

Being there

NLP Master Practitioner Modelling Project by Renuka C S

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1 MY JOURNEY:

My journey from the NLP Foundation course to the Master Practitioner course was steady and well-paced. I was happy and satisfied with my progress until it was time for the project. In my first two attempts, I failed in defining an IT which was compelling enough for me. Eventually, my project died a natural death. Years later, I felt the need to gain the skill of modelling. And, here I'm attempting once more to find an IT, model it and make it a part of me.

Attending online sessions over weekends, the time passed very fast. Refreshing the concepts, reflecting on the influence that NLP has in my life, I was having a good time. Once again, I reached the crossroads of picking an IT. This time, things were different. I knew the skill I want, and it turns out that knowing it is only the beginning. I had to present my IT in a way 'the effect I am seeking for' is expressed vividly in a sensory-rich language. Although it seemed like a difficult task in the beginning, remembering the effect created by 3 people who had the skill I wanted, helped me to find words to express it.

The effect I was after was 'being there', listening completely while someone is sharing their painful experiences. Having experienced a range of painful experiences in life, while someone is sharing their story, I connect with the vulnerability I faced in the past and instead of that experience empowering me to be better equipped to be there for the other person, I tend to withdraw into my own set of thoughts. These three people whom I chose to refer to, would have created magic in similar situations. When in a conversation, all three of them get immersed in it. It feels like they care about the speaker and nothing else at that time. It feels like their whole body is an ear and is listening. They don't break the state of the speaker.

They seem to be always with the speaker during the conversation. I have often felt they are not avoiding distractions, but they are being there for the other person, and being there for other person makes them unavailable for anything else naturally. In layman's terms, no multi-tasking while listening. And it seems effortless for them to listen like that.

What does 'being there' means to me?

- I am engaged in the conversation.
- I am attentive to the emotions expressed and words used by the other person.
- I am at ease being with the other person.
- I am in the moment.

Defining the above four simple points had taken multiple attempts to express it positively. What I do not want, had been the focus of all the scenarios I played in my mind. I looked back into the recent past where I have felt that I am not being there for the other person. Every time I could recall that I had an inner dialogue that goes in a loop. I could identify the trigger to the loop. And I realized that I have repeated this behaviour so many times that it's on autopilot now. At the first glance of the trigger, I'm off to my world of dialogue loops. I caught the behaviour, but there's something deeper in play. I wrote down the exact words of this inner dialogue. It was a generalized statement that was detrimental, and it had become one of my beliefs. Now, this is not something I was hoping to face during this project. I was not unaware of what modelling can do, but I needed a strong grip to start my journey. For a while, I thought, this is going to be another incomplete attempt. Well, who knows what the future holds for us? I read an article about the 12-steps process

followed in deaddiction groups. It starts with the acceptance of being powerless and that acceptance provides the space for learning. This was an eye-opener. Instead of 'I can and therefore I should' gave way to - I can't hence I'm here to learn. At this point, the Master Practitioner project started becoming real. A sense of gratefulness crept over, and I was ready to take the next step.

2 MY APPROACH:

After having accomplished the 'IT' I was craving for through the modelling and associated processes, writing about what I was doing in past seems to be like something that happened long long ago.

2.1 BEFORE

When I started, my thoughts on the current state and desired state were as follows.

Outcome

I want to be good at listening even when a subject shares a painful experience.

What is listening?

Listening is noticing the patterns in the communication.

How do I listen now?

I notice the relatable feelings expressed by the subject.

What happens when I listen?

I pick emotions that I can relate to from the communication and wait for more cues around those relatable emotions to cross-verify.

What happens next?

If those are emotions for which I have seen the other side, I support breaking down those emotions into different components. If there is nothing I can relate to, I would just hear them out and state clearly that I do not know how to help in the situation as of now.

Who is the listener now?

The part of my mind which is happy for the subject for taking the initiative and believes whether I can help is dependent upon my personal experience. I believe that I can make any sense of the communication only if there is something I can relate to in it.

My expectations on the same lines for the outcome state were:

What is good listening?

Good listening is when I can notice enough patterns to have a comfortable conversation with the subject.

How do I listen when I am good at listening?

I notice the filters of time, association, matching etc.

What happens when I am good at listening?

I keep finding triggers, in real-time, that would help to explore the map of the subject if/whenever required.

What happens next?

I engage in communication with the subject in a way enabling self-exploration for the latter at a comfortable pace and space.

Who is a good listener?

The part of my mind which is:

a) respecting and welcoming the intent and the initiative to communicate expressed by the subject, b) taking responsibility to pay attention to the patterns and c) feeling resourceful to engage in communication in the language of the

subject. I know that the subject has all the resources within, and my role is merely to help him/her realize that they are self-sufficient.

Purpose

Support the subject to experience freedom in thoughts, emotions, and actions.

(This remains unchanged in my current state and desired state)

Pay-off

Letting of the belief that I will be able to make sense of the communication only if:

I have been through the same experience, or,

I know the speaker very well.

2.2 DURING

Two failed attempts at the Master Practitioner project earlier had opened my eyes towards a self-sabotaging thought I carry. I thought it would be wise to have a tool to deal with it before even starting the interview process. I chose a belief and decided to hold on to it, during every step of the project. The belief was, I can't hence I'm here to learn. This belief kept everything that should not be part of a learning journey, at the bay.

The tools that I used to break down my observations, content of the interviews and develop insights out of it was 'Logical Levels of Thinking' exhibited and expressed by the exemplars. How the exemplars receive and respond to verbal and non-verbal communication was also covered in the process.

I finished the interviews with the enthusiasm of a child and collated my insights. I developed the steps to listen post that. I hear the other person speak (Ae), see their body language (Ve) leading to match my body language and breathing pattern (Ke). After this match, I would respond in matching tone/magnitude 'mm' sound at appropriate times (Ae) or whatever appropriate words pop up in my mind.

Ae→Ve→Ke→Ae

These steps eliminate the inner dialogue which I used to have in between (Aic) making the steps different from my former Ae→Ve→Aic→Ki. The tone or any modulations in the sound of the speaker due to the emotions that are building up while sharing (Ae) and the change in body language like watery eyes, shrugged shoulders or covering their mouth etc., (Ve) used to trigger an inner dialogue (Aic) in me and it used to go into a loop and make me unresourceful.

I went on to test it out. After a few attempts at it, I grew fond of the process, and I read about different types of listening. During the training for Master Practitioner, Ramesh had pointed out that I am ready to be a coach. Coupled with a moving experience I had while interviewing one of the exemplars, I thought coaching would be the logical next step. I took a short course on coaching skills. It opened a new world of opportunities to practice my model. I sought permission from a few coaches to be a silent observer to their sessions. I listened with and without making notes. I played coach to a few of my classmates also. Each time right after the session, I reflected on how the construct of my thinking was during the process. My model evolved into something better each time. After 25 hours of applying the listening model in coaching, I can say that I have successfully modelled to 'be there' as I wanted to, in any emotionally packed conversation.

2.3 AFTER

After the modelling exercises, my thoughts on the same are as follows.

Outcome

I am good at listening irrespective of the content

What is listening?

Being in the moment with the speaker.

How do I listen?

By paying attention to the speaker and doing nothing else.

What is being good at listening?

Having undivided attention on verbal and non-verbal expressions of the subject.

Who is listening?

I am listening.

What happens when I listen?

I have observed some level of matching happening in body language and pace of speech. And I feel a state of comfort in the situation getting established.

What happens next?

I feel connected with the subject

What happens when I feel any discomfort?

I pause, asking myself what is creating discomfort. Keep checking till I find what it is.

How do I check what it is?

I describe the discomfort, look for triggers and positive intentions behind the discomfort.

Purpose and role

Being there for the subject

3 MY EXEMPLARS:

I. My first exemplar is my grandmother. Though she is no more with me to conduct an interview, she had passed on the wisdom beforehand. I am glad that I had that long conversation with her one afternoon during a weekend. She pays undivided attention when someone is speaking to her. She doesn't move at all. Her hand would be usually resting on the arms of the chair with one hand touching her face. She maintains that throughout. Her face will have a slight smile if what's shared is pleasant, blank if anger and her eyes will be partially filled with tears if the other person is sharing anything painful for them. She could sit and listen for hours without showing an iota of discomfort. The other person would feel heard and feels like they were talking to her forever. She was a woman of very few words. Yet, throughout childhood, I witnessed our neighbours, her old friends and old students regularly visiting her to share their stories. The women who used to sell door to door, bangles, pickles, pappads, puffed rice etc., also often come home asking for water and end up sharing their otherwise unspoken troubles with her. She offered no advice, no questions, still they left the gate feeling content.

According to her, she learnt the most by listening to people than from any other source. She picked it up from her first teacher at school and applied it throughout her life. Her first teacher was a priest at a church. He, along with the lessons in the syllabus, used to regularly take them with him to the activities that the church organizes for the community. She recalled listening to people being a major part of these activities.

My grandmother was a person who was always in the moment and any conversation, I have not noticed her anxious about the future or worrying about the

past. Whether this was a meta program she acquired or was born with, it helped her to be there for someone who was talking to her.

Two beliefs she mentioned as enabled her to pay attention to others are:

1. We have two ears and one mouth so that we listen more.
2. Being able to listen is a privilege.

Being mindful about using resources, was very important to her. She considered time as a resource, particularly, time in hand. Time in hand spent on someone who is coming forward to offer their time and consider us worthy to share their thoughts to, she told me, is the time well spent. Though she did not explicitly state it, the way she prioritized this activity over other commitments, meant only one thing to me, it gave her a deep sense of purpose and fulfilment.

II. My aunt, Valsala. She is a simple human being; she lives in the present and is childlike. She was in her early twenties when I was in primary school, after twenty years, she still listens in the same way. She stops doing what she is doing while listening. She looks at the other person with wide eyes. The emotion that I have seen on her face most of the time while listening is 'wonderment' as if she is being pleasantly surprised. Whenever she feels the speaker is in confusion, or sad, she would extend her right arm and gently squeeze the palm of the speaker. Tears drop from her eyes usually almost at the same time as the speaker. She stays connected by looking at the speaker till the speaker breaks the state and end the conversation. Upon asking her how she does that, she had a simple explanation - when someone talks to you, you listen. It means, listens, nothing else. Though she was not imitating my grandmother, she mentioned that the latter paid attention to people, so it must be important to do so. That's the belief she holds on to, and it is as simple and

profound as her behaviour. She says she goes with the flow while listening and hence the tears, smile, reaching out to touch etc., without any inhibitions.

III. My friend, Sid. Sid listens, not just to human beings, he listens to mother nature also with the same zeal. He notices beauty and pain. Unlike the previous two exemplars, he goes one step further while listening, he responds with words and creates the same effect. The storyteller in him was very kind during the interview and he painted a vivid picture of how he sees the situation and how he responds. When he sees pain, he says and listens to the breath.

Sid responds to the speaker spontaneously. He is not afraid to express a burst of laughter or tears and give company to the speaker. My focus during the interview was specifically on how he listens to someone who is sharing a painful experience. He holds space by 'being still'. As the speaker spirals down into the abyss of his or her emotions, Sid waits patiently for the right moment. He believes that 'everyone has all the resources they need'. Over many interactions, I have had with him, this quality of not getting dragged down along with the speaker, but at the same time staying connected with the speaker, is something I have noticed with awe. The 'right moment', according to him, is the moment when the person comes up from the bottom to gasp a little air. He believes that drowning or getting churned with the other person do not do any good to both parties. His role, he sees clearly as help out when a cry for help is heard.

Sid described his process using two metaphors. In the first, he referred to the cry for help as a straw raised by the speaker from the water and he used his words to thicken that straw to make it into a raft on which the speaker can float. In the second, he says as the individual shows the signs coming up for catching a breath, from water, he takes them and throws them out of the water – meaning, breaking

the state. The knack of getting that moment right seems to be crucial in his listening process. The speaker feels heard and seen sufficiently enough before the conversation moves to overcome the grief.

I absorbed the essence of his process a little more vividly than he described. I see it as him waiting on the banks, as the process of listening. The listener stays on firm ground, he/she does not have to be in the water. The listener stays on the banks, not away, but close. Close enough to feel and breathe the air laden with the chilliness of water, see the person drowning through the water and notice the movements of the person in the water. He stays close enough to spring up and catch hold of the person as soon as he or she comes up to the surface. Along with the first breath they take, they get pulled to the shore. Soon enough, he covers them with a blanket of his warm and compassionate words. The individual, at this stage, feel comforted, relaxed, and safe.

Following this interview, I was tempted to learn to speak like him and ended up taking some coaching lessons.

IV. My ex-manager, Sylvia. Sylvia bonds well with the team and she derive great strength from that in managing her teams effectively. Over the period, one thing that I never failed to notice was how she listens to people. In my own experience, during a rough time in my life, the ten minutes she took in pulling me into a training room to listen to me and hug me, was a life-changer for me. I am indebted to her for that kind gesture and to every force in nature that gave me the courage to open up to her at that moment. I have seen her countless times, sitting at the best corner desk on the floor, listening to someone who is in distress or confused or stuck with all the attention in the world. In the open floor plan, she creates a safe space for this one-to-one conversation sheerly by holding attention and space for the latter.

Sylvia says that the belief that drives her is a value that was an integral part of her first organization in her career. The value is that 'listen to others the same way you want another person to listen to you'. It's profound and leaves no doubt in the minds of the ones who want to put it into practice. This belief has been a part of her ever since. It helps her in expressing her emotions and speaking her mind, all the while giving space and attention to the other party. The most striking part in her behaviour, while she is listening, is that she matches, as though involuntarily the other person in body language and in emoting. The environment naturally becomes easier for the person to talk to her.

The only internal dialogue that goes on in the moment for her is 'how would I want to be listened to' and do exactly that. It's a recipe that hardly goes wrong. And she gracefully handles the tricky situations giving equal respect and attention to all parties involved, like when her little boy wants to sit on her lap during an office video call or when she spots one in her team looking not so well as she is leading a floor-walk for the clientele.

4 MY MODEL:

As stated earlier, the process of listening to I follow now is $Ae \rightarrow Ve \rightarrow \underline{Ke} \rightarrow \underline{Ae}$

Hear (Ae) and see (Ve) the speaker followed by matching my body language (Ke) and then responding appropriately (Ae).

I reached the state of a) matching the body language and saying the right words/sounds and b) cutting off the inner dialogue by emulating the thought process of my exemplars and making my own.

My grandmother said that it's a privilege if someone chooses to share their experience with you. I feel grateful for being of service. Expressing my gratitude towards everyone and everything that helps me learn, grow, and evolve by paying it forward.

All my exemplars were had a unilateral view on the purpose that listening serves, just be there. I picked up the concept that the value addition I make is my time, from my training for coaching skills. Although there were values and beliefs that my exemplars shared had a similar underlying message, stating the belief to myself as the time I give is the value addition I am making, took off the pressure of what to respond to from my mind. Surprisingly, now I have words to respond to, and it has become spontaneous as well. The rest came along with that. To summarise, the logical levels in my model are as follows.

Higher purpose – Being grateful.

Purpose/role – Be there

Belief – The time I dedicate to listening is the value I add.

Capabilities – Willingness to listen, ability to pay attention to details and patterns

Behaviour – Maintaining eye contact with the speaker, using clean language and staying in the moment

Environment – Friendly and warm
