

Facilitating Knowledge and Learning Capabilities through Neuro-linguistic Programming

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Abstract: Knowledge and learning capabilities assist organizations to recognize and assimilate new information, apply it toward new ends, and are a continuous genesis of creation and recreation where gestalts and logical structures are added or deleted from organizational memory. Accordingly, organizations that have a high level of knowledge and learning capabilities are potentially more innovative and adaptive as they are able to build on and generate new knowledge, which is crucial for strategic renewal. The management of knowledge and learning capabilities becomes critical if organizations are to become and remain competitive. One method for facilitating knowledge and learning capabilities is through neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). The NLP model suggests that subjective experience is encoded in terms of three main representation systems: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (VAK). NLP Practitioners argue that individuals prefer one representation system over another in a given context: the visual system includes external images, as well as remembered or constructed internal mental images; the auditory system includes external sounds and remembered or contrived internal sounds and the internal dialogue (i.e., a person talking to themselves on the inside); and the kinesthetic system includes tactile sensations caused by external forces acting on the body and emotional responses. There is a dearth of research conducted using the NLP approach in facilitating knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations. Accordingly, this paper critically reviews the literature and argues that since NLP may be used to facilitate knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations. We provide examples to illustrate the benefits of utilizing NLP in developing knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations. Future research direction and limitations will also be discussed.

Keywords: Knowledge and Learning Capabilities, Neuro-linguistic Programming, Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic Systems

Introduction

KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING are two different and yet closely related elements in the concept of organizational learning (Pemberton and Stonehouse, 2000). Knowledge originates in human beings and can only be created by humans but not by organizations (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Watson, et al., 2005). Organizations that are able to effectively utilize accumulated tacit and firm-specific knowledge are more likely to coordinate and combine their traditional resources and capabilities in innovative and distinctive ways, providing more value for their customers than their competitors (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997). However, knowledge is a static resource—a so-called ‘stock’ (Bontis, 2002). It requires a dynamic catalyst which helps to cultivate the level of knowledge stocks in organizations. From our perspective, learning can act as such a catalyst.

Learning occurs in different ways including studying, interacting, and practicing (Boal and Hooijberg, 2000). These ways of learning result in changes in ‘know-what’, ‘know-

how', 'know-why' and 'care-why' respectively (Garud, 1997). Like its knowledge counterpart, learning firstly takes place at an individual level but it can then extend to group and organizational levels (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel, 1998). To maximize the effect, individual, group and organizational learning processes need to be aligned with one another in a coherent way so that culture, systems, structures, and procedures can support the strategic orientation of an organization (Crossan, Lane and White, 1999; Vera and Crossan, 2004).

Organizations that develop dynamic and unique knowledge and learning capabilities may create new knowledge on an ongoing basis that potentially underpins continuous organizational knowledge, learning and memory (Tsoukas and Mylonopoulos, 2004). Knowledge and learning capabilities can occur at individual, group and organizational levels and assist organizations to recognize new information, assimilate it, and apply it toward new ends, and are a continuous genesis of creation and recreation where gestalts and logical structures are added or deleted from organizational memory (Boal and Hooijberg, 2000). Accordingly, it is important for organizations to facilitate the development of knowledge and learning capabilities for innovation in the knowledge economy. One possible way of facilitating organizational knowledge and learning capabilities is through neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

According to Bandler and Grinder (1979), NLP denotes the view that a person is a whole mind-body system with patterned connections between internal experience (neuro), language (linguistic), and behavior (programming) (Tosey, Mathison and Michelli, 2005). Although NLP has been examined across a number of fields, very little research has been conducted that provides a clearer understanding of the application of NLP in organizational knowledge, learning and memory. The study conducted by Tosey et al. (2005), for example, examined the relationships between NLP and management learning. However, their approach was primarily employing NLP as an analytical method to identify linguistic differences in interviews through a longitudinal case study. Nevertheless, Tosey et al. (2005) have demonstrated that NLP is a structured and systematic means of mapping subjective experience and constructed reality of people experiencing transformative learning and knowledge development (Linder-Pelz and Hall, 2007).

As very little reliable data on the subject has been made available for the current investigation, a critical analysis of the relevant literature is adopted which can provide a cogent and comprehensive perspective on the theoretical and practical aspects of whether NLP can help in facilitating knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations. Bourguignon et al. (2004) argue that a literature-based analysis helps to increase the level of clarity and precision of a concept, which is a necessity if we are to understand the constitutive use of NLP in developing knowledge and learning capabilities in the organizational context. Since the findings revealed from the analysis are representative of the current state and progress of the field, this study provides an insight for human resource strategy scholars and practitioners. This literature-based analysis is a tentative step towards understanding the application of NLP in enhancing knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations. This is essential because it helps to present a call for further conceptualization and future empirical examination to gain more validity (Serenko, Bontis and Grant, 2009).

The paper aims to provide a better understanding of NLP, and its application on individual, group and organizational knowledge and learning. Also, it aims to extend the academic literature on NLP, dispel some myths about NLP and connotations individuals may already have with the approach. After critically reviewing the literature, the paper argues that since NLP primarily focuses on the development of knowledge and learning, it may be used as a

conceptual framework to nurture organizational knowledge and learning capabilities. Examples will be used in the paper to illustrate the possible benefits of utilizing NLP in developing the capabilities in organizations. Future research direction and limitations will also be discussed.

Knowledge and Learning Capabilities

The study of the firm's resources and capabilities as the foundation for organizational strategy has emerged in the recent years, especially from the resource based theory of the firm which emphasizes resources that are rare, valuable, costly to imitate and non-substitutable can be utilized as a source of differentiation between firms (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1995). The development of strategic management thought, at least to some extent, has been influenced by the significance of the economic role of 'knowledge' (Kong, 2008). As valuable, rare, and inimitable resources are usually intangible and implicit in nature, value creation is increasingly dependent on the knowledge, notably tacit knowledge, that an organization possesses (Kaplan and Norton, 2001). The importance of knowledge is emphasized in knowledge-based views of firms (Spender, 1996).

Knowledge has become a dominant theme in the strategic management literature, because it is a meaningful resource for organizations, and also a critical source of sustained competitive advantage (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001; Michalisin, Smith and Kline, 1997). Quinn, Anderson, and Finkelstein (1996) postulate that most organizational value, whether financial or non-financial, is created by the competent members of an organization who 'know-what', 'know-how', 'know-why' and 'care-why' and the competent members can be anyone from the top to the bottom levels of the organization. An organization's ability to innovate, create and use the entrepreneurial energies of its people becomes critical in the knowledge economy (Bhatnagar, 2006). This ability is fundamental for organizational strategic renewal and yet, is firm-specific knowledge. Thus, organizations that are able to effectively utilize tacit and firm-specific knowledge are more likely to coordinate and combine their traditional resources and capabilities in innovative and distinctive ways, providing more value for their customers than their competitors (Teece et al., 1997). Learning acts as a dynamic element which helps to facilitate the level of knowledge stocks in organizations.

Learning occurs in our day-to-day lives (Boal and Hooijberg, 2000) and changes our 'know-what', 'know-how', 'know-why' and 'care-why' respectively (Garud, 1997). Learning can take place across individual, group and organizational levels. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998, p.212) studied the learning process embedded in Crossan, Lane, and White's (1999) organizational learning framework and summarized:

Intuiting is a subconscious process that occurs at the level of the individual. It is the start of learning and must happen in a single mind. Interpreting then picks up on the conscious elements of this individual learning and shares it at the group level. Integrating follows to change collective understanding at the group level and bridges to the level of the whole organization. Finally, institutionalizing incorporates that learning across the organization by imbedding it in its systems, structures, routines, and practices.

Accordingly, learning, like knowledge, firstly takes place at the individual level and extends to group and organizational levels. Tsoukas and Mylonopoulos (2004) argue that organizations that embrace dynamic and unique capabilities allowing them to create knowledge and develop

learning on an ongoing basis likely underpin continuous organizational learning. These capabilities can be defined as knowledge and learning capabilities, which are distributed throughout an organization and thus can occur at individual, group and organizational levels.

Knowledge and learning capabilities assist organizations to recognize new information, assimilate it, apply it toward new ends, and are a continuous genesis of creation and recreation where gestalts and logical structures are added or deleted from organizational memory (Boal and Hooijberg, 2000). The capabilities often involve processes used offensively and defensively to improve fits between an organization and its changing environments (Boal and Hooijberg, 2000). Accordingly, organizations that have a high level of knowledge and learning capabilities are likely to be more innovative as they are able to build on previous knowledge and generate new knowledge constantly, which involves a great deal of learning and is often crucial for strategic renewal (Chaturvedi and Chataway, 2006; Crossan and Apaydin, 2010). The environment for most organizations today is global, complex, dynamic, highly competitive, and extremely volatile (Tarique and Schuler, 2010). Knowledge and learning capabilities must be developed strategically if the growth and competitiveness of a firm is to be sustainable. However, the capabilities will only become effective if the learning processes across the individual, group and organizational levels are aligned with one another; as well as with the culture, systems, structures, and procedures within an organization (Crossan et al., 1999; Vera and Crossan, 2004). One possible way of facilitating knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations is through neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP)

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) emerged in the 1970's from the University of California, USA. Richard Bandler and John Grinder, the original developers of NLP, were involved in mathematics and linguistics (Carter, 2001). Much of what Bandler and Grinder (1979) identified and developed was based on the work of well-known linguistics experts and since then the term 'neuro-linguistic' has been widely used (Yemm, 2006). As described by Linder-Pelz and Hall (2007), '[t]he 'neuro' refers to the way humans experience the world through their senses and translate sensory experiences into thought processes, both conscious and unconscious, which in turn activate the neurological system; 'linguistic' refers to the way we use language to make sense of the world, capture and conceptualize experience and then communicate that experience to others; and 'programming' addresses the way people code (mentally represent) their experience and adopt regular and systematic patterns of response'. Thus, the title, NLP, broadly denotes the view that a person is a whole mind-body system with patterned connections between internal experience (neuro), language (linguistic), and behavior (programming) (Tosey et al., 2005).

NLP began as a means of studying how people process information, construct meaning schemas, and perform skills to achieve results (Tosey and Mathison, 2008). Bandler and Grinder (1979) wanted to study individuals who were high achievers, identify the specific elements that these people undertook to achieve excellence, and then teach or impart these elements to others in order to improve their performance. As described by Dilts (1998, p.30), '[t]he objective of the NLP modeling process is not to end up with the one 'right' or 'true' description of a particular person's thinking process, but rather to make an instrumental map that allows us to apply the strategies that we have modeled in some useful way'. Thus, NLP

aims to replicate what works and allows others to find evidence within its practices of an eclectic approach that draws from (among other things) cognitive-behavioral approaches, gestalt therapy, hypnotherapy, family therapy, and brief therapy (Tosey and Mathison, 2008). The principle of NLP is to make human capabilities available for others to learn (Tosey and Mathison, 2010). In short, NLP is ‘a set of guiding principles, attitudes and techniques that enable [individuals] to change behavior patterns as [they] wish’ (Yemm, 2006, p.13).

The NLP approach is interested in how people construct their experiences through cognitive processes, rather than in seeking causal explanations in the past for why they experience the world as they do, or in the contents of a particular experience (Tosey and Mathison, 2008). Thus, the NLP method of communication is a useful approach for individuals as it allows them to codify and respond appropriately to their own and other people’s experience (Linder-Pelz and Hall, 2007). In other words, NLP can be used as an approach to human communications that combines cognitive theory, split-brain processing, and sensory perception (Wood, 2006), which are important elements in the organizational learning processes for knowledge creation.

The NLP approach suggests that subjective experience is encoded in three sensory representation systems namely: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (Davis and Davis, 1991). Sadowski Jr. and Stanney (2002) describe that the visual system includes external images, as well as remembered or constructed internal mental images; the auditory system contains external sounds and remembered or contrived internal sounds and the internal dialogue (i.e., a person talking to themselves on the inside); and, finally, the kinesthetic system comprises tactile sensations caused by external forces acting on the body and emotional responses. Practitioners of NLP claim that people tend to have one preferred representation system over another in a given context (Ghacmi and Janvier, 2004). According to Bandler and Macdonald (1988), each of the NLP sensory representations can be broken down more finely as ‘sub-modalities’. These sub-modalities are the building blocks of thought patterns, that is how each inner sense is composed (Alder, 1992). For instance, individuals with different representational systems may use different sub-modalities to describe their inner experiences towards the same object or event. Table 1 below shows examples of sub-modalities of NLP representation systems when individuals are describing their experience of a location:

Table 1: NLP Representational Systems and Associated Sub-Modality Distinctions (Adapted from Tosey and Mathison, 2010)

Representation systems	Visual	Auditory	Kinesthetic
Sub-modalities in VAK representational systems to describe experience of ‘location’	Size Distance Brightness Focus Colors (or monochrome) Frame Motion	Volume Pitch Tempo Rhythm Intensity Motion	Temperature Pressure Intensity Scope

As shown in Table 1, a person with ‘visual’ representation system is likely to focus more on particular set of sub-modalities such as size, colors, and the degree of lights to describe

their inner experience towards a location. The same location is possibly described differently by another person who has a different preferred representation system.

NLP provides a visual, auditory and kinesthetic framework for individuals to become aware of the distinctions of their representation systems as well as the others (Tosey and Mathison, 2010). Tosey and Mathison (2003) argue that how people use their senses internally, and the kinds of internal representations they create, are believed to be unique to every individual. NLP concentrates on how human beings go about making sense of their experience and interacting with others (Pollitt, 2010). Techniques in NLP involve the study of language patterns, patterns of motivation, how rapport is built, and how individuals code data (Thompson, Courtney and Dickson, 2002). NLP is often used to help its users—whether they are therapists, salespersons, or teachers—more quickly gain rapport with their subjects (Taler, 1991).

One presupposition that NLP has is that people act according to the way they understand and represent the world, not according to the way the world is (Tosey and Mathison, 2003). Skills, beliefs and behaviors are all learnt, and consist of sequences of representations, therefore change and learning can be achieved through modifying representations and sequences (Tosey and Mathison, 2003). Tosey and Mathison (2003) argue that NLP is firmly systemic, or cybernetic, emphasizing on the way people create, act according to, and can change and reconstruct, their own 'maps of the world'. The creation, action, change and reconstruction of such maps, according to Tosey and Mathison (2003), become central to NLP's potential relevance to learning theory and the processes of education. Pollitt (2010) studied the use of NLP in Metronet Rail BCV Limited, a company which was responsible for the maintenance and renewal of London Underground Bakerloo, Central, Victoria and Waterloo and City lines. They argued that the NLP approach subsequently became a vehicle to drive and support the learning and development team, other colleagues and customers through Metronet's integration into the London mayor's transport organization, Transport for London.

As described by Tosey and Mathison (2008, p.5), NLP 'aims to identify what is distinctive about the strategies of exemplars in a given skill, including internal cognitive as well as behavioral elements, such that other people can learn to perform the same skill'. Indeed, learning is often emphasized in NLP as the key to personal change and development (Tosey and Mathison, 2008). According to Dilts and DeLozier (2000), NLP espouses underlying epistemological principles, concerning the processes through which people perceive, know and learn. As knowledge development is primarily internal learning and NLP mainly focuses on individual internal learning to improve self-awareness and develop greater skills in self-management, communication and interpersonal dealings (Thompson et al., 2002; Yemm, 2006), it may be used as a practical approach to develop knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations. Unlike other NLP studies that focus on techniques and modeling, this paper examines how NLP may be applied as a set of strategies for developing the dynamic capabilities in organizations. An analysis of the relevant literature identified a number of issues in relation to the usefulness and limitations of NLP in facilitating knowledge and learning capabilities in the organizational context, and these will be discussed in the following section.

Facilitating Knowledge and Learning Capabilities through NLP

As highlighted earlier, NLP has a primarily focus on learning, and learning is the first step to acquiring knowledge, especially tacit knowledge. Accordingly, NLP has a sound ground in facilitating organizational knowledge, learning and memory. According to Bandler and Grinder (1979), people tended to favor one of three NLP representation systems to receive or access information. The following examples given by Taler (1991, p.49) illustrate how individuals utilize NLP representation systems to receive or access information:

People who are visual will tend to use language revealing this preference, such as 'I see what you mean' or 'That is not clear'. One whose presence is auditory will say 'I hear you or that sounds right'. The subject favoring kinesthetic will say 'I'm in touch with you' or 'I just don't grasp it'. A practitioner [or well trained organizational member] who listens well will be able to determine the subject's identified representational system and respond in a similar representational system in order to gain the subject's confidence.

With the above examples in mind, a person's knowledge, skills and experiences will be developed more effectively if information is gathered and processed through his or her preferred representative system during experience sharing and interpersonal interaction (Lavan, 2002). This means that, for instance, a person with a visual representative system will most likely learn much more effectively through pictures, diagrams and other visual form of presentation. However, when information is presented to the person through other representative systems (i.e. auditory and kinesthetic), learning will become less effective as it may take a much long time for the person to process the information gathered.

Alder (1992) argued that there was no failure, but only feedback in the NLP approach. This means that if something did not go as planned, one has simply learned the results and then changed his or her behaviors accordingly in order to reach the desired outcome. In other words, when a person is presented with information that does not match with the person's preferred representative system, the person will seek ways to transform the information making it easier for the person to process and learn. It is this self learning ability that actually increases effectiveness over time as an upward spiral of self-development and personal achievement is set in motion (Alder, 1992). Accordingly, NLP allows continuous learning to occur in organizational members as they can use information and feedback to improve what they are doing.

More importantly, as the learning in NLP is focused on experience, skills and tacit knowledge, if organizational members know and use the techniques that match their preferred ways of learning, they may learn more easily, quickly and naturally. This also applies to groups and an entire organization when members of the organization utilize the NLP approach to interact with each other. Since it is more natural for the organizational members to learn, it becomes easier for them to develop, internalize and utilize new knowledge that may create value for their units, divisions or even the entire organization. This is because when organizational members apply the NLP learning approach to interact with each other, group and organizational learning begins to emerge. In other words, NLP motivates organizational members to acquire knowledge through an enjoyable, successful and satisfying experience.

Figure 1 below illustrates the relationships between NLP representation systems, learning processes and knowledge creation.

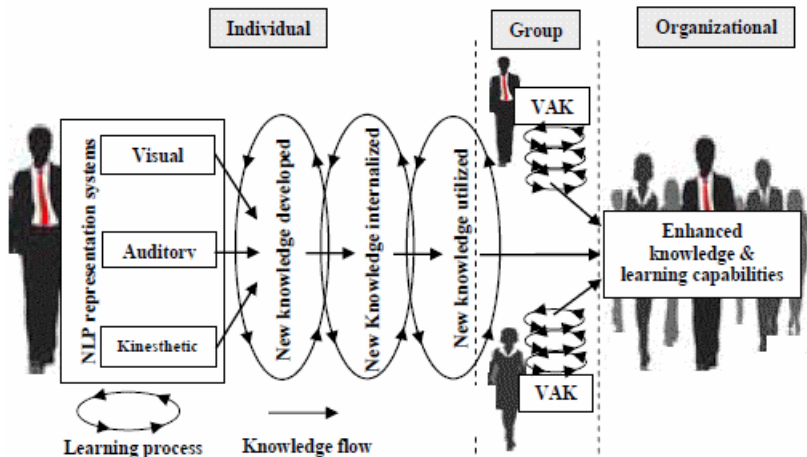


Figure 1: NLP Representational Systems, Learning Processes and Knowledge Creation

As can be seen from Figure 1 above, an organizational member learns his perceived world through NLP representation systems, whether it is visual, auditory or kinesthetic. New knowledge is developed, which will then be internalized and/or utilized. Theoretically, when other organizational members utilize NLP to learn and interact with each other, more new knowledge are developed, internalized and utilized, which creates group and organizational values.

Despite these promising arguments from the literature, there is a potential problem with NLP when it is applied in facilitating organizational knowledge creation and learning development. Techniques in NLP involve the study of language patterns, patterns of motivation, how rapport is built, and how individuals code data (Thompson et al., 2002). Indeed, NLP concentrates on how an individual makes sense of his or her experience and interacting with others (Pollitt, 2010). In other words, there is an in-built mechanism in NLP that allows interactions between organizational members to occur and tacit knowledge, skills and experience to be shared. However, such in-built mechanism is not explicitly shown in the NLP approach in order to encourage members in an organization to interact and share experience, skills and knowledge with each other. As Tosey and Mathison (2003) argue, ‘NLP in our experience concentrates on the intrapersonal, intrapsychic processes of reality construction. It attends little, if at all, to the social context and intersubjectivity. If it is a learning theory, it is one that emphasizes individual rather than social learning’. As highlighted earlier, having organizational members to develop, internalize and utilize knowledge individually is not sufficient for nurturing knowledge and learning. It is the cumulative tacit knowledge along with all other human resource elements that create most value to organizations. As already argued, to allow knowledge and learning capabilities to be fully effective, the learning processes across the individual, group and organizational levels must be aligned with one another; as well as with the culture, systems, structures, and procedures within an organization (Crossan et al., 1999; Vera and Crossan, 2004). Accordingly, for NLP to be effective in facilitating

organizational knowledge and learning capabilities, top management teams must have a very clear idea of what they are attempting to achieve. Intensive NLP training provided to all members in is likely to be required. Top management teams need to cultivate a learning culture so that knowledge sharing becomes an organizational norm. External consultations and professional NLP trainers may need to be brought in to emphasize the importance of sharing and creating knowledge for the organization. Only through the NLP approach and active interpersonal interactions allow the level of knowledge and learning capabilities to increase dramatically. More research is needed to reveal what strategies are required to develop knowledge and learning capabilities through NLP in organizations.

Conclusion

NLP has endured for more than thirty years. As background on our own position and perspective, this paper is based on the discipline of knowledge management and organizational learning. It is our intention that this paper has enhanced understanding of NLP and its potential for organizational knowledge, learning and memory through scholarly enquiry. As the literature suggests, NLP aims to develop individuals' skills in relation to other people, by improving understanding of their thought processes, behaviors and language (Pollitt, 2010). NLP may help individuals to develop skills, knowledge and confidence, which not only improves professional lives, but also generalizes into improving areas of their personal lives (Lavan, 2002). It is a field of practice and innovation with a wide range of tools and techniques that learners and professional trainers can apply within both formal and informal learning settings (Tosey and Mathison, 2008). Based upon the preceding discussion we argue that the NLP approach facilitates knowledge and learning capabilities in organizations. However, the in-built mechanism in NLP that allows interactions between organizational members to occur and tacit knowledge, skills and experience to be shared is not explicitly shown in the NLP approach. Accordingly, leaders and managers must ensure that learning processes occur in individual, group and organizational levels and the processes must be aligned with the culture, systems, structures, and procedures within the organization. We strongly encourage further research on strategies that foster the development of knowledge and learning capabilities.

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