

# NLP

## Practitioner Course

**Module 8 – Meta Programs**

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# Module 8 - Meta Programs

## *What Are Meta Programs?*

Meta Programs are one of the sets of filters we use to create our map of the world. They run 'in the background', so we are usually not consciously aware of them. They drive:

- what we pay attention to
- what we respond to
- what motivates us
- how we interact with the people around us
- the kind of language that will influence us

As the name implies, Meta Programs are at a different logical level to our other mental 'programs' such as strategies. They influence the type of information fed into our strategies, the goals we set for ourselves, the way we make decisions, and the motivation behind our strategies.

## *History of Meta Programs*

The term 'metaprogramming' first appeared in John C Lilly's book *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Computer* (1968). Lilly presented the human nervous system as a biological computer, running 'programs' either hard-wired or learned. 'Metaprogramming' is changing the central control system so that we can learn more quickly and select more useful programs.

Richard Bandler introduced meta programs to NLP in the late 70s as a way that people maintained coherency in their cognitive patterns.

Leslie Cameron-Bandler and others investigated further, using the Meta Model to identify a list of Meta Program patterns for use in therapy which eventually grew to around 60. One of her students, Rodger Bailey, simplified the model into 14 patterns for use in a business context - the LAB Profile (Language and Behaviour patterns) as set out in Shelle Rose Charvet's excellent *Words That Change Minds*.

James and Woodsmall's 'Time Line Therapy and The Basis Of Personality' presents a similar simplified set of patterns, and links them to Jungian personality characteristics as used in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

**Note:** you will also see meta programs written as 'metaprograms' or, in the UK, 'metaprogrammes'. This last is a misnomer - 'programs' is a metaphor drawn from the IT industry, which even in the UK uses the US spelling of 'programs'.

## ***What Meta Programs Are Not***

**A way of putting people into boxes** at the Identity level! They may be influenced by context and the person's emotional state.

**Either/or** - instead, each meta program is like a spectrum and most people will be somewhere between the extreme ends

**Absolute.** Meta programs are context-dependent - for example, people tend to be more detail-focused about subjects that interest them.

## ***Five reasons you need to know about Meta Programs***

**Achieving rapport:** meta programs are another thing you can match to help people feel at ease with you.

**Self-awareness:** if you are aware of your own meta program preferences, you will have a better idea about activities and career paths that allow you to play to your strengths.

**Recruitment:** every job has an ideal meta program profile. If you recruit people to match that profile, they will perform better in that role. You can even write job ads in a way that will attract the people you want, and put off the people that won't be suited to the job.

**Influencing:** you can use language that suits people's meta programs to influence them and communicate with them in the way that it is easiest for them to understand.

**Managing change:** describing changes in a way that is compatible with people's meta program profiles will make it easier for them to accept and feel enthusiastic about changes, and avoid triggering knee-jerk resistance.

**Sales:** you can help people to reach a buying decision by presenting them with information in the style and sequence that works for their meta program filters.

## ***Detecting Meta Programs***

Depending on the specific meta program, you can detect them from:

The words that people use, the structure of their language patterns, and the way they talk

The way they behave

Their history, for example how frequently they have changed jobs

## Meta Programs in Business

Traditionally, meta programs have been taught at Master Practitioner level. This is to do with the fact that they were discovered later than the 'classic' NLP components like submodalities and anchoring, rather than saying anything about their complexity or level of difficulty.

In fact, Meta Programs are easy to understand, recognise and use - and too useful to leave out of a business-oriented course. This Practitioner course covers six of the most useful meta programs for business, with tips on how to identify them, job roles that different patterns may suit, and advice on how to influence and manage them.

(see also the Convincer Channel and Convincer Mode in the Strategies Section - these are also classed as meta programs but it's more useful to cover them under buying strategies)

## Towards/Away From

(also known as 'Direction Filter' or 'Motivation Direction')

Are you motivated towards goals, targets and what you desire, or away from problems and difficulties?

Extreme 'Towards' people will be gung-ho, and will overlook potential problems that can trip them up - think 'invasion of Iraq' or stock market booms.

People who are very 'Away-From' will be perceived as fault-finding and overly negative or cynical by their colleagues, and will lack direction unless given a problem to solve or a crisis to fix.

They also will run out of motivation the further away they get from what they wanted to avoid - so they might never lose that last 8 pounds, or get close to their professed goals but let them slide before they finally attain them.

Like all meta programs, this one is context-dependent. You may find that someone is strongly 'Towards' or strongly 'Away-From' in almost all contexts that you ask about.

## *Identifying the Towards/Away From pattern*

Ask "What do you want in a job?" (or car, or relationship, or house). This will start to give you the person's values. For each value, you can ask "Why is that important to you?"

The answers will be either towards, away-from, or a mixture. Some values may be more towards or away-from than others.

Keep asking "Why is that important to you?" - at least three times. The initial answer is likely to be coloured by the prevailing culture - e.g. in the US you are likely to get a 'towards' answer - so you need to go a bit deeper to find the person's real pattern.

## Towards

**Language:** talking about what they want, what they would like to see, what they can get, achieve, benefits.

**Body language:** nodding, gestures indicating the vision they are moving towards, 'inclusive' gestures

## Away-From

**Language:** what to avoid, 'yes but', problems (including solving problems), pitfalls, avoiding, removing, "hang on a minute", comparative deletions, modal operators of impossibility, referring to target dates as 'deadlines'.

**Body language:** dismissive or 'warding off' gestures, shaking head

Look out for 'concealed away-froms' in language patterns - the away-from is not explicitly mentioned but it's there in the person's internal representations:

1. Comparative deletions e.g. "It's better to have money". Better than what?
2. Modal operators of necessity e.g. "You've got to have money, haven't you?" What happens if you don't?

## Job role examples

A "Towards" pattern is useful in: visionary leaders, entrepreneurs, creatives, ideas people. It's often found in change agents, coaches, and NLP Practitioners.

An "Away-from" pattern is useful in: health and safety officers, process control, proof-reading, maintenance engineers. Often found in medicine, pharmacy, solicitors, accountants, civil service.

## ***Influencing and managing***

**Towards:** this is what we can achieve, this is what it will get you, benefits, results, achievement, winning, advantages, what you can have, just think about it!

If you are an extreme 'Towards' person, you may want to look at the massive benefits of doing an occasional 'minesweep' to make sure the route to your goals stays clear of potential problems.

**Away-From:** solve the problem, fix it, avoid, sort out, eliminate, this is what will happen unless we..., these will be the consequences if we don't do it.

If there are no immediate problems to motivate the Away-From person, ask them to look into the future to see the problems that will occur if they don't take action now.

Advertisements for cleaning products often use a lot of away-from imagery.

## ***General/Specific***

(also known as 'Chunk Size Filter' or 'Scope')

What level or chunk size of information are you comfortable with - the big picture or the details?

This meta program is about which levels of the 'Hierarchy of Ideas' the person is comfortable operating with.

A person at the 'General' end of the spectrum will think in terms of abstract concepts and generalisations rather than specific details.

When faced with too much detail they will feel overwhelmed or bored.

A person at the 'Specific' end of the spectrum will feel more comfortable with facts, details and step-by-step sequences. Abstractions, and the big picture on its own, will feel vague and nebulous without more details and specific examples.

## ***Identifying the General/Specific pattern***

This pattern will come out in any general conversation. For an example, you could ask the person what they are currently working on, or how their day has been.

The 'Specific' person's answer will be in the form of a step-by-step narrative with lots of specific detail. They will use lots of qualifiers (adjectives and adverbs). If you interrupt them, they may start at the beginning again, or else re-start where they left off.

The 'General' person's answer will be shorter, in the form of a summary. It may not be in a temporal sequence, but will aim to give you what the speaker sees as the most important aspects first. This may seem like a random order to the listener.

## ***Job role examples***

Generally speaking, the higher level of abstraction a person can handle, the higher they can go in an organisational hierarchy (the upper ranks of the army are even called 'generals'). The ability to think strategically - in other words, to be able to work with high levels of abstraction - is usually essential for board-level roles. Having said that, people need to be able to handle details to perform well at lower levels on their way up.

A detail focus is needed for: quality control, proofreading, health and safety, bookkeeping

A big picture focus is needed for: leadership, creative roles

## ***Influencing and managing***

As with all the meta programs, match where the person is on the spectrum in order to communicate with them. If you need a 'General' person to be more specific, or vice versa, start from where they are and use pacing and leading to help them move up or down the levels of abstraction.

**General:** give the big picture, the overview, 'the real issue is...', 'in a nutshell'. Calibrate to notice if they are getting bored or overwhelmed with detail.

**Specific:** use examples and sequences (first..., second...), give detail, exactly, specifically, precisely. Calibrate to notice if they are looking lost or if what you're saying is going over their head.

Proposals and reports often contain an executive summary (for 'General' readers) and appendices with lots of detail and facts (for 'Specific' readers).

## ***Proactive/Reactive***

(also known as 'Action Filter' or 'Motivation Level')



Do you take the initiative and leap into action, or do you prefer to analyse and wait for others?

'Proactive' people are self-starters, and do not wait for others before they act. They are focused on achieving results and may upset others in their willingness to get there.

'Reactive' people won't act until they have analysed the situation, or until other people prod them into action. Other people may get frustrated with their apparent inactivity.

## ***Identifying the Proactive/Reactive pattern***

This pattern will appear in language structure and body language.

### **Proactive**

**Language:** Short, direct sentences, often with a 'command' tonality on statements or even questions. Active verbs. Active verbs and verb patterns indicating an 'at cause' mentality. Expects to be listened to. A need to act.

**Body language:** Generally fast. Fidgety, pencil-tapping, won't sit still for long periods (you will definitely notice this if you have a strongly 'Proactive' person in a meeting or training course).

### **Reactive**

**Language:** Passive verbs, nominalisations, long sentences that tail off, verb patterns indicating an 'at effect' mentality (things happen to them, others 'make' them do things, lots of modal operators of necessity). Conditional words like 'might', 'could', 'would'. Can have 'question' tonality on statements. A need to understand.

**Body language:** Able to sit still for long periods. May seek lots of eye contact - as if looking to others for approval or checking that they are being listened to.

## ***Job role examples***

A Proactive pattern is useful for: sales people (outgoing sales), business owners, leaders

Proactive people need to be given things to do, otherwise they become bored. If you are recruiting for a role needing a Proactive pattern, you can screen out 'reactives' by requiring applicants to phone.

Don't hire high Proactive people for jobs requiring diplomacy, or where consequences need thinking through.

A Reactive pattern is useful for: support desk, customer service, research and analysis, jobs which include long periods of waiting around.

Reactive people need time to get their heads round a decision, or to check how others feel about it. Don't hire them for roles requiring snap decisions.

Most job roles require a mixture of Proactive and Reactive.

## ***Influencing and managing***

**Proactive:** use words about getting stuff done. 'Just' (as in 'just do it'), make it happen, let's get on with it, jump in, you'll smash it. Or Richard Branson's motto: "Screw it, let's do it." Pace their belief that they make things happen.

If you need to restrain them from jumping straight in, you can say "Just before we...." - the 'just' indicates that the delay will only be very short.

Give Proactive people ways to use their energy. If selling to them, give them a way of taking action or getting results straight away.

If you have a strongly proactive person on a course or in a meeting, make sure the activities or meeting segments are short. Even one Proactive person can disrupt things for others if they get bored and fidgety.

**Reactive:** use words about considering. As you consider, you could, we might, take as long as you need, circumstances are right, this is what you've been waiting for, everyone's doing it.

Use Cialdini's 'Social Proof' principle by giving examples of other people who have bought the product or are doing what you wanted them to do.

If you want them to act, use wording that implies that they have had a period in which to consider and analyse: now that you've had a chance to think about it, no need to wait any longer.

## **Internal/External**

(also known as 'Frame of Reference Filter' or 'Motivation Source')

This is about how much feedback you consider you need.

The Internally Referenced person has internal standards that they use to assess how well they are doing, regardless of what anyone else says.

The Externally Referenced person actively needs feedback from others to stay motivated and confident that they are doing a good job.

## ***Identifying the Internal/External pattern***

This is a great interview question: simply ask "How do you know when you are doing a good job?"

**Internal:** 'I just know', 'I feel it', 'my experience tells me', 'I decide'. They will refer to their own internal 'evidence'.

**External:** 'My manager/customers/colleagues tell me'.

For people in between the two extremes, you will get a mixture of the two answers, plus reference to objective external evidence e.g. targets hit.

## ***Job role examples***

Internally referenced people are good in back-office positions and those that require independent decision-making: leadership roles, technical specialists, the professions, creative artists.

Externally referenced people are good in any front-line role: customer service, retail, travel, hospitality.

Usually people become more internally-referenced as they spend time in a role and build up a 'database' of reference experiences to base their decisions on.

Ideally, a person in a new role, or coming onto a training course (such as an NLP Practitioner course) will start out externally referenced and gradually become more internally referenced over time. This enables them to take on information in the early stages and become confident in applying what they have learned as they become more experienced.

## ***Influencing and managing***

**Internal:** as you know, only you can decide, you may want to think about, this is just a suggestion, what do you want to have happen?

**External:** people are saying, research shows, they're not happy, this is what you could do, I've noticed that, the boss says.

Externally motivated people need frequent feedback. If they don't get any from their boss, they will become apprehensive as the annual appraisal gets nearer, because they literally will not know how they have been doing. If you are a strongly internally-referenced manager in charge of a strongly 'external' person, do whatever it takes to remember to give them more feedback than you would require yourself.

Externally-referenced people may take information or inquiries about the current state of some task as an instruction to do something about it, even if that's not what the inquirer intended.

Internally motivated people treat instructions from their manager as just more information; they will act as and when they see fit. Ideally, you will allow them to make their own decisions (or think they are making them, hence the use of influencing patterns such as 'only you can decide' - having set out the facts to point to a particular decision - and 'as you know' - before telling them something they don't know).

Find out what motivates the internally-referenced person and see that they get it. Feedback will not have much impact on them.

If you have a strongly internally-referenced person on a training course, you may have to arrange an experience that demonstrates to them that they don't already know everything there is to know about what they are supposed to be learning.

## Sameness/Difference

(also known as 'Relationship Filter' and 'Motivation Decision Factors')

This is about how people react to change and how often they need change. There are four main groupings along the spectrum from Sameness to Difference:

**Sameness:** these people like things to stay the same and dislike or actively resist disruption. According to Rodger Bailey's LAB Profile (the , they will accept a major change every 10 years but only initiate change themselves (e.g. changing jobs) every 15 to 25 years.

**Sameness with Exception:** these people like things to stay the same, but with minor improvements or changes every so often. They like evolution rather than revolution. They need a major change every five to seven years.

**Sameness with Exception and Difference:** these people are comfortable with both large and small changes, as long as the major changes are no more frequent than three to four years.

**Difference:** these people switch jobs, roles or assignments very frequently. They flourish in rapidly changing environments and quickly become bored in the absence of change.

## ***Identifying the Sameness/Difference pattern***

The classic question to identify Sameness/Difference for a given context (remember that as with any meta program, the degree of Sameness/Difference can change depending on the context), is:

"What is the relationship between your work this year and last year?" or "What is the relationship between this job/house/whatever and the previous one?"

These are typical answers you might get from each of the four groupings in the pattern:

**Sameness:** will talk about similarities. "No change really - it's just the same as last year."

**Sameness with Exception:** will talk about similarities, but also mention some changes, often as comparisons. "I'm still doing pretty much the same thing, but I've been given a bit more responsibility and a new team member has joined." They will talk about how they got from there to here.

**Sameness with Exception and Difference:** may mention major changes **and** similarities, as well as using comparisons. "It's changed quite a lot since the merger; we're still expanding, and we're getting better at responding to customer queries."

**Difference:** may not understand the question - "What do you mean, relationship?" Will talk about what's different and new. "It's completely changed - we're in a whole new ballgame." They will talk about how things are now, rather than how things got to be how they are.

## ***Job role examples***

**Sameness:** roles that don't change are increasingly rare in the modern economy. In the past, this pattern would have suited administrative or clerical roles; nowadays, people with a strong 'sameness' pattern are likely to be viewed by managers as impediments to necessary change. Working with traditional crafts or the backwaters of retail may be the last refuges of the 'sameness' person.

**Sameness with Exception:** this is by far the largest category (65% according to Rodger Bailey) - will be comfortable in a role that changes gradually, where they can build on what has gone before.

**Sameness with Exception and Difference:** as for Sameness with Exception, but with the occasional major change as well, either in job role or employer/location.

**Difference:** the classic 'Difference' person is the management consultant, who takes on a new assignment every six months to a year - and gets frustrated when people in the client organizations don't embrace change enthusiastically!

## ***Influencing and Managing***

**Sameness:** as usual, continuity, reliable, similar, the same, tradition, heritage

**Sameness with Exception:** better, evolution, upgrade, development, improvement, the same except for...

**Difference:** revolutionary, new, paradigm shift, disruptor, unique, a whole new ballgame, totally different, new, game-changer

**Sameness with Difference and Exception:** use a combination of elements from the Sameness with Exception and the Difference patterns above.

To help Sameness and Sameness with Exception people to accept necessary changes, present the changes as small, evolutionary improvements that build on the best practice and successes of the past. The enthusiastic language of change advocates - "A revolution in how we do things! This is going to turn the whole business upside down!" - will not resonate with the majority of any workforce outside the high-tech sector.

Instead you can find similarities and parallels between the new system and the old, and present it as basically the same with a few small enhancements, which will enable them to do what they've always done, but a bit easier and better.

Consider involving people in identifying which aspects of the current situation are working well and should be carried forward into the future to allay their fears of change (this is how the change method known as "Appreciative Inquiry" works).

When you are not able to give Difference-oriented people the substantive change they need to stay interested, you can at least change things around by rearranging the office and moving desks every so often.

## Options/Procedures

(also known as 'Reason Filter' or 'Motivation Reason')

This is about how you prefer to do your work. Do you look for alternatives and new ways of doing things, or do you prefer to follow the established procedures? Do you prefer to create new things, or maintain existing ones?

Options people, as the name implies, prefer to keep their options open, sometimes to the point of being reluctant to commit to a decision in case they lose out. Procedures people like to have things settled and know where they stand. They like to complete and finish things.

### *Identifying the Options/Procedures pattern*

Generally the modal operators a person uses will give you a lot of their pattern. Options people use modal operators of possibility ("can", "could") while Procedures people use a lot of modal operators of necessity ("must", "should", "ought", "needed to").

A good question to elicit someone's Options/Procedures pattern is "Why did you choose your current job?" (or house, or car, or whatever context you're eliciting the pattern for).

The **Options** person will use a lot of values in their explanation. They will talk about what they chose to do and why it was important to them.

The **Procedures** person will tell a story about **how** (rather than why) they came to be where they are. They talk about a sequence of events rather than choices, and don't mention their values.

Someone on the midpoint of the scale may tell you a story about how they got there, but also include references to the values or reasons why they made the choices they did.

### *Job role examples*

**Procedures** people like to have instructions to follow and want to do things the right way. So they suit bureaucratic jobs, production environments, procedure-based areas of law like conveyancing, and professions like piloting where safety procedures are important.

Less obviously, sales people need a strong dose of 'Procedures' because success in sales is very largely about following tried and tested procedures, again and again. Franchisees need to be Procedures-oriented because franchises are all about following the instructions in the franchise manual.

**Options** people are reluctant to follow established procedures - deep down they believe there is always a better way of doing things. They get bored before they reach completion.

They are good in roles where creativity is needed - designers and design engineers, management consultants, and entrepreneurs. They would much rather start their own business than buy a franchise.

Some jobs, such as training and teaching, need a balance of Options and Procedures - options to be able to adapt in the moment and come up with creative ways of teaching things, procedures to be able to stick to a successful format or follow statutory procedures where necessary.

Managers also need an Options/Procedures balance to be able to manage staff with either profile.

## ***Influencing and managing***

**Options:** improvements, possibilities, choice, reasons why, these are the options, a couple of alternatives

Find ways to allow Options people to exercise their creativity - get them to look at improvements to procedure or create something new.

**Procedures:** follow the procedure, first... then... and finally..., the right way, do it by the book,  $n$  steps to..., process, methodology

Procedures people do well with clear guidelines where they get to complete the process. Procedures are not just step-by-step sequences - they can also incorporate decision points and loop-backs (as in the TOTE model). The Procedures person can cope with this, as long as the directions for what to do in a particular situation are clear.

The impact of this pattern on selling, in brief: Options people are interested in alternatives, possibilities, and **why** they should buy something; Procedures people are concerned with **how** to use the product or service, and with going through the right steps to buy it.

There is much more about all of these meta programs and several others in Shelle Rose Charvet's very readable book "Words That Change Minds".