
Subtle Skills for Building Rapport Using Neuro-Linguistic Programming in the Interview Room

By VINCENT A. SANDOVAL, M.A., and SUSAN H. ADAMS, M.A.



Mark Hamilton, a seasoned detective, slowly opens the door to the interview room. The witness to the drive-by shooting sits leaning forward in a chair with her head in her hands. Normally, Mark bellows out his introduction to establish immediate control, but not this time. He enters the room without speaking, pulls a chair close to the witness, leans forward, and, in a barely audible voice, slowly begins, "I'm Detective Mark Hamilton...."

Detective Hamilton is using techniques from Neuro-Linguistic Programming, a communication model with a name he might not even recognize. Yet, his years of interviewing have taught him the techniques. To establish rapport with this witness, Detective Hamilton knows that he needs to match her nonverbal behavior, or kinesics, by sitting down and leaning forward. When the witness begins to talk, Detective Hamilton listens carefully to her words and intentionally uses similar language. He also pays close attention to *how* she talks and matches

her paralinguage (speech rate, volume, and pitch). In so doing, Detective Hamilton builds rapport with the witness and, hence, increases his chances of gathering pertinent information during the interview.

Detective Hamilton and other experienced investigators recognize the crucial role that rapport plays in an interview. Derived from the French verb *rapporter* meaning "to bring back," the English word *rapport* refers to a relationship or communication characterized by harmony.¹ With this in mind, the need for rapport applies to all interviews, but especially to those

involving a victim or witness who has experienced physical or psychological abuse. The interviewer's task is similar to that of the clinical psychologist, who must initially develop a personal bond with his client before intimate feelings are shared.² Thus, investigators can enhance their rapport-building skills by examining some practical recommendations derived from the behavior modification technique known as *Neuro-Linguistic Programming*.

UNDERSTANDING NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING

In the early 1970s, John Grinder, an assistant professor of linguistics at the University of California in Santa Cruz, and Richard Bandler, a student of psychology, identified patterns used by successful therapists. They packaged them in a way that could be passed on to

others through a model now known as Neuro-Linguistic Programming, or NLP.³

Neuro-Linguistic Programming embraces three simple concepts. First, the *neuro* part of NLP recognizes the fundamental idea that all human behavior originates from neurological processes, which include seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling. In essence, people experience the world through their senses. Second, they communicate their experiences verbally, through language;⁴ therefore, the *linguistic* part of NLP refers to this use of language to communicate thoughts. Finally, the *programming* aspect of NLP recognizes that individuals choose to organize their ideas and actions to produce results. Each person also decides how to organize these ideas in a specific manner.⁵

The NLP founders theorize that people think differently and that

these differences correspond to individual programming or processing systems. People use their senses outwardly to perceive the world and inwardly to “re-present” this experience to themselves. In NLP, representational systems denote ways people take in, store, and code information in their minds.⁶ These systems pertain to the principal human senses—seeing (visual), hearing (auditory), and feeling (kinesthetic). To a lesser degree, they involve tasting (gustatory) and smelling (olfactory). People constantly see, hear, and feel whatever transpires around them. When individuals relate these experiences to others, they mentally access the sights, sounds, or feelings associated with these experiences and communicate them through their predominant representational system.⁷

BUILDING RAPPORT WITH NLP

Enhancing communication and, hence, building rapport represents the most applicable aspect of NLP to investigators. The ability to communicate effectively and build rapport stands as one of the major contributors to a police officer's success in dealing with the public.⁸ In an interview setting, effective communication involves the interviewer's skill in establishing rapport through specific actions and words, thereby building trust and encouraging the interviewee to provide information.

Others besides successful law enforcement interviewers have found NLP techniques helpful in rapport building. For example,



Special Agent Sandoval is an instructor in the Law Enforcement Communication Unit at the FBI Academy.



Special Agent Adams is an instructor in the Law Enforcement Communication Unit at the FBI Academy.

some medical hypnotists use the concept of “matching” with highly resistant clients.⁹ By simply conforming their nonverbal behavior to that of each client, by using language from the client’s preferred representational system (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic), and by matching the client’s volume, tone, and rate of speech (paralanguage), they often can overcome the client’s reluctance to communicate.

When interviewers intentionally align themselves with a witness or suspect through these matching or mirroring techniques, the interviewee is more inclined to respond to the interviewer and subsequently provide information. As one researcher points out, “people like people who are like themselves.”¹⁰ Once interviewers establish rapport, barriers disappear, trust grows, and an exchange of information follows. To achieve these results, interviewers should match or “mirror” the interviewee’s kinesics, language, and paralanguage.

Building Rapport by Matching Kinesics

Matching another person’s body language or kinesics probably is the easiest and most obvious technique. Kinesic behavior typically includes gestures, posture, and movements of the body, such as the hands, arms, feet, and legs.¹¹ However, a difference exists between mimicry and matching. Interviewers should match another person’s body language with subtlety and caution; otherwise, the person easily could become offended. People who have developed rapport tend to match each other in posture and

gestures. For example, individuals conversing together often adopt the same posture. Like partners in a dance, they respond and mirror each other’s movements with movements of their own, engaging in mutual responsive actions.¹²

Detective Hamilton employs the kinesics aspect of NLP in his interview. When he enters the interview room, he immediately notices the witness’ posture and the position of her hands. He notes that she is leaning forward with her head down. Her posture and the position of her head speak volumes.

“
Once interviewers establish rapport, barriers disappear, trust grows, and an exchange of information follows.
”

As Detective Hamilton introduces himself, he pulls his chair close to the witness and, just like her, leans forward in his chair with his hands in front of him. As the witness begins to open up and speak about what she has seen, her nonverbal behavior gradually follows suit, as she opens herself up by sitting back. Eventually, as her trust in Detective Hamilton grows, she feels comfortable enough to relax. She realigns her posture by sitting up and facing Detective Hamilton. Through each succeeding change in her body language, Detective

Hamilton matches her behavior, thereby lending credence to the belief that the deeper the rapport has been built between two people, the closer the matching of body language.

Building Rapport by Matching Language

Because people use language to communicate thoughts, the words they choose reflect the way they think. When relating experiences, an individual uses the visual, auditory, or kinesthetic representational system to identify these experiences and communicate them to others. For example, a person whose predominant representational system is visual will say phrases, such as “I see what you mean,” “that looks good to me,” “we see eye to eye,” or “I get the picture.” On the other hand, a person whose preference is auditory will use language, such as “something tells me...,” “that rings a bell,” “we’re on the same wave length,” or “that sounds okay to me.” Finally, a person who is kinesthetic or “feeling” oriented will make statements, such as “I’ll get in touch with you,” “how does that grab you?,” “you don’t have to get pushy,” or “how do you think I feel?”¹³

Successful investigators listen closely to the choice of words witnesses and suspects use. Then, they conform their language to match the interviewee, using similar visual, auditory, or kinesthetic phrases.

When Detective Hamilton’s drive-by shooting witness finally begins to talk, she describes her situation with phrases, such as “tremendous pressure,” “I feel like I’m

going to pieces,” and “I can’t come to grips with what’s happening.” The detective responds to the witness’ account by matching her words. When she speaks of the “tremendous pressure,” he explains ways to relieve the “pressure.” He continues to use kinesthetic phrases, such as “take this load off your shoulders,” to communicate in her preferred representational system.

Because individuals process information in different ways, through distinct representational systems, the investigator often acquires valuable insight into the interviewee’s personal preference by paying close attention to the interviewee’s eye movements. According to NLP, eye movements, referred to as “eye-accessing cues,”¹⁴ reflect the manner in which an individual processes data. Therefore, the eyes move in specified directions, depending upon the person’s preferred mode of thinking. The founders of NLP concluded that eye movements reflect whether the person has a visual preference (thinks in terms of pictures), an auditory preference (“hears” sounds), or a kinesthetic preference (feels or experiences emotion) to process information.¹⁵

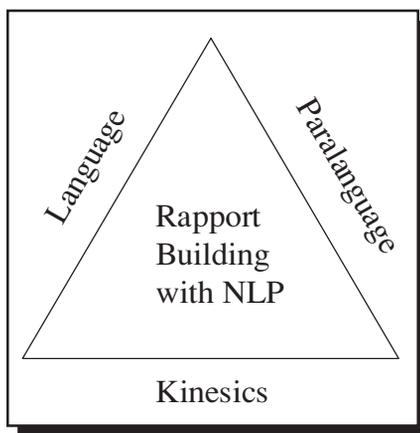
Typically, individuals move their eyes up at an angle as they remember a picture. Some people look directly to the side, which indicates that they are using the auditory mode to recall something that they probably heard before. Finally, individuals who look down at an angle appeal to kinesthetic sensations as they recollect what they felt or experienced.¹⁶

If an investigator observes that a witness consistently looks up at an angle, particularly when responding to questions that require recall, the interviewer can conclude, with a measurable degree of confidence, that the person is “seeing” a picture while remembering information. In NLP terms, this individual’s preferred representational system is visual. The investigator can facilitate the witness’ recollection of events

feelings or emotions, such as “how did all of this feel to you?” or “can you get a handle on what took place?” By closely monitoring the movements of a person’s eyes and aligning questions in accordance with the interviewee’s observed preferences, investigators can build rapport, thereby enhancing communication between themselves and the people they interview. While NLP practitioners cite a direct neurological connection between eye movements and representational systems,¹⁷ other researchers recognize the need for additional empirical studies.¹⁸ Currently, investigators use interviewees’ eye movements as another possible indicator of their preferred manner of communicating.

Building Rapport by Matching Paralanguage

Matching another person’s speech patterns, or paralanguage, constitutes the final, and perhaps most effective, way to establish rapport. Paralanguage involves how a person says something or the rate, volume, and pitch of a person’s speech. One researcher goes so far as to say that matching the other person’s voice tone or tempo is the best way to establish rapport in the business world.¹⁹ What may hold true in the business realm applies in the interview setting as well. Individuals can speak fast or slow, with or without pauses. They can talk in a loud or soft volume and in a high or low pitch. However, most people are unaware of their own speech rate or vocal tones. In fact, investigators do not have to match a person’s voice exactly, just close



by encouraging this visual recall through such phrases as “how did it look to you?” or “show me what you mean.” If the witness looks to the side when asked a question concerning what the person saw, the investigator can encourage the witness to remember by using questions designed to stimulate auditory recall, such as “tell me what you heard” or “how did it sound to you?” Finally, if the witness looks down at an angle when asked a question by the investigator, this could indicate that the person has a kinesthetic preference. Therefore, the investigator can choose phrases that underscore the witness’

enough to encourage that individual to feel understood.²⁰

In the interview setting, slowing the rate of speech to correspond with the pace of a halting witness allows for recall and communication at that person's pace. By the same token, if a witness speaks with more volume and at a quick rate, the investigator should try to match the person's animated and expressive manner of speech. By listening carefully and paying close attention to *how* people speak, investigators can, in NLP terms, get "in sync" with people by matching their paralinguage.

Experienced investigators continually employ this technique, usually without even thinking about the mechanics or the process involved. Detective Hamilton also uses this aspect of NLP in his interview.

The drive-by shooting witness speaks slowly, as if searching for the right words. Detective Hamilton slows the rate of his speech, giving ample time for the witness to get her point across without feeling rushed. He lowers his voice to match her soft volume and refrains from the urge to interrupt her. As the witness becomes more excitable, speeding up her speech rate and increasing her volume, Detective Hamilton increases his rate and volume as he attempts to mirror her. In so doing, he demonstrates to the witness that he is interested in her as an individual, and this allows her to communicate what she experienced in a way that is comfortable for her.

CONCLUSION

Detective Mark Hamilton's witness begins to feel support and

understanding from the interviewer, who continues to match her kinetics, language, and paralinguage. When he sees her consistently looking down to her right, he realizes that she may be processing information on the kinesthetic level and encourages her to talk about her feelings. Slowly, she begins to trust Detective Hamilton.

Unbeknownst to the witness, Detective Hamilton had been matching her in specified ways until she finally felt secure enough to provide full details of the drive-by shooter and his vehicle. As a result, the witness' emotional need was met and, from Detective Hamilton's perspective, the interview was a success.

“

**Successful
investigators listen
closely to the
choice of words
witnesses and
suspects use.**

”

This scenario illustrates the importance of carefully observing how witnesses and suspects communicate through nonverbal, verbal, and vocal means. Neuro-Linguistic Programming is not a new concept nor used rarely. In fact, most successful interviewers employ some variation of it to gain rapport. However, by being conscious of the process and the benefits associated with NLP, interviewers can use these techniques

to their advantage. By matching interviewees' nonverbal behavior, the manner in which they say something, and even their choice of words, interviewers can increase rapport and enhance communication. As a result, the potential for gaining crucial information needed to help resolve investigations improves significantly. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Genie Z. Laborde, *Influencing with Integrity* (Palo Alto, CA: Syntony Publishing, 1987), 27.

² Ronald P. Fisher and Edward R. Geiselman, *Memory-Enhancing Techniques for Investigative Interviewing*, (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1992), 22.

³ John O'Connor and John Seymour, *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming* (London, England: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ Richard Bandler and John Grinder, *Frogs Into Princes* (Moab, UT: Real People Press, 1979), 5.

⁸ P.B. Kincade, "Are You Both Talking the Same Language?" *Journal of California Law Enforcement* 20: 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Jerry Richardson, *The Magic of Rapport, How You Can Gain Personal Power in Any Situation* (Cupertine, CA: Meta Publications, 1987), 21.

¹¹ Judith A. Hall and Mark L. Knapp, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992), 14.

¹² *Supra* note 3, 19.

¹³ *Supra* note 7, 83.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 7, 35.

¹⁵ *Supra* note 7, 25.

¹⁶ *Supra* note 7, 25.

¹⁷ *Supra* note 7.

¹⁸ Aldert Vrij and Shara K. Lochun, "Neuro-Linguistic Programming and the Police: Worthwhile or Not?" *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 12, no. 1 (1997).

¹⁹ *Supra* note 1, 30.

²⁰ *Supra* note 1, 31.