

## Soft Skill Development: Relevance of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

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### Abstract

Market today offers a plethora of job profiles that require blend of skills and talents. Strong interpersonal communication, problem solving and high order thinking skills are crucial to turn an average employee into a skilled professional. Employers demand the workforce to be ethical, team spirited and work oriented. Beyond the occupation specific knowledge and skills (hard Skills), is required effective communication skills, delegation, motivation and problem solving attitude that could mark the demeanor of a leader. The effective ways to develop soft skills is leadership workshops; sessions on personality development (PDP classes), team building plots, guidelines on personality traits, etc. are provided by organizations and institutions. Researchers claim that Neuro-linguistics programming (NLP) is the one of the most effective method to the identification of personalities, ability to trace the thought process of others, etc. NLP is being used by corporate houses and Multi-National Companies to train their recruits for desired performances. This paper provides the overview of all facets to an elevator for a success oriented work life. It focuses the effective measures and strategies to scale soft skills through NLP. It also underlines the concepts answering the lead (why's, how's and what's) to NLP in the development of soft skills for achieving professional heights.

**Keywords:** Neuro-linguistic programming, Soft Skills Development, Entry level Employee, Psychotherapeutic NLP.

### Introduction

Researches in Human Resource Management and studies in skill development bring the fact that soft skills are both inherent (in some) and can also be acquired (by the others). Efforts in

the field of soft skill development has shown efficient ways to the acquisition of soft skills through training, workshops, counseling sessions and PDP by professional coaches. A key finding is that NLP is perceived to be the most effective forms of soft skill development training.

It is found that NLP provides knowledge that has positive effect on a trainee's mental ability, behavioral response influencing his/her interpersonal skills. It nourishes and nurtures the strengths as well as weaknesses of the individual especially improving on the recessive skills. Soft skills are a mandate to every individual at every stage of life but this research is specifically directed to its relevance for students completing college, entry level employees as well as for employee performance (future promotions and success).

“The two cultures” acclaimed speech by English Scientist and novelist **C.P. Snow**, **1998** (Snow and Collini) demarcated and defined liberal education into two:

Philosophical-humanistic hemisphere and a Technical-scientific hemisphere, where the former is perceived as superior. Soft skills like perseverance, self-confidence, concentration- focus and motivation is proven to help student's secure higher scores on cognitive tests. Soft skills like communication, reliability, positive attitude, clairvoyance, problem solving and leadership are certain to gain success in the professional world. Markets today are riding a roller coaster. Unpredictable times, therefore, calls the attention of corporate leaders to a highly efficient workforce. The normative marketing theory demands the extension of company's base and network and relative relationship competence (**Clark, 1999**).

This furthers the demand for extending the “organizational mind”, which is the collective reasoning, analyzing, sensing and responding system of the workforce. Withstanding the competitive markets and a constant pace of growth highlights the importance of improving the soft/interpersonal/relationship skills of the employees in the organization (as well as students who are on the verge of starting their career, entry level employees).

Questions to be answered:

A study on how NLP trainings influence a person's soft skills?

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What is the potential of NLP in building success oriented workforce, how can today's graduates be tomorrow's leaders?

### **Background of Neuro Linguistic Programming**

Neuro Linguistic programming or NLP developed in the USA in 1970's. It achieved widespread popularity as a method for developing personality and communication. *The term was coined by the founders, Richard Bandler, an information scientist and John Grinder, a linguist (1975a) refers to purported systematic, cybernetic links between a person's internal experience (neuro), their language (linguistic) and their patterns of behavior (programming).* Though the term "Neuro Linguistic" was first used by Alfred Korzybski in 1941 (**Dilts & De Lozier 2000**), the concept was first recognized by Bandler and Grinder. They defined NLP as "The study of the structure of subjective experience".

NLP is a sub-branch of the field psychotherapy (**Dilts et al., 1980**), and from the last few years it is considered to be a recognized mode of psychotherapy as neuro-linguistic psychotherapy. Several studies have proven it as an effective treatment choice of psychotherapeutic change in individuals with depression or anxiety (Lisa Wake, 2008). Its divergent utilizations leading to diverse conceptualizations have so far been a reason to the difficulty in giving it a universal definition. Practitioners have been successfully applying NLP in a range of other areas as law, HRM, coaching, teaching, selling and management (**Dilts and DeLozier, 2000**).

The aim of this paper is to provide the insight to A) the need to soft skill development and an empirical study to demonstrate the lack of soft skills in students and level 1 (entry level) employees, B) the role of neuro-linguistic programming trainings in soft skills development, C) to use these findings to evaluate NLP's potential and conclude ways to developing success oriented workforce, from today's graduates to tomorrow's leaders.

Before starting with the core parts of this paper I would like to briefly dwell on "What is - soft skills and NLP?"

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## Soft Skills

“Soft skills are a synonym for “people skills.” The term describes those personal attributes that indicate a high level of emotional intelligence.” *source -Margaret Rouse, Whats.com*

Technologists with soft skills are preferred over others by business leaders as there is higher possibility to a better performance. Hard skills being an essential requisite to get a job, soft skills, however necessary to- get and keep- the job. Wikipedia definition “Soft Skills is a term often associated with a person’s “EQ” (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, interpersonal skills, managing people, leadership, etc. that characterize relationships with other people.” *online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, 2010*. Soft skills can be categorized into high priority, entry level, ethical and least-critical, on the order of its priority and area of use:

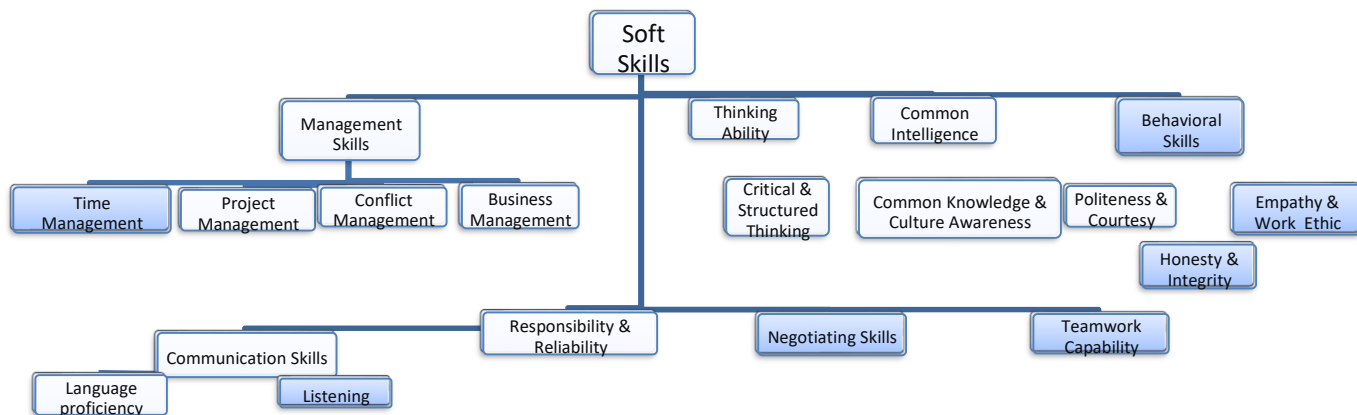
**High Priority Soft Skills** - Communication, Problem Solving or Adaptability, Reliability.

**Entry Level Soft Skills** - Communication, Professionalism/Integrity, Reliability and Teamwork.

**Ethical Soft Skills** or highest specific skills- Trustworthiness, dependability.

**Least Critical Soft Skills** - Creativity or Innovation, Self-direction.

**Figure 1: Examples of Soft Skills**



The entire market is divided into 4 main sectors i.e. manufacturing, health care, professional services and public service. To cater to the needs of customers/clients, each sector

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demands a unique set of prior soft skills in its employee base. Professionalism/ Integrity, reliability, communication and teamwork are the top soft skills priorities for entry level employment. National surveys of employers reflect that more than 75% of employers said that soft skills were as important as technical skills in securing a job and rising higher. They also reveal that some soft skills are better predictor of adult success (salaries, graduation rates, home ownership) than technical skills. Staying within the ethical boundaries is considered to be the highest specific skill. Creativity or innovation and self-direction are the least critical of soft skills. Communication, problem solving/adaptability and reliability are considered to be the high priority soft skills. However, a report by employer's survey suggested that 55% of job applicants lack in the most common skill i.e. communication. Communication can be further divided into written and oral communication as per usability in the sectors (written communication is more important to community college administrators, oral more important to sales).

Soft skills development is done at two stages of human personality building:

- a. School-College level (by incorporating soft skills in subject knowledge, classroom activities)
- b. Employee formal training role (through workshops, PDP, activities). Soft skills development in schools (academics):

Soft skills play a vital role in shaping an individual's personality. It is highly essential for every student (especially at the time of completion of college and entering into a profession) to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. British Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), reports that "Employers say many graduates lack 'soft skills', such as "team working" and "They go on to explain that candidates are normally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning" (AGR, 2007). "*The two cultures*" acclaimed speech by English scientist and novelist C.P.Snow where he demarcated and defined liberal education into two: Philosophical-humanistic hemisphere and a Technical-scientific hemisphere, where the former is perceived as superior (Snow, 1968).

Personality profile tests and psychometric assessments are also done as a selection procedure for aspirants to analyze their abilities and approach towards situations.

**At High School level:** Embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses is an effective method of achieving both an attractive way of teaching a particular content and an enhancement of soft skills. For e.g. teachers conduct debate sessions to arrive at a conclusion giving opportunity to all the students to speak their views and beliefs on the specific topic of study, rather than simply providing facts to derive a result. Similarly, plays in literature textbooks are enacted in classrooms allowing students to choose and perform in accord to the characters in the play. Science teachers provide riddles; real life experiences and humorous examples to enable their students remember the otherwise difficult and banal theories or formulae. This level of teaching approach allows exuberance, creativity and generates curiosity among students. Relation building (teacher-to-student bonding) and team spirit (student-to-student bonding) is cultivated as a positive side effect of such practices.

**At College level:** Incorporating soft skills in grading system and assessment process. Encourage professional communication between students and their peers, faculty and community.

Personality Development Program (PDP), interactive sessions, public speaking. Maintain a 'learning *organization culture*', '*teaching managerial skills*' and '*leadership quality*'.

A study by **Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI)** shows:

- a. 74% of respondents identifying that the development of a soft skills credentials is an important task for colleges and workforce development providers. However, when employers were asked about the impact such a credential would have on the job application process, only 46% stated that it would have a positive effect on the job applicants' chances of gaining entry-level employment.

b. Employers are willing to play only a limited role in soft skills development. Nearly two-thirds (67%) of area (local) employers surveyed believe that education system is responsible in the soft skills development of their employees. Therefore, laying an emphasis on soft skills development is a must in academics.

*Source- SJI soft skills report, 2013 by Jennifer Pritchard.*

### **Soft Skill Development – Employee Formal Training Role**

Expanding a company's network and relationship competences require developing "soft-assembled strategies" (Clark, 1999). Each individual must possess such competences and skills in an organization (Micro perspective by Wilkinson and Young, 2005).

Soft skills are both inherent and can also be acquired through different methods like trainings, workshops and counseling by professional coaches. Specialized psychological trainings (as NLP) are provided by organizations to their workforce for better performance and to build company rapport and relationship. Self-help books, articles on leadership, videos on success principles and testimonial speeches are suggested.

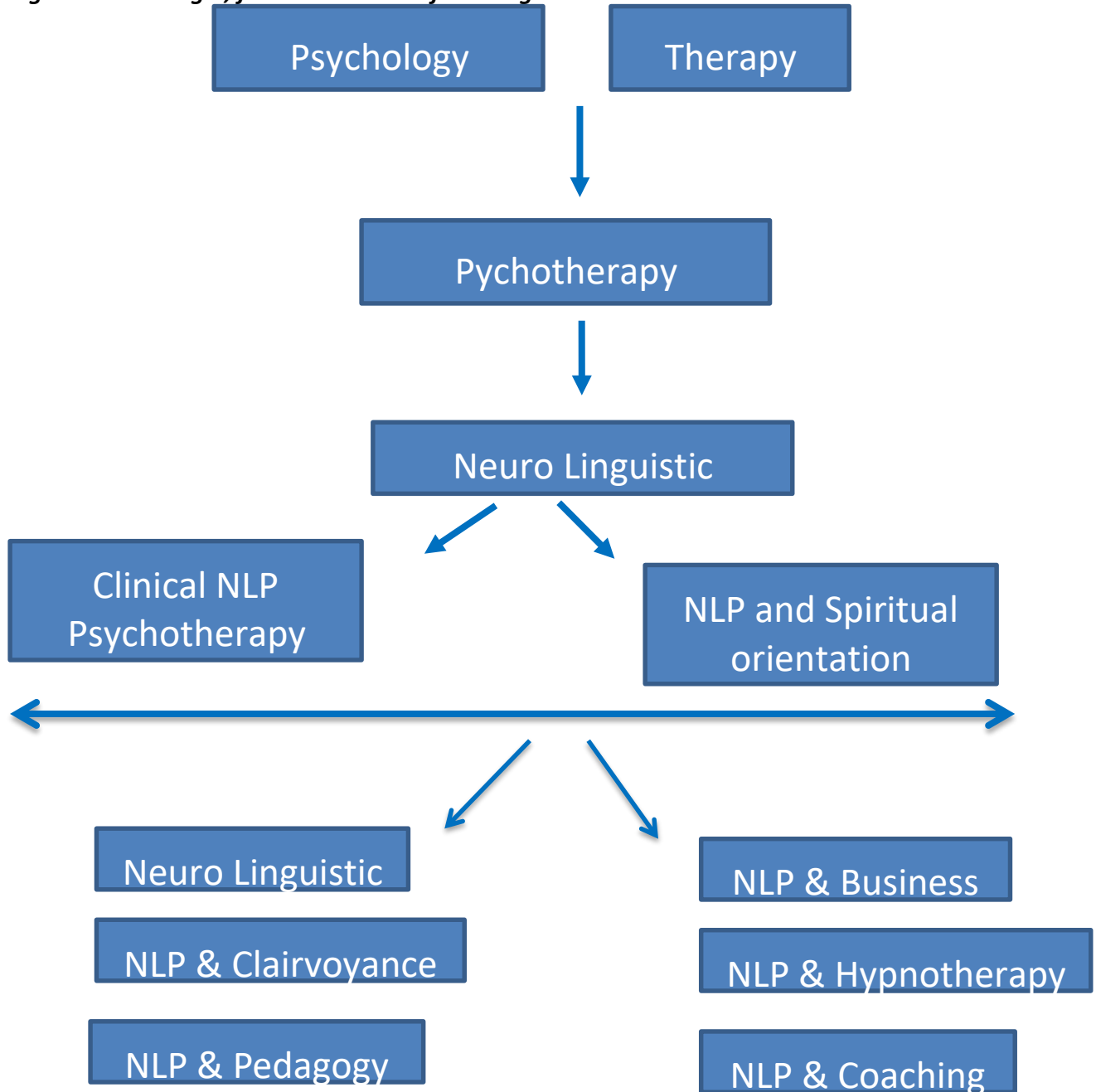
### **Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP)**

Neurolinguistic Programming or NLP refers to a way of organizing and understanding the structure of subjective experience and is concerned with the ways in which people process information (through visual, auditory or kinesthetic modes) *Neurolinguistic Programming Vol.1 The Study of the Structure of Subjective Experience, Robert B.Dilts*. The concept of NLP originated from Psychotherapy (Dilts et al., 1980). NLP has now (for a few years) been recognized as an effective psychotherapeutic change in individuals with depression or anxiety. Wood (2006) describes NLP as "an approach to human communication that combines cognitive theory, split brain processing and sensory perception".

Soft skills are the most essential aspect of personality development and are so far accepted as being an essential tool in the paraphernalia of growth graph. Among the several modules designed for soft skill training, NLP has come up as the world's most popular forms of

interpersonal skill and communication training (Tosey and Mathison, 2003). As illustrated in Figure1, NLP can be categorized into two different fields in accord to its usability i.e. Clinical NLP Psychotherapy and NLP & Spiritual Orientation.

**Figure 2: NLP origin, fields and areas of training**



Source: production based on Internet desk research on NLP and its training institutions



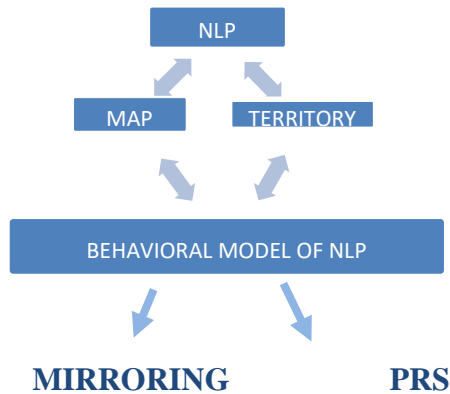
Although a specific origin, the concept of NLP is observed to be applied in diverse fields. This research is positioned with the context of “NLP and business” that focuses on interpersonal skills for personality development. Several renowned works have been published in this field like Sue Knight ‘*NLP at work*’; Ronda Byrne, ‘*The Secret*’; Byron A. Lewis ‘*Magic of NLP Demystified: A pragmatic guide to communication and change*’; John Grinder, ‘*Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson*’, etc.

Other practitioners of world fame like Joseph O’Connor applied NLP techniques in his books- ‘*Coaching and NLP*’, ‘*Psychological Skills*’ and has written books providing insights to a happier, more successful life.

### **Behavioral Model Of NLP: Role in Skill Identification and Acquisition**

NLP can enable you to achieve those professional and personal goals you desire, to keep on the leading edge of the latest technology of change, to manage your own life, and to have the excellence and skills of anyone you have ever admired (Penny Tompkins, ‘*The Developing Company*’). The central Philosophy of NLP is summed up in the sentence “*The Map is not the territory*” (Lankton, 1980, p.7) that means, each of us operates on the basis of our internal representation of the world (i.e. the “map”) and not the world itself (the “territory”). Thus, maps are individual specific and are mostly distorted and limited. The therapists or practitioners of NLP understand and operate on the basis of the clients’ map of the territory (which builds trust and familiarity between the two. Peoples’ “Maps” are represented by five senses: visual, kinesthetic referring to the technical and visceral sensations; auditory including noises and sounds; olfactory including smell and gustatory including taste.

**Figure 3: Central Philosophy of NLP**



*Source: self-produced flowchart based on Lankton's, 1980 central philosophy of NLP*

At the most basic NLP is considered to be the ‘*collection of techniques*’, (Dilts, 1980). Techniques by which a practitioner organize and re-organize his/her subjective experience (or experience of client) in order to define or subsequently secure any behavioral outcome. Behavioral model is a set of explicit skills and techniques (Dilts and De Lozier, 2000). However, NLP was originally portrayed as a method which was formally known as “modeling” (Bandler and Grinder 1975 p.6). The aim of NLP modeling is identification of distinctive nature of the strategies of exemplars in a particular skill including both, the internal cognitive as well as behavioral elements, so as to provide understandability for others to learn the same skill. It is the process of adopting the behaviors, language, strategies and beliefs of another person or exemplar in order to build a model of what they do and what should be done by you (for expected or desired outcomes). Below given are three reasons for obtaining NLP training as a tool to soft skill development:

- Level 1-Desire to gain knowledge about oneself  $\Rightarrow$  Focus on personal development.
- Level 2- Desire to gain more knowledge about interpersonal behavior  $\Rightarrow$  Focus on advancing interpersonal skills.
- Level 3- Desire to influence or treat other people's ill behavior  $\Rightarrow$  Focus on Psychotherapeutic treatment. (Borg and Freytag, 2010)

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The research paper's prior focus is level 2 which is positioned on NLP'S role in interpersonal/soft skills advancement. This research will further strengthen the perspective that NLP is so far worldwide adopted form of soft skill and communication training. NLP world's most popular forms of interpersonal skill and communication training (**Tosey and Mathison, 2003**).

### **Ways Towards Designing a Model to Teach the Skill**

#### *observe – collect – sequence - design*

Second position shift- observe “what” a person does, by asking relevant question about “how” and “why” he behaves in a particular manner so as to enter into someone else's reality so as to know him/her completely.

Elements of Model's behavior – the practitioner collects all the elements of model's behavior and systematically takes out each element in order to find which set is essential and vice versa. Model<sup>1</sup>-when all the relevant bits of behavior are accompanied; practitioner sets and sequences the model.

Design a method to teach the skill- Practitioner uses the sequence to design the method to teach the skill in order to solve the client's issues. For E.g. to teach the ability to mirror customer's physical movements practitioner has to first teach the learner about kinesics and relation between mind process and body language.

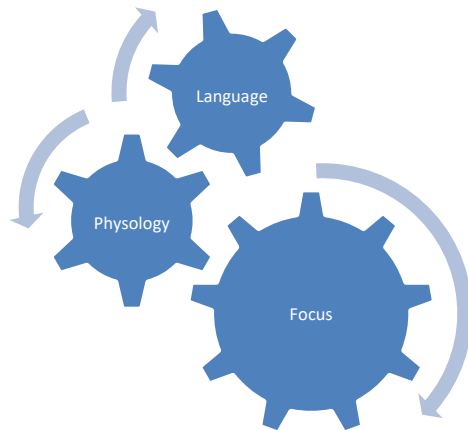
### **The Change Theory**

One of the most effective theory of NLP training is ‘THE CHANGE THEORY’ which states to change three things to bring the change as desired i.e. change your focus, change your physiology, change your language. E.g. If a short-tempered man is made to practice to keep a check on his language while in anger and switch to a polite tone, the results will be a considerable fall in agitation and anger level. Similarly, if a depressed person is asked to dance on his favorite beats or hang out with his/her friends, anxiety will

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<sup>1</sup> Source- Role of NLP towards attaining excellence in Imparting Knowledge in the Education Field, Vol.4 Indian Journal of Applied Research, Divya Jain, 2014

considerably vanish. Researches prove that while in anger if a person sits from standing or lies down if sitting nearly 60 % of his/her anger is reduced making him feel more relaxed.



**Figure 4: The Theory of Change**

### **The Idea of Triple F (FFF)**

While attending a NLP training sponsored by Hindustan Unilever Limited in 2009, as a business consultant I was fascinated by a new concept. The concept popularly abbreviated as F.F.F. (or FFF) rule is being used as one of the most strategic and effective communicative method especially in sales. Feel Felt Found is what triple F stands for, a sales professional after attentive listening his customer starts with agreeing to his customer's belief, I too **feel** the way you do (about a particular brand, product, service, situation, need, etc.). Then, once I had no choice and I had to use this product, I **felt** that I was too negative about predicting its quality. I **found** that it works exactly the way it is promised. This builds the sales persons rapport and develops trust (risk of offending the customer is reduced considerably) this type of self-testimonial illustrations makes our arguments more authentic and familiar to the listener.

### **NLP Methods in SOFT SKILL Development**

Informants agree that NLP training enhances a person's ability to read nonverbal language. It uses participants' levels of expertise, with a variety of real life metaphors, practical exercises and differentiation in delivery styles; making it one of the most popular skill development program.

**Understanding of Kinesics** - enhances a persons' sensory acuity. In sales 60-70% of all interpersonal communication is nonverbal (**Academic Research by Wood, 2006**).

**Mirroring** - Language, physical movements, beliefs, choice of words, tone and tonality of speech (ways of communication) are all practiced to mirror so as to build up a rapport and bridge the gap between the two, seller and buyer. This is practiced by professionals in CSR and customer handling, also in problem handling this art has proven its worth (through testimonial interviews).

**Need Identification and Generation** - This is a must skill in employees from customer centric markets.

NLP methodology in relation building sessions enables the individual to master the art of understanding PRS (Preferred Representational System). This hypothesis brings the seller to the same platform making him/her enter the customer's world by speaking the way customer speaks, mirroring his body language and gestures. For example if they believe a customer to be visual oriented then employee (salesperson) would apply more figures in his/ her selling/ persuading approach.

**Active Listening and Curiosity** - Whether it's a student or an employee active listening and curiosity are the core to learning. Interviewees proclaim that the two skills are substantially affected as a consequence of practicing NLP. Both of these skills develop rapport and demonstrate sincerity in turn building trust factor.

**Map of the world** - Each individual possess a map of their own beliefs about the world (territory) or objects. This concept is a very effective method to understanding peoples' personality trait, desires, likes and dislikes. Again this tool is certainly effective in communicating with our peers, teachers, customers, colleagues, seniors-juniors, friends as well as family. A noticeable fall in disputes or disagreements can be observed on practicing this technique while communicating even on controversial issues. Identifying Personality Traits

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People all over the world can be categorized into four basic personality types: Melancholy, Phlegmatic, Sanguine and Choleric (**Florence Littauer, 1992**). Categorizing people on the basis of their habits, likes-dislikes, choices and preferences develop a better understanding about people one deals with. Learning the unique blend of personality traits provides an insight to people's emotions, priorities, work performance and relationships. This also enables the learner to improve upon ones' own strengths and weaknesses. 'Personality learning' being one of the most interesting methods used in NLP training develop priority soft skills like effective communication, reliability, teamwork, problem handling and especially customer service.

**A Second Position Shift** - NLP calls this step as a process to enter into someone else's world, this is done by observing "what" a person does and by asking relevant questions about "how and why" he behaves in a particular manner. This step is generally a first or second order encounter with the client during teaching NLP. The bits of information about the client are then collected, organized and shaped into a method of skill teaching module (customized teaching model) by the practitioner.

**Testimonials:** *"Showed me a way to communicate more effectively"* - Anita Anand

*"Fascinating stuff. Useful for both my professional and personal life"* - William Hunt

*"The best sales training I have had, I will use and practice"* - Alexander Rose, Andrew Overton

*"The Business NLP Academy has provided Bradford College with the skills and abilities that its' staff can now use across our varied departments including Staff Development, Marketing, Teaching and Well-being"* - Bradford College.

*"The Business NLP Academy understood us, our business needs and was able to context theories and techniques in a way that made real sense to our business"* - ATS Euromaster

## **Conclusion**

NLP is involved in producing human experience through its three most influential components i.e. neurology, language and programming. The term NLP gained universal popularity in the last decade, was basically used as a tool for effective communication by counselors (Einspruch & Forman, 1985; Tosey & Mathison, 2003). Neuro Linguistic

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Programming work in several contexts, professional as well as personal lives, managing both interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Founders observed that the employees going through similar training and experience perform in a different manner. This perception lead to further researches in understanding the significance and potential of the concept in various areas like psychology, countering phobias, training, communication, learning and personal development. As a result, the concept developed (drawing its inspiration from the computer programs) to reveal that human brain can learn healthy patterns and behaviors to bring a positive change to a more success oriented behavior. As described by Sue Knight “NLP is a process of modeling the conscious and unconscious patterns that are unique to each of us in such a way that we are continuously moving toward higher potential”. NLP trainings enable learner to track his/her thinking process and also develop the ability to understand the reasons behind the thinking pattern of others. Last decade has experienced the results of NLP practices in skill development programs, employee training sessions, motivational seminars, etc. MNC’s, community colleges, workforce development organizations incorporate NLP trainings in soft skills development programs.

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