

Neuro Linguistic Programming

Joel Lee

Aled Davies: Hi, everyone. My name is Aled Davies, founder of MediatorAcademy.com. Home of the ambitious, home of the passionate mediator. This is the place where mediators, aspiring, new and accomplished, come and learn from experienced mediators, practitioners, and thought leaders from around the world.

Neurolinguistic programming is an approach to communication and personal development, which was started in California back in the '70s by, I think, a couple of academics. In this interview, I want to discover more of the concepts of NLP and how they can help me become an effective mediator, and a more successful mediator.

What I mean by that is, how do I run a more successful mediation practice. My guest today has always thought NLP has a lot to contribute to conflict resolution. He spent a number of years teaching aspects of NLP in his negotiation and mediation classes. He is an associate professor, the faculty of law, the National University of Singapore, and runs the faculty's negotiation and mediation workshops.

He's a graduate of Harvard Law School and a consultant with CMP Partners in the U.S. and a principal mediator with, and a trainer, of the Singapore Mediation Centre. He's published extensively on the subject of mediation. Lectures all around the world and he's a regular contributor to the Kluwer Mediation Blog.

It's a real pleasure to welcome Joel Lee onto Mediator Academy. Joel, welcome.

Joel Lee: Thanks very much, Aled. The pleasure is mine. And as you were describing all those credentials I was thinking, 'Who is he talking about?'

Aled: Joel, I've got loads of questions, but I think the one that's going to be on my audience's mind is what is NLP, neurolinguistic programming?

Joel: Okay. That's a much harder question than I was expecting. I think one definition that's been thrown around from time to time is, it's the study of subjective experience. Which sounds kind of cool and I could give you a whole academic definition an NLP and it's great, you won't need to write a paper.

Bottom line it . . . works like this. If you understand how people process information, you can package your communication in a way that facilitates the communication much better. So basically, if you understand that they process in terms of pictures or sounds or feelings, it makes sense to connect with them or to show them things or to tell them things in their language, in a sense, their sub-language. That sort of encapsulates for me what NLP is, as it can relate to conflict resolution.

Aled: It sounds like a way of lubricating the channels of communication so that they flow a lot smoother and easier?

Joel: That's certainly one way to think about it. I think, at least for mediators and negotiators like ourselves, communication is our bread and butter. The communication skills, communication tools, inter-personal skills, these are the methods by which we interact with and influence the world.

It's not limited to us obviously. Teachers use that, therapists use it as well. So it makes sense, from my perspective, for us to get a very good handle on communication, because that's how we get things done. It would be great if we were telepathic, but we're not.

Aled: Give me an example, then, of what are the concepts from NLP and how it would help improve the quality of the communication, or the way I communicate with somebody else.

Joel: Sure. If it's all right with you, let me just say a little about the background of NLP. You mentioned a little earlier that it was created in the '70s by two gentlemen. One was called John Grinder, he was a professor of linguistics at the time. Also at that point in time, his graduate student, Richard Bandler, who was somewhat of a mixed bag you would say. He was a scientist, he was a musician, he was a rock-n-roll sort of, he was kind of many things.

They're both still actively teaching today. They asked themselves this one simple question. What's the difference that makes a difference between someone who's excellent in what they do and someone who just sucks? That's a technical term when you say someone 'just sucks'.

From their perspective, they set out to study three of the most exquisite communicators of their time. They were, at that point in time, therapists. As you might know, Virginia Satir was sort of the mother of systemic family therapy. Fritz Perls, the father of Gestalt therapy. Everyone wants a mother and father. Milton Erickson was the father of modern medical hypnotherapy.

Even though they used very different schools of thought in terms of therapy, they found that these folks had many patterns of human behaviour in common. They found that when they distilled these patterns of human behaviour and they tried it on themselves, it enhance the ability to communicate with other people. They thought, 'That's kind of cool.'

So NLP itself is currently being taught as all these sub-patterns of behaviour. But fundamentally, the initial premise of NLP was that if we have a model of excellence, someone who does something very well, could be a sports person, could be a salesperson, could be a doctor, could be anything. NLP provides a way, through a process called modelling, to break down what they do into chunks, then we could distill and test out.

Specific to conflict resolution, which is what you asked a little bit earlier, the idea then is that there's some human behaviours that we can replicate, that will allow us to connect with the parties better, and to influence them better, and to persuade them better. And maybe even to coach them better so that they can communicate with one another.

By way of one very quick example, there is an idea in NLP that human beings really process information in one of six ways. So you either process information in terms of pictures, sounds, feelings, smells, tastes and words. So there's six different ways.

You can try a simple experiment if any of our listeners right now just want to think about. I'm going to say something and you guys think of it, or you just think whatever you think. Think of a dog. I'm willing to guess that you have either a picture of a dog, the sound of a dog barking, or the feeling of a dog if you own a dog. If you own a dog, you might have the smell of a dog, which I think is common to many dog owners. I'm pretty sure none of us have the taste of a dog, but let's not go there. And some of you may see the words D-O-G.

If you break how you represent information down, it actually is just in those six forms. And they're may be combinations, but it will be a combination of one of those six forms. If we understand that, that people have a primary representational system, there's a system by which they habitually communicate in, it's like a sub-language for them. Then it makes sense that if I wanted to communicate better with a single person, if I understood how they were processing information, at that particular time, it makes sense for me to communicate with them in that sub-language, which is what we call those "representational systems".

Aled: So it's a bit like tuning into their frequency.

Joel: Precisely. If I might just point out what you just said, which is to tune in to the frequency, comes from what we call the auditory representational system. I might respond to you by saying, 'I hear what you're saying.' Then I might talk to you in terms of auditory representational systems. So I might say, 'Listen, Aled, one of the things that we need to talk about, is how we might discuss a solution to our problem.' And because your processing auditorily at that point in time, the words will just fit, fit right into the way you're currently thinking.

Now this is not to say that we stuck. In other words, please don't sort of go away thinking this person is just visual and their visual forever and ever and ever. We cycle through. There's some subjects which might be more suitable for visual representations or auditory representations. But at some point we cycle through and if we can identify where any person is in the cycle at one point in time. We can connect with them better.

Aled: Okay. You talked about a couple of things. At a behavioural level being able to sort of change ones behaviour in the moment to, as it were, tune it to their frequency to improve the quality of the communication between us. You also talked about some premise or presuppositions. Is that another way of saying some assumptions or beliefs around...

Joel: Yes. With any sort of field we need to have some special terms that apply to us and distinguish us from everyone else. You self suppositions of communications or presupposition of NLP, there is actually assumptions or working assumptions that we operate out of.

When I think of the fundamental beliefs that a practitioner holds when they're dealing with the world, that works too. I don't have strong views about what terms we use.

Aled: What are some of the presuppositions, some of the fundamental beliefs and opinions the mediation- sorry, the NLP approach?

Joel: Let's talk about four specific ones that impact directly on communication and therefore conflict resolution. One of the things I particularly like is this concept called the map is not the territory, and the idea, generally, is that when we speak with someone and they say something like, they come and shake your hand and they say, 'Hey, listen, thanks for taking the time to meet with me. I believe in a win-win sort of relationship and I hope you are, too.' As we talk like that this is what I call motherhood statements. You can't help but nod because they all make sense. It sounds so good and you can't help but be drawn into that rhetoric.

The problem is that when someone says to me 'win-win', I have no clue what they mean. I don't. And if I was an unaware communicator, my brain would fill in the meaning, and I would assume I knew exactly what you meant and this is why miscommunication happens. Misunderstandings and miscommunication happening, because I think I know what you mean but actually I don't. And you obviously have a different view of what it means.

Then when we talk about it as if the same thing, because we're using the same words, then something happens and we go, 'Oh, something just didn't...' there's a disjoin, right? We start off with the premise that I have no clue what you actually mean. The map that we're using, the words that we use don't adequately represent our understanding of reality.

If the words that I use don't represent my understanding of reality, and of course, my understanding of reality doesn't necessarily adequately represent reality, my words are a shadow of a shadow of reality. Which is enough to mess people around, that's why you got to watch my tricks before we have a conversation like this. Take a blue pill, one of those pills.

Aled: You can see how this originated from California in the '70's, can't you?

Joel: I tell you, but we can say this over the Internet, it's all good. So the map is not the territory. The moment you understand that, then we constantly question our assumptions. What might this person mean when they say this? We don't, obviously, go around questioning everything they say, because that gets annoying and then they'll punch you in the mouth. But the idea is, let's not be so certain about what we understand someone else might be saying.

So if that is true, the map is not the territory, then we need to understand that sometimes when we feed forward a piece of communication, like I say something to you and, so don't take this the wrong way, Aled, but let's assume I'm saying this to a woman. I say, 'So and so, I love you.' It's a funny name, so and so. Anyway, she's Chinese and we have funny names like that.

'So and so, I love you,' and she responds by slapping me and calling me, 'You bastard.' I have a number of choices, a number of possibles. One response is I'm going, 'Wow, she's a crazy sort of person and she's broken, spoiled, crazy.' Because it can't be me that's wrong, right? It's always the other person that's broken.

I could do that but that's hardly helpful because then I've put the locus of control . . . I can't change, there's nothing I can do, really, because she's crazy, broken, whatever. Or I could actually, what the second response I could do is, 'You know, I've tried, I'm a failure, I'll never love again.' Right? Which also isn't a very useful response.

This is why sometimes another presupposition of NLP is 'there is no failure, only feedback'. What that means is that if we understand that everything we do is a feed forward in communication. If it doesn't get the response that you want, it hasn't failed. It's just simply a form of feedback to me that something wasn't quite working.

If I break this down or if I connect this to something that mediators do all the time, which is to elicit interest for audience, if you're sort of operating out of interest based model. If you say to someone, 'And so what I'm hearing from you is that this is important,' whatever 'this' might be. And they look at you and they go, 'No, it's not.'

Now as a mediator I could go, 'Oh, shit. I'm a failure.' But from my perspective I'm going, 'Oh, it's not? I'm sorry, I must have misunderstood. Help me understand what's important about it.' You don't say it's failure, you just go, 'Yeah, okay, let me deal with it.'

Aled: I think that, in that instance, I would imagine one of two possibilities. One is, 'Oh, I'm rubbish at this, eliciting interest business.' Or I could go, 'It is...'

Joel: So am I, I'm just better at pretending.

Aled Davis: Or I could go, 'It is what you really want, you just don't know it yet.' My job is to really force this, rather than be really curious and think, 'Okay, so I wonder what is then, if that isn't.'

Joel: Bottom line for us NLPers is we say the meaning of the communication and response you get, it's not what you intended. So if I intended to pay someone a compliment and they get offended, I shouldn't say they're stupid. I should say obviously I delivered that a little bit wrong or delivered that in a way that they didn't quite get the message.

That's the meaning of communication. So I need to then develop flexibility in the way I communicate. Find different ways to communicate or connect with someone. Because, honestly, the only person I can change is me.

Aled: Yeah.

Joel: I can't change anyone else. If I change me, I might be able to influence someone else, but all I can change is me.

Aled: You've got, map is not the territory, no failure, just feedback, or failure...

Joel: There's no failure, only feedback. Yeah. Develop flexibility in your communication. And the meaning of your communication is the response you get.

Aled: Right, okay.

Joel: All these pithy sayings that we just sort of, rolls off our tongue because we've said too many times.

Aled: These are things that as a mediator we take for granted to be true going into a mediation. This is part of our operating system.

Joel: Absolutely.

Aled: Then it's likely to help us improve the quality of the communication. We can then utilise some of the behaviours that are consistent with those beliefs or presuppositions.

Joel: Absolutely. One of the nice thing about operating assumptions is that they influence the paradigms. They influence the way you think. Which will then make it very conducive to use the appropriate behaviours. Some of the behaviours that we've talked about for example, is communicating in the right sub-language. Communicating in the proper representational system. As one example.

Aled: I'm going off subject here, but it's an interesting thought. Have you come across any research around the presuppositions of mediators? Not the espoused presuppositions, but the theories in use?

Joel: Not that I have. I've spent pretty much close to my entire working life trying to track down studies that have studied excellent mediators. There have been bits and pieces along the way. I understand that in the early NLP days there was some work done, some modelling done of mediators. But I can't find any publications on it. I can't find the purported existence of cassette tape recording of it. It's a little bit like "The X Files" now, you know. You hear about these things, urban legend, but you can't find it. If you ever get hold of one, please tell me.

I'm not aware of anything that specifically looks at the operating assumptions. Obviously, in mediation courses they talk about models and those things are implicitly talked about, but no one has explicitly says, 'You know what, if you're a mediator, these need to be your operating assumptions because they are helpful to your job.'

I think they tend to dive into sort of the conflict resolution model and the opening statements and the process.

Aled: I think that's a huge flaw in mediation training. I think you've got to start with your operating system. Because if you're running, it's a bit like running the latest version of Microsoft Office on a Windows 91. If your operating system is out of date, in other words, the assumptions that you hold are inconsistent with the core principles of self determination and free and informed consent, and so on. Then how can your behaviour, how you intervene, how you manage the process, how can that be consistent, if you don't have a fundamental basis of assumptions?

Joel: I agree. I wouldn't go so far as to call it a flaw. I think different mediation trainings, they themselves have difference of assumptions about what a training should be.

Aled: Yeah.

Joel: So they're always consistent within their own self belief system.

When I teach negotiation, for example, and I teach collaborative negotiation, which is inter-space negotiation, one of the things I would say to people is, 'I don't want to teach you the moves, the negotiation behaviours of collaborative negotiation, because so what if you know those behaviours? If your mindset is not collaborative, then one of two things will happen. Number one is that your behaviour and your mindset will be incongruent so there will be seepage, there will be leakage and then you will be incongruent, and no one will believe you anyway. Or secondly, what will happen is that the mindset will tend to override. So your execution of the collaborative behaviours will not come to pass.

If you can change the mindset, if you can start thinking about the world [sounds like 00:20:59] collaboratively, your strategies and your behaviours will flow automatically. Because that's what needs to change. So I quite agree with you. But as I said, I won't go so far as to say it's a flaw simply because sometimes you have two days to train a mediator at different levels. Sometimes you just want to concentrate on the behaviours, because you think that that's where it's at.

From my perspective, mediation is a high level skill, and you can teach it at a sort of behavioural level. I think it's very, very important to teach it at more than that [sounds like 00:21:36]. If you address the concepts and the mindsets and all that, you will actually find the behaviour is easier to teach, if you actually spend some time talking about this. So I agree with you there.

Aled: Okay. Let me change the frame then from flaw to missed opportunity.

Joel: I like that. We're good at that. You know the joke about mediators, right? How many mediators does it take to change a window?

Aled: No?

Joel: We don't change windows, we reframe them. I know it's a bad one, sorry.

Aled: We've got some of the core assumptions that we think will enhance one's ability to communicate. Let's drill down into some of the specific tools, some of the specific concepts and strategies and where in the mediation process might we deploy these to improve the process.

Joel: Well, I think when we talked about representational systems earlier, you're constantly doing that, because you're constantly communicating. One of the challenges that you may find is that because, party A is speaking from a visual representational system and party B is speaking from a kinesthetic representational system. Part of the reason why they're having communication difficulties is because of that. They're both speaking English or the same language, but the manner by which they're speaking isn't, just somehow, it's going like that.

Sometimes what the mediator does is simply translate it. They're are lovely examples of this, generally in couples counselling, where say the female partner is speaking visually and sees the house as a mess and all that kind of stuff, and the male partner is actually communicating kinesthetically. It's like, never the twain shall meet. He feels she's not getting it and she feels that he's not seeing her point of view. And you know what? They're both right.

One of the things that the therapist does or the counsellor does, which we mediators can do, is to help translate. So essentially saying to one party, "What this party actually means is da, da, da". To speak to that party in the

representational system they understand. So that's one thing that you're constantly doing.

At that point in time, you'll probably be operating a lot more at joint session in the early stages of communication. Exploration of issues. Potentially even, when closing the deal and when there's tension coming back into the negotiation or mediation. But if you can actually tune them into a space where their language is about the same, we can actually now talk at the same sub-language. Maybe you can just sit back and relax and watch them go.

Sometimes they're just out of rapport with one another, and it's kind of what you need to do. That's one thing that you could do.

One of NLP's contributions is what we call rapport-building skills. In mediation training we often say the mediator must build a good relationship with the parties, or you must help the parties build a relationship. They rarely tell you how. They rarely ever say how specifically do we build a relationship. They assume that we know how to do it. And we talk about active listening skills and all that.

NLP generally works off a very fundamental model. We call it pacing and leading. It's a fundamental model because you can apply that to many things. For example, Aled, you are a party and you are communicating visually, which means that you will use a lot of visual predicates, like, 'I see what you're saying. From my perspective.' Generally, people operating on a visual representational systems speak a little bit faster, they breathe a little bit high in the chest.

And I need to bring you down a little bit to say an auditory representational system. I will pace and lead you. What that means is I will actually speak to your representational system first. Connect with you at that level, and then slowly shift you to a different representational system. Sometimes you will follow, sometimes you will not. It might not always work on the first go. But that's an example of pace and lead.

Another example of pace and leading might be, me building rapport with you through the rate at which you speak. You know how people speak in different paces, at a different rate. Some people speak very, very fast, like, for instance, like myself, am guilty of speaking very, very fast.

I'm sure you've encountered people who speak a little bit slower and it's almost as if and you want to hurry them up because you're going, 'Come on, I get you, I hear you already.' But, you see, those people are likely to be processing what we call kinesthetically. They are feeling every word. And because they're feeling every word, the pace is a little bit slow. So again, pace and lead. If you need to speed them up a little, you need to actually match them where they are before bringing them upwards.

Last example is NLP always talks about using body language to build rapport. First let me provide a caveat here. It's sort of a red flag. It's not always useful to use this in joint session, and I'll explain why in a little while. But the premise behind using body language to build rapport is that when parties are in rapport, their body language matches. For example, they do gestures the same way, they may nod at the same pace. They may cross their legs in the same way. They may lean forward or lean to the side or in similar ways.

We find it's systemic. It works the other way around. For example, if you have matching body language you can take that as a sign of rapport. But it works the other way. If you want to build rapport, you could actually match their body language. It's kind of weird because I've tried it before in a pub with someone I didn't know. We were drinking Guinnesses and every time he took a drink, I took a drink. And every time we took a drink, took a drink. I didn't know him, we were actually some distance apart, and I wanted to see whether I could lead him to a different place.

Every time he took a drink, I took a drink. Then I changed my body language and I lifted my cup with my other hand. And freaky as it was, he lifted his cup with his other hand and he changed his body language. And I go, 'Yes. Got one.' It sounds magical but it's not. It's a process called entrainment and it's a very commonly observed human behaviour. It's just that people don't think to do it the other way around.

The reason why I say that's not so useful in joint session is you don't want your body language to be overtly matching only one party and not the other.

Aled: I see.

Joel: Because then you might be perceived as being bias or not neutral, or partial. What I would say is you could match their tones, because that's not so obvious visually.

You could match them by what we call crossover matching or crossover mirroring. That's when you actually matching a part of their body but with a different part of your body. What I mean is if you're nodding, I could be, for example, tapping my chair at the same rate at which you're nodding. It sounds very esoteric right now so I won't freak people out. But that's kind of examples of what you could be doing with a pace and lead principle.

Aled: I like the pace and lead principal for many reasons. But one of the things that strikes me is, and this may be a thought that the audience is thinking now, is . . . see, that was an embedded command there. Do you like that?

Joel: It was, wasn't it. Suddenly, I'm thinking about it.

Aled: [laughs]

Joel: It was like the audience, too.

Aled: That was completely unconscious.

Joel: That's it. It's a credit to your something, you're a trainer.

Aled: At what point, must we be really careful that we're not perceived or this isn't being perceived as manipulating the parties. In other words, doing something to them without their knowledge in order to . . .

Joel: I'm legally trained, therefore, let me say the words, let me take issue with that. I think it's, to mediators, we won't argue with the fact that you cannot not communicate. So even when you don't communicate, that's a communication. Anyone who's received a cold shoulder from a partner at home, you know what I'm talking about.

I work off a different definition of manipulate. We often understand that the term manipulation to mean something negative. In fact, you defined it. You actually said to affect someone without their permission. But, you see, Aled. My point of view is how can you not? The process of communication is already affecting someone.

Aled: Very good point, yeah.

Joel: Surely, manipulation can't be that you're affecting someone without their permission. Because if we couldn't do that, then we will be horrible mediators. We'd have no tools. Because by asking people what their interests are, for example, you have essentially manipulated them to think about something that is higher than their positional. We need that position, depend which direction you want to go. So I'm not sure that manipulation should be defined that way.

Aled: I think my question, you've helped me really clarify what I'm thinking now. I guess what I'm thinking is, is there a danger that a mediator could use some of the skills and approaches of NLP . . . ?

Joel: Absolutely. You could turn to the dark side. Yeah. Absolutely. You could go to the dark side. I've said this before, Let me explain. I think that a lot of the time we cannot not manipulate. And I use the word manipulate in the original sense of the word, which is to move or use something skillfully. I can manipulate my mobile phone. I can manipulate my mouse. There's nothing unethical about that. It's using something with skill.

I think what makes something ethical or not, so whether it's ethical manipulation or not, is really the intention by which we operate. Our operating assumptions. So if I go, "[makes noise 00:32:33], I'm going to make Aled do something against his will". and I'm not sure that that's so easy to do, then that'd be bad. But if I

genuinely was using my NLP skills or my mediation skills, to help parties come to a space where they can agree, I have no problem calling it manipulation.

I would say that I would be exercising that skill ethically. I get the whole "guns don't kill, people kill", but I think it's a tool like any other tool and you can use it well or you can use it badly.

One of the things that listeners may be familiar with, is that NLP, one of the things that is a great and powerful tool is the way we use language. There is a concept called 'the meta-model' and the meta model is a language model which helps people restore, recall deletions, distortions and generalisations in languages. When people speak what they say isn't completely what's in here and they have all kinds of assumptions and so on and so forth.

The meta model is a series of questions that help you help the speaker retrieve those assumptions. You could use that in a way to help them develop more choice. Because if you can get them to question their assumptions in a respectful way, then what will essentially happen is they'll go, 'Okay. Maybe my conclusion wasn't right because the assumption I was using is not exactly sound.'

I could easily use the meta-model to actually make someone question reality. I could make someone change their belief system. I could manipulate them unethically. It becomes a choice. So when I teach the meta-model to my law students, I tell them this. I don't say, 'I don't want to teach you this because I'm not sure you'd use it well.' Or, 'I'm going to teach it to you and I don't care how you use it.' 'Beware how you use it. It's a choice. Please use it well and with respect.'

Aled: Could you give me a specific example of how you could use the meta-model in a productive way?

Joel: Sure. For example, if someone says, 'I can't work with him anymore. He doesn't care. The relationship's not working out.' There are three things there. There are three sentences there, which no doubt I will forget in a couple minutes. But if you want them to respond to the 'I can't work with him anymore,' and I look at the person and I say, 'Okay. I hear that. I hear that you can't work with him anymore. Help me understand what stops you.'

You get them to elucidate the difficulty, as opposed to just accepting that it's not possible to work with him anymore. That's one possibility. 'I can't work with him anymore. He doesn't care.' All right. We usually go, 'Well, I'm sorry to hear that he doesn't care.' We're accepting the assumption that he doesn't care. You might actually ask, 'Well, actually, how do you know he doesn't care? What do you see, hear or feel that tells you that he doesn't care?'

He might say, 'Well, he's always late.'

'Okay. So him being late leads you to assume that he doesn't care?' Then you can start breaking the connections between the assumptions. Because, you know what, 50% of the world are late. It's not that they don't care, they're just late. Lateness just happens. We know some people that will be late for their own funerals. It's just the way it is.

If you come from my family background, for example, where it's important to be on time, and being late is disrespecting me. Of course I'll think that you don't care. So that's another thing you could question.

The third thing you could question is, 'He doesn't care about the relationship.' And I'm saying, 'Okay, so it sounds like the way you guys are relating isn't working out for you. How would you like to be relating instead?' So you're asking them questions that breaks down what a relationship is. Because relationship, when used that way, is what we call a nominalisation, it's an abstract noun.

It's frozen in time, which basically means that if I say to you, 'Aled, our relationship's not working out.' That's it. That's final. It's not working out and it's forever and ever and ever. But if you ask the question, 'Oh, right. Okay. So how would you like to be relating instead?' It give fluidity back to the concept of relationship. And he can think of the different ways that you could change.

One is an empowering way of thinking about relationships and one's not. So those are three examples that I've just given you there, where you can ethically use the meta-model to move around, sort of, the way people think. It is manipulation, I'm not denying that. But hopefully it's ethical. You can just Google meta-model and they'll be workings on this, books, that kind of stuff.

Aled: As a mediator, one of the things that we're taught but without much of a structure, is reality testing. I imagine there are aspects of the meta-model that would plug straight into reality testing.

Joel: There are. For example, the simplest. . . we usually say that's reality test and all that, and let me be clear. We should always reality test, in my opinion, in a private session. Because you do that in a joint session, it's too threatening and people lose face. Not good. For example, simple ways to reality test are just four questions that come out of the meta-model.

'What would happen if you said "yes" to this agreement?' Or, 'What would happen if you said "no" to this agreement?' You're literally forcing them to think about the consequences. You can ask it any other way you like, but essentially if you understand that the creature you're hunting is the consequence. What would happen if is the question.

The funkier way of asking that is actually 'What wouldn't happen if?' Did you see how that messes around with your mind for a moment? For example, Aled, if I said to you, 'What would happen if you gave this person a contract?' Okay? It's

easy for people to process and they usually tell you these are the pros and these are the cons. The next question, 'What wouldn't happen if you gave this person a contract?' It forces you to actually think about the reverse image, almost like the negative image of that.

Interesting enough, sometimes that actually smokes out some interests that you may not get with that first question. It can get a lot more complicated because, 'What would happen if?'

'What wouldn't happen if?'

'What would happen if you didn't?'

'What wouldn't happen if you did.'

So you could actually play around with that. I strongly recommend not doing that when you're driving. It's kind of bad. Smoke comes out their ears and stuff like that.

And you don't have to use all four questions, but essentially, it's a great way to get people to think about the consequences and thinking around the problem.

Aled: Yeah. It makes me think of framing in NLP.

Joel: Absolutely.

Aled: Is that a systemic frame or was that something?

Joel: Actually comes from something else. But let me just quickly speak to frames for a moment. I think NLP has its own sense of framing and I think mediators do that pretty well. We do also single word reframes pretty good. We do our reframing, because that's actually one of the skill sets that mediator trainings actually do focus on a lot of the times, so that's okay.

The four questions that I talk about come from my training in NLP which it teaches them as what he refers to them as 'cartesian coordinates'. If you actually read the Kluwer Mediation Blog. I wrote an article on cartesian coordinates. It's probably easier to read it than for me to actually explain it. But essentially, the idea is that if you think of cartesian coordinates as a sort of graph with four quadrants, you can actually get people to think about a problem by cycling through different quadrants, because there's always an X Y minus X minus Y. Minus X Y or X minus Y.

It's a little bit like what would happen if you did, what would happen if you didn't, what wouldn't happen if you did, what wouldn't happen if you didn't. It's those four things.

The closest thing in many NLP trainings that talk about cartesian coordinates would be what we call sleight of mouth, which is 16 different ways of reframing. I recently tested this out one year ago. I decided I was going to sort of play around and teach this to a group of mediators I know. I made copious notes. I taught it to

them and they loved it and I promptly went and lost the notes. Damn it. I may have to recreate the damn thing at some point.

Sleight of mouth is the closest thing, I think, to cartesian coordinates. Connirae Andreas, who is one of the early students of NLP, you might be familiar with her name, does something called 'reversing presuppositions', which is also very close to cartesian coordinates. You can Google three things, 'cartesian coordinates', which will probably give you the whole lot of maths, maths or science, so maybe don't do that.

Google 'sleight of mouth'. Google 'reversing presuppositions, Connirae Andreas'. You can probably get some interesting readings on that. I can always e-mail contact you so on.

Aled: Wonderful. Listen, Joel, I know you've been really generous with your time so far. We've got maybe a couple of minutes before you have to dash off. Is that right?

Joel: Yeah, well, I think I can stretch it a little bit because I said to you earlier before we started, once you get me started it's a bit hard to stop me. But I will have to disappear probably in about five to ten minutes.

Aled: Okay. All right. There's lots of, and I think we're not even touching the surface of the...

Joel: We could go on forever, but...

Aled: We could go on forever, because what we haven't talked about, and I'd love to talk. Maybe we can do another interview, but I think, I was actually trying to think of how I might say that. In our next interview we can talk about . . .

Joel: Interesting you should say that, Aled, because I'm obviously very susceptible to all your embedded commands. Is the use of language, we can actually talk about the use of, anyway, but we talk about questioning assumptions. But we don't actually talk about the use of presuppositions in language. Maybe that's something we can talk about at a future point.

Just very quickly, a lot of the time every sentence that we say has presuppositions in it, which means that in order for you to understand what I'm saying, you actually have to unconsciously accept the presuppositions.

Let me give you a quick example. I have a friend in New Zealand who used to like asking this question, which is very annoying. He would say, 'Are you still beating your wife?' I know that's very politically incorrect and he usually threw people for a loop because if you think about it, if you said 'Yes', you're in trouble. And if you said 'No', you're still in trouble because the presupposition is that you at some point were beating your wife. It's a wise ass sub-question.

If I say to parties, 'Most people aren't aware that across the wall there is a 70%-75% settlement rate in mediation.' When you say it that way, that there is a settlement rate of 70-75% on average. Because it's that most people don't realise it. You say to them, 'Do you realise that?' So you can use presuppositions in ways that actually support your mediation outcome or what you're trying to get parties to do.

Another example is, I might say, for example, 'I'm not going to guarantee that we will be able to come to a solution immediately. There may be a number of obstacles which we will have to overcome by working together before we agree on a solution.' As you listen to all that I'm presupposing quite a number of things.

I'm presupposing that there will be obstacles, but I'm also presupposing they will work together to overcome them. I'm also presupposing there will be solutions. I'm also presupposing that we will agree on one. Now whether we do or not at the end of the day isn't the point, because if it was that simple then we just do a tape series on this and we'd be rich.

But the idea is that each of these presuppositions will seek one's representations in the mind of the listener that will support as you go along, what your desired outcome of the mediation is. Does that make sense Aled? Am I getting a bit too esoteric?

Aled: No, that makes really good sense. I think that's a really helpful. I talk a lot about, or I explore different ways of conducting the opening session and the mediator's opening statement, and rather than churning out the same old, some old, I think you should make it a really meaningful, empowering . . .

Joel: Yeah. Absolutely.

Aled: . . . narrative. One that, really you are a dealer in hope as a mediator.

Joel: Yes. I like the way you say that.

Aled: And to be able to say, 'Look,' I love that, 'We won't be able to come to, I'm not promising that you'll be able to come to a solution immediately,' embedded in there is, 'It won't happen straight away but it's going to happen.'

'It's likely you'll encounter a number of obstacles. Having said that, I'm confident that you'll have the resources and the willpower and the energy and the tools today to be able to overcome those obstacles. To come up with a range of solutions, then you can decide what you want to do.'

I just think being a bit more thoughtful about what you say that gives people hope on the day.

Joel: I think, as mediators, we are professional communicators, which means that every single thing we say, every single thing we do, including our non-verbals, needs to be purposeful. I mean it's a tall order. I sometimes say to people I work with when I'm training them, I say, 'Listen, if I stop you at any point and I say to you, "What was the purpose of your doing that or saying that?", you need to be able to tell me even if it's bringing it to your consciousness, you must have had a purpose for it. Don't do something by default or not really thinking on it because you're just not thinking about it. Don't be unthinking.'

I think as professional communicators it's part of our responsibility to be purposeful in everything we say and do. Okay, we can sort of relax from time to time because that's incredibly tiring, but most of the time when we are working, I think that's important.

Aled: I was about to say we're just skimming the surface and we haven't even touched on the applications of NLP in business development. Speaking from my own personal experience, trained as an NLP practitioner many years ago when I was just starting my business. I have to say a lot of the concepts and ideas and the structures have really helped me build a successful practice just by being outcomes focused, chunking up, using a lot of these things. There's an entire library of interviews.

Joel: Next time I'll interview you because you clearly have applied it in your own business.

Aled: Maybe, that's an interesting thought. Why don't we maybe do that?

Joel: Well, we do role reversals in mediation, right?

Aled: Yeah. That's a great idea. Finally, before you have to dash off, I want to talk a little bit about the training and learning a little bit more about NLP. Currently, mediation training is, the standard model, is a five day mediation training. I do know in Singapore what the typical NLP . . .

Joel: It's five days for an accreditation.

Aled: Is it five days for an accreditation? In the U.K. they run 20 day accreditation programmes and that's the standard model for an NLP accreditation.

Joel: Right. I'm sorry. What I meant is for a mediation in Singapore it's a five day seminar.

Aled: I like what you say about 'we are professional communicators'. I think for us to really be professional and really cultivate this skill, I'd like to see mediation training incorporate a lot more of the concepts and ideas of NLP into mediation. Tell me a little bit more about the training that you do and how you've integrated that into the training.

Joel: It would be great if you had a lot of time to integrate every single thing from NLP into mediation training. But there are always commercial realities. Two contexts. One context is the university context where I run negotiation and mediation workshops and the focus of those workshops are training workshops. They're not academic courses where we only discuss some theory. The goal is to actually have students leave with some skill.

I'm happy to report, for example, that some of my students who leave the mediation workshop go on to take the accreditation at the Singapore Mediation Centre and pass on the first go. Simply because they've learned the skills, they've learned the theory and it works very well for them.

In those courses, I generally incorporate a little bit of rapport building. A little bit of the presuppositions, the communications, those same things that we've talked about. For mediation specifically, I incorporate the meta-model because you get questioned. In negotiation specifically I incorporate presuppositions of language simply because there's a little bit more precisions of aspect.

I could easily put the other component in the other course, it's just that there isn't enough time in self-academics [sounds like 00:52:40] and that stuff. So that's the context of the university.

In the context of trainings run by the Singapore Mediation Centre, of which I'm one of the trainers, it's not a standard part of their training yet. But from time to time when I run the advanced mediation training, which is a three day course, I occasionally will introduce NLP, like rapport, like presuppositions, like the meta-model.

As I mentioned earlier, late last year I introduced a little bit of the sleight of mouth, of which the secret now, is completely lost because God knows where that notebook went. So that's that context, but we don't incorporate that as something that's a standard sort of thing. The difficulty of course is that there are very few NLP-trained people in Singapore who are also in this field. So very few people feel that they can teach the NLP components in the SMC trainings, which I understand.

So that's one aspect that I think you can incorporate. If you ask me sit down and think about every single thing NLP that we could use, I think there's a lot. I think there are confidence building exercises that mediators could use. There are subtle things, like anchoring, that mediators could use, which gets a little bit more to the dark side.

So there's all those things that it's entirely possible to use. I think commercial reality is it basically means you could not, because then you'd be running an NLP course that has an application for mediation, as opposed to a mediation course where we are teaching a little bit of NLP.

The other thing I would say is NLP has tremendous benefits I think to any trainer, because a lot of the time when we train, we tend to train content, as well. I'm a certified NLP trainer, which basically means that I've gone through ten days or fourteen days, I don't remember now. It was a long, long training period of trainers' training, where we actually practiced, we actually trained how to train.

There were regular exercises as to how to set up the stage, in a sense, of positionings that we would stand, body gestures that communicate things a certain way. How to create metaphors, how to do demonstrations. That kind of stuff. Which has been tremendously helpful to me as a teacher and a trainer, but which I know that many trainers don't have the benefit of. Many trainers, some of whom are very excellent, are excellent because that's who they are. It's not that they trained to do that, it's just, they were born that way.

But there are many trainers who have the potential to be very excellent, but they haven't had the chance to attend that type of ten or fourteen day course. I think that has a lot to contribute, as well.

Aled: Joel, listen, this has been a really, really enjoyable interview. We can talk...

Joel: It's incredible for me, as well.

Aled: I could take hours. Are there any particular recommended readings for anyone watching? First of all, how can they find out more about your work, because I know you've written extensively on this subject? I know you write on the blog of Kluwer Mediation Blog. Where else can they find out more about this?

Joel: Well, the Kluwer Mediation Blog is really where I've written a lot about NLP and mediation. I wrote an article years ago in a journal called 'The Law Teacher' [sounds like 00:56:14], which is an English publication on using NLP for conflict resolution. Teaching NLP for conflict resolution. I'm pretty sure that's not easily available unless you can access the Law Library somewhere.

There is an article in the 'ADR Journal' which is 'Australasian Dispute Resolution Journal' where I talk about using the meta-model in mediation. So those are places that you could find publications.

I've been meaning to write, actually, a book. It's one of my dreams I'll never get around to it. I haven't set an outcome, damn it, on a neurolinguistic tool box for conflict resolvers.

Aled: I think you've got to do that. I don't think there's anything out there. You've got to do that.

Joel: It'd be fun to do, I just need to find the time and that's a little bit of positive . . . [sounds like 00:57:09]. So those are places you can look at specifically. If you

Googled NLP, for example, there'd be all kinds of NLP stuff on the web. One good introductory book to NLP, in general, there's something called, 'Introducing NLP. It's written by two Englishmen, Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour. It's a good introduction in NLP. It sets things up very logically and sequentially.

It's something you sort of pick up. I believe, was it Ian McDermott, may have written a book called 'Principles of NLP.' That's a valuable book, too, as a starting text. Just a word of warning. There are lots written out there. I used to read every book on NLP but I can't now because it's third generation, fourth generations, there's many books out there. So it's a little bit harder now to separate good books from the not so good ones.

Sometimes it's feels like you're reading books that are just repeating what everyone else is repeating. But I think there are some very good ones out there. They're good NLP trainers out there, if you're interested in taking up NLP training. Websites are websites. Start on the Internet. You should always read with a pinch of salt. There's some very good and cohesive websites out there. So plenty of places to get information, it's just trying to figure out which information is the more useful.

Aled: Brilliant. Joel, I want to say a huge thank you for your time, and I really appreciate it. I look forward to the next interview.

Joel: Yeah. Whether it's you interviewing me or me interviewing you, right?

Aled: Yeah, definitely.

Joel: It's been a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Aled: Thank you, Joel. All the very best.