

Essential NLP - Practical Tools for a Great Life

Podcast 4 - Important Questions

Hi, and a very warm welcome to my Essential NLP skills podcast number four.

If you've been following this podcast series you'll know that we've done an overview, we've looked at two really important things in podcast number two which were:

- 'Rapport' - the ability to communicate effectively with people and to feel like you are relating to them
- 'States' - which is all about working out 'are we in the right state of mind in any particular moment in time?'

And then in podcast number three we looked at the neuroscience behind change, neuroplasticity, and particularly how there's a massive link between the words we say, what states they create and what neurology they build.

So that's where we have got to. What we are going to look at today are issues that actually stem from that. One of the problems we've got is: how do we ask people what their problem is without generating more neurology and more stability in the problem state. And as we mentioned in the last podcast: the easiest way to do this, it seems, is to minimise the amount of language we use that is problem-based.

Unfortunately, when people come to see us we often have a tendency to ask them what the problem is. However it's much more useful to say 'what can I help you with?' By changing our language in this way we start to immediately direct them to finding the solutions that they want.

We will, of course, want to check in and find out how they are getting on as well. But at the same time we need to ask these questions in a very careful way, and the easiest way to do this is, is with something we call 'framing'.

This is when we say 'look, what we are going to do is very briefly be discussing what your issues are and how we can help you, but we are not going to spend a lot of time doing that because where we really need to focus is the second phase of the session, which is looking at how we can make a difference'.

And this brings us to one of the really important distinctions of NLP, and that is, that much therapy, counseling and problem solving approaches normally focus on the 'why?' question. Asking 'Why are things the way they are?'

And although there is some value in that, it's a massively overused question. People seem to ask the 'why?' all the time - but asking 'why?' focuses on the problem, on the past and very often on who is to blame, and who is responsible. And although the 'why?' question can be useful, and certainly the past does influence how we think about ourselves and the future, to some extent, it's not nearly as useful as the 'how?' question.

Replacing the 'why?' question with 'how?' question is always much more useful.

NLP has a structure for finding out information in a very particular way. Once we've gone through 'what brings you here - what can we help you with?' type questions, it moves into something called 'Well-Formed Outcomes'.

Well-Formed Outcomes are a fantastic way of helping people to work out what they want but in a way that very clearly steers their neurology in the right direction and helps them to get what they want. If you are involved in NLP, coaching or management these are really essential skills. They are similar to things called SMART goals but they are even smarter because of their understanding of how the neurology works.

The first question we ask is a fairly obvious question, but it is a very important one, which is 'what do you want?'. The important thing about this question is that its answer must fit two very important criteria. It must be stated in positives and it must be something that is deliverable.

So let me clarify that; very often when you ask people what they want they will say things like 'not to be anxious' however as we discussed previously all this does is re-stimulate the neurology they do not want to be activating - i.e. the neurology of stress and anxiety. This is why we insist the answer is stated in positives and we coach and assist them to turn this from 'I do not want to be stressed' to stating what they actually do want - such as 'I want to be calm'.

Very often just explaining the concept of neuroplasticity to them makes it very clear to them why it is important to use positive language when they are talking about what they want.

The second qualifying criteria is that it has to be something that is deliverable by them. So often people state what they want in terms of they want someone else to change - someone else to be different or some external force to provide a solution. On reflection we can see this is not a very good way to work. Yet it's such a common way of thinking that people have when they get stuck. They feel they've exhausted all the possibilities of what they can do about the situation and are now looking elsewhere for other people to change, or for some external event to provide the solution. Here we need to recognise that we need to take responsibility. We can only really effectively change ourselves, as that, obviously, is the person we have the most power over. As we know, when we have tried to change other people, it rarely works - changing ourselves is the most effective way to use our energy if we want to get a difference in our lives.

So once we have a very clear idea of what it is that we want - in positives and something we can deliver - an interesting thing happens. Not only do we get a clarity about exactly what it is we want to happen but also, by exercising our brain in this way, we start to get much more familiar with what that is going to be like. We start to generate the new pathways we need to make these changes, to have these new behaviours, to change these beliefs and to change to this future that we wish for.

So these questions are not just 'let's set some goals' questions. The purpose of these questions is actually to get our brain in the right state to do the thing we want to do. Remember going back to podcast 2, it's absolutely essential to get our brain in the right state, and in fact when you look at all these questions of the Well-Formed Outcomes, all of them move us to exactly the state we want to be in to get the solution or to get the job done.

The next question encourages this too. It is 'how will you know when you have achieved this? And what would you see, feel and hear in that place?' By answering this question we once again stimulate the neurology of success. Here we are asking you to think about what it feels like, what you are seeing, what you hear, when you have achieved your goal. It asks 'How do you measure that success?'

Technically what this question asks you to do is to go into the future and see yourself in the future where this has already occurred and to feel what that feels like. By doing this you generate a whole set of new neurological pathways that take you exactly into the zone you need to be to make the changes you want.

By asking also what would you feel, see and hear (these are called representational systems and we will be covering them later) it further encourages the development of those new neurological pathways. By doing this, developing and strengthening those pathways that get you what you want, just like training muscle, it makes it much more likely for you to achieve this.

And the third question we are going to ask is 'What is the first step?'. Now this question is very interesting; first of all it is the solution to being overwhelmed, we very often won't even attempt a task if we feel it is just too much to do. If we asked 'What is the first step?' it becomes much more manageable. A bite sized piece with which we feel comfortable.

If we ask someone to write a book, then that is quite a big task. But if we ask instead 'If you were to write a book, would it be a paperback or a hardback?', 'A novel or a manual?', 'What colour would the front be?' or 'What might the title be?' then by doing this, by breaking it down into smaller steps, it becomes reasonable and brain can get its 'head' around it.

The other important part of the 'first step' question, is, once again it sets us in motion on this task. We think through 'I could do that, that and that?' and each time we do that we are starting to step into areas we have not been into before. We claim these new areas as our own, as part of the territory we are now moving into. So this question 'What is the first step?' is a really valuable question.

There are some other questions we are going to ask that are part of the Well-Formed Outcomes, but you'll find them in the podcast number five.

For now I would like to play around with these starting questions:

- What do you want? - Making sure it is in positives and something you can deliver.
- How will you know when you've achieved it? - Making sure you describe it in detail - including what you can see, feel and hear. Envisioning it as though you're actually there, having achieved it.
- What is the first step to achieving that?

Play around with these, both in your personal life and conversations you have in your business or therapy work. You'll see that these very clear questions start to shift and move things forward rapidly because they utilise the skill of the brain to develop new neurological pathways, which is exactly what you need to do if you want to create change.

So ditch the 'why?' question on the whole and move towards the 'how?' question and start with these three very simple ways of asking 'What do you want?', 'How will you know when you've achieved it?' and 'What's the first step?'.

Look forward to hearing how you are getting on with this, please send me your comments on what you'd like more of, if you'd like me to go over anything again or if you'd like the transcripts. Send me an email at phil@philparker.org.

Really look forward to seeing you on the next podcast. Take care!

Phil



Phil Parker
phil@philparker.org
0044 (0)20 7374 0233

<http://www.twitter.com/philparkerLP>
<http://www.facebook.com/philparker.LP>
<http://www.youtube.com/user/thephilparker>
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