

Creating Healthier Workplaces with NLP

How Ubisoft and Groupon have been supporting their teams



By Andy Coley

I've been qualified as an NLP Trainer since 2012 and alongside the work I've been doing in the field of healthcare, I've also been working with well-known organisations to bring NLP to the heart of larger businesses.

Over the last few years, I've been working with organisations such as the Arcadia Group, The City of London, The British Retail Consortium, Chilly's Bottles and billion-dollar businesses such as Groupon, Roche and Ubisoft.

The Groupon project came about when one of their senior leadership team visited a practice group session I was running in southeast London. I set this up when I moved to London in 2016, partly to meet new people but also because I love running practice sessions for practitioners and those keen to find out more about the field of NLP.

He was the compliance director and already a big advocate for coaching, having recently attended coach training in one of the well-known coaching schools. He'd heard about NLP and wanted to know more. After a great session about values and some of the ways you can work with these with clients he wanted a taste of NLP, so we arranged to meet up for some 1:1 coaching so he could experience what NLP-based coaching was like.

He loved it and we pulled together a three-day training programme, similar to a diploma course, so I could train the SLT (Senior Leadership Team) at their head office near London Bridge. Groupon is a relatively new organisation; it's only been around since 2008 in the US and 2009 in the UK, with the Groupon Goods channel added in 2011. So, like any newer business, it was still



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experiencing teething and growing pains as it continued to expand.

They had a high staff turnover (29% who left within 12 months) and no training programme for their team leaders, category managers or leadership team. Whoever had been in the job the longest was promoted and not given any support in the shift in identity/responsibility or skills in how to lead a team, plus there was not a great model of leadership as everyone was busy *doing* their job, and not really focused on leading through example.

Taking a coaching approach to leadership

I took the SLT through the programme. Of the 12 people present, 6 had come to the UK from Groupon's European offices to take part. They found the programme very insightful when it came to managing their own state, along with supporting their teams in a much more coaching-led way.

Many of you will have heard of *Situational Leadership* by Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard, which talks about the need to change your leadership style, depending on the maturity of your team. Groupon had a very directing style, telling staff what to do, treating them very much like kids and then being annoyed when staff were constantly asking to be told what to do.

The aim of the programme became to take the team through to the next level of a coaching approach so that eventually they could reach a supporting and delegate leadership style.

Once the SLT had gone through the training and we'd evaluated the feedback, I developed the programme so that 80 of the management team and ultimately all 180 of the goods team throughout the European offices could take part. To do this, two champions were identified from the SLT who would qualify with me as NLP Practitioners and become internal advocates for the change and delivery of the programme. I personally delivered the sessions to four cohorts; I then shadowed the champions on another four sessions and they ran further sessions for the teams themselves.

What started off as a project for the senior leadership team became so much more and the feedback from those taking part



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was that they really felt much more supported by their peers and that they had better ways to communicate, listen and build rapport with each other. Models and techniques such as the communication model, the meta model, perceptual positions, the presuppositions of NLP, clean language, cause and effect and so on gave them the chance to step back and gift themselves and others advice, plus time to reflect and think more clearly instead of reacting instinctively.

This course, about taking a coaching approach into leadership, is one that I've repeated with other organisations, and it can be really effective *if* it's something the whole team takes on board from the senior leaders, all the way through the layers of the team.

Change has to come from us before it'll come from others. We have to model what we're expecting to see, and they got that at Groupon. As a result, the staff turnover halved, and employees felt more valued and better able to communicate effectively with both their peers and their managers.

Using NLP to develop professional boundaries

Most recently, my largest client has been Ubisoft, the billion-dollar computer games company behind titles such as *Far Cry*, *Rainbow Six Siege* and *Assassins Creed*. They first got in touch at the end of 2020 wanting help and support with training around the topic of professional boundaries.

Ubisoft had been in the press for all the wrong reasons that summer. Senior execs had lost their jobs in Montreal and Paris when the #MeToo movement meant that people felt like they had the opportunity to report serious misconduct.

The company undertook an organisation-wide staff wellbeing survey (there are approximately 18,000 staff globally) and one of the things that came out was how stressful interacting with

players had become. The games industry can be highly toxic and with staff working mainly from home, a blurring of the lines between home and work life – especially for those in the community teams, who work directly with players in the Star Player Programs, eSports leagues and community relationship centres – meant people were burning out.

I've developed a training programme for them called *How to ensure safe & exemplary interactions with players*. It consists of three modules so far; the first two contain NLP-based principles and techniques to enable them to put themselves at cause in tricky situations, communicating well with players and staying out of the drama of situations.

We also look at reflective practice and giving themselves advice, and ways of handling stress using physiology and then putting it into practice with role plays. The third module is peer group coaching, which enables the theory and reality to embed together by discussing issues the team is having and getting advice from each other. This third module has been the difference that's made the difference with the training. They learn and model a mentor who is part of the group and this enables them to feel supported and know that what the team in Korea or Japan faces isn't that different to those in Sweden or the UK.

So far, 200 people from Europe, Scandinavia, UAE, Russia, Asia and Australia have been through this virtual training and it's expanding into the US/Canada alongside new training for managers and those in non-player-facing roles. The EMEA HR team is heavily invested in bringing NLP into the way that their staff look after themselves and I'm delighted to be able to support them on that journey.

Bringing NLP to the heart of organisations is very much my passion. ■

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