelling activity is then to uncover an expert's detailed strategy for doing whatever it is that they do. What is the sequence of thinking and behaving that the expert goes through in order to produce their outcome or create the experience they have?

We need to know:

- ★ The goal(s) they have in mind when starting
- ★ The initial trigger that begins their strategy
- ★ What they do to move closer to their goal(s)
- ★ The test they have that will allow them to know when they've achieved their goal(s)
- ★ The decision point; what to do if they have or haven't achieved their goal(s)

As a final step we explore what the link between mental state and physiology that goes with excellence. All sportsmen know how important this is – in business it is no different. For example, if we're modelling excellent presentation skills, does the expert stand a certain way or breathe in a certain way that enables them to be their very best?

By now we have all the information we need that will allow us to do understand the state of

excellence and install it in ourselves. Then we can go on to design a universal training and teach others how to do it as well.

Obviously, for brevity we've simplified the steps but even at this level you can appreciate the power in this modelling process – a way of surfacing implicit knowledge, bringing unconscious competencies into awareness – so that they can be enhanced and transferred to others. It is much more powerful than the simplistic approach of traditional knowledge management – turning tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge by asking the expert to write down what they know.

The Proof of the Pudding

In the 90's Robert Dilts² worked with Fiat to model the thinking and leadership skills that had allowed it to make spectacular changes³ in the company's fortunes. The project identified that key senior managers had specialised capabilities and competencies that had driven success. These were duly modelled and incorporated into Fiat's training programmes – accelerating the careers of many junior managers. Dilts was so successful in this that he continued with an active involvement with the company and was made an associate professor at the ISVOR Fiat School of Management.

Modelling your Success

So, who's the very best at the key functions for your business? It may be you, in which case great! Now how would you like others in your company to be able to do it as well? Or, what if there's someone else whose business abilities you admire; someone about whom you've thought "how do they do that, I wish I could do it like that."

Well you've read this far. You know more about modelling than you did just a short time ago. You've got some aspect of your own or your staff's abilities that you'd like to have improved. You've read what's possible. Get modelling. And here's a final thought – when you know what you're doing it is entirely possible to create a model that's even better than the original. What could that do for you?

² Modeling with NLP; Dilts, Robert; Meta Publications; 1998 [ISBN 0916990419](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0916990419)

³ In the 70's Fiat was on the verge of collapse; by the late 80's Fortune magazine listed it as the 2nd most profitable company in the world.