

How does NLP-based coaching assist mature aged people?

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Published in Australian Career Practitioner Winter 2006

As career practitioners we often feel challenged when working with unemployed mature people who may seem 'resistant', 'depressed' or 'unmotivated', don't we? Even midlifers with jobs can feel stuck or frustrated but lack the confidence or motivation to make changes.

Roger had been made redundant. When he came for career coaching he spoke of having 'made bad choices, wanting to change industry and feeling "angry, procrastinating, fearful". His aim in coming for coaching was to "... relish what I'm doing, feel self assured, enjoy my work and be more self-reliant with regard to getting feedback and finding motivation".

When Sylvia came for coaching she was very stressed about looking for work after being out of the workforce for many years. She wanted to explore her options, identify her ideal role, set goals, achieve work/life balance and gain confidence about getting back into the workforce. Sylvia enjoyed the process of clarifying what role she wanted to go for and learning how to go about the job search. But still she felt very "down" and unmotivated and had no idea why.

As Melody Rewakowski wrote recently in the Australian Career Counsellor, "*As professional career counsellors, we are well aware of how well a client's ability to move forward can be tied to their self- confidence and self-esteem.*"

So we need coaching methodologies that first, enable people to deal with feelings and beliefs that have held them back and second, that facilitate positive changes in how they think, feel and act.

This paper introduces a new coaching methodology—which we call *developmental career coaching*—that is solidly based theoretically and very effective for clients like Roger and Sylvia.

Until now much of what is called *career development* is more accurately described as career *planning and management*; this involves assessing personal characteristics, researching appropriate occupations and preparing for job search or other career action steps. Insofar as career planning and management involves modifying existing skills and behaviours or learning new ones (such as writing resumes,

improving interview skills, researching alternative occupations, learning small business skills, etc) career coaching involves *skills and performance coaching*.

Developmental career coaching is, by contrast, more about assisting people like Roger and Sylvia to find better work/life solutions by assisting them to think, feel and act in ways that serve them better. No amount of vocational assessments, occupational research, action planning and job search skilling will enable a person to make changes if their beliefs and emotional states do not support them.

The focus of *developmental coaching* is showing clients how to modify their beliefs, values or identity; how to change how they think and feel about their self-worth, confidence and what 'success' means; how to achieve better work-life balance, become a better decision-maker, stop being a 'procrastinator', 'fearing failure', etc.

The starting point of developmental coaching is *self-reflexivity*—the ability to step back and explore, notice, hear and think about one's thoughts, feelings and behaviours. In the field of cognitive behaviour psychology this is known as *the meta-cognitive skill of self-reflection*; the fostering of this skill is, as Dr Tony Grant of the coaching psychology unit at Sydney University says, central to the coaching process. Dr Bob Bodenhamer and Dr Michael Hall, who developed the Neuro-Semantic models of personal change, call this the *step-back* skill. They show clients how to become aware of how they create mental movies and scripts that directly affect how they feel and act. At the heart of the Neuro-Semantic coaching models is the systemic nature of mind and body, involving multiple layers of thinking and feeling. We have thoughts about thoughts, feelings about feelings, etc. Once we understand the structure or pattern to how we run our brains and behaviours it is surprisingly easy to change those patterns.

What exactly is involved in *developmental career coaching*? It starts with the skills that all counsellors and coaches use: rapport-building, clarifying outcomes, active listening and supporting, questioning, giving and receiving feedback. Neuro-Semantic coaching skills also include detecting intricate and layered patterns of thinking and feeling, helping clients change their beliefs and emotional states, tasking clients to take actions to develop skills and holding clients accountable. The Neuro-Semantic coach is trained to identify and work with a person's language patterns, personality style and perceptual filters (or 'meta-programs'), emotional states and the mental movies they make of their experience. At the AACC conference in March participants we detail and discuss the 24 core coaching skills, with handouts.

NLP (Neuro-linguistic programming), out of which Neuro-Semantics grew, is about the internal representation of experience and how we communicate with ourselves. As meaning-makers we construct meanings in our mind and package them in symbols (words), share them and embody them. Words work in our neurology to create our emotional states and induce us into various mind-body-emotion experiences. NLP has given us many effective tools to change our way of functioning and navigating our lives.

“Neuro-Linguistics and Neuro-Semantics are not about ‘linguistics’ as such or ‘semantics’ as such but about the embodiment of linguistics and semantics; that is, how words and meanings affect, influence and program our physiology and neurology.” Michael Hall, Neurons e-group, February 2005

Neuro-Semantic models and *developmental career coaching* build not only NLP but on learning theory, social cognitive theories, constructivist assumptions and brief solution-focused therapy. Details of the theoretical underpinning of this coaching model will be presented visually at the AACC conference in March.

Developmental career coaching not only comes from cognitive-behaviour frameworks but also from a systemic one that addresses the complexity of subjective experience in ways and to an extent that other frameworks do not. For example, one of the many coaching patterns we use is a version of the Miracle Question. It unpacks what’s happening behind the unwanted feelings and beliefs, installs new and empowering beliefs and has the client learn how to access positive and resourceful emotional states.

With lots of skilled questioning the coach enabled Sylvia to see and articulate that she felt embarrassed about loving doing such ‘boring’ things as spreadsheets. In addition, she had an untested belief that her age was working against her. She also realised that money was an issue. The coach guided Sylvia in ‘unpacking’ her negative thoughts and beliefs (using a whiteboard) until she got to a core and deeply unconscious belief about her value as a person. When Sylvia saw the layer upon layer of thoughts and feelings she was astonished at how effectively she had set herself up to feel stressed and unmotivated about going back to work. Given that she had had enough of living with those old feelings, she decided she wanted instead to feel excited and focused about going back into the workforce. Assisted again by skilled questioning, Sylvia came up with 22 true and empowering beliefs about herself and her

situation that enabled her to genuinely feel excited about the future. She then learnt ways to strengthen that feeling of excitement and to access it whenever she wanted it. This version of the Miracle Question took around an hour.

Once we know the structure of unwanted behaviours or states we can de-structure and re-structure them.

Roger has clarified his new career objective and his vision of where and how he would be working. But like so many of us, Roger had trouble putting into practice the changes he wanted to make; he needed a way of *closing the knowing-doing gap*.

A five-step process, called *Mind-to-Muscle*, enabled Roger to turn his intention into a neurological (mind-body-emotion) pattern with which he would close the gap between what he wanted and what actually happened. It involved Roger identifying his intention, describing that intention as a set of beliefs, turning those beliefs into a decision he was making right now, noticing the positive emotional state or experience that came with those beliefs and that decision, and then turning that emotion into an action. The coach guided Roger to actively talk and walk through these five steps and it took about 30 minutes.

The outcome? Roger reflected aloud: *"The new Roger is centred, confident and has his own imperative. He is going forward with confidence and approaching the future with the anchor words 'I have reason to be confident'. From the haze a clear horizon is emerging..."*

Roger learnt that to "know" something he not only needed to describe it with words but to fully experience it in his body.

When we talk of NLP and Neuro-semantic-based coaching being systemic (making changes at the level of mind, body and emotion) we are saying that this approach is about showing clients like Roger how to run their own brains, manage their emotional states, and live (act) more resourcefully.

For people to make real changes in how they think, feel and act requires them to accept responsibility for their thoughts and feelings, speech and behaviour. Some clients are 'uncoachable' because they aren't ready to accept that responsibility; they may need counselling or therapy first.

That said, experience tells us that with the appropriate level of coach skilling we can assist the vast majority of clients to identify and achieve the changes they want to make in their emotional states, frames of mind and behaviours.

To quote visionaries in the field of NLP some 25 years ago:

“Your ultimate success at helping people achieve their desired outcomes—including managing change—will depend on your ability to observe, identify and utilise the multitude of patterns that will constantly be offered to you in your sensory experience by clients...not in the ability to measure and average types of behavior.” (Dilts, Grinder, Bandler et al, 1980),

Will *you* take up the challenge?

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