



Talking change

Laura Murphy describes how one trading standards service is using a technique known as neuro linguistic programming (NLP) to communicate and motivate staff during periods of high-pressured change

Daily, it seems, we hear about trading standards managers being subject to increasing pressures from above and below as extra demands are made upon the service. Changes in legislation and potential reconfiguration of structures and services have to be managed, all against an increasing customer expectation both from the public and the politicians. But how good are managers at communicating these changes and keeping staff motivated?

At West Sussex County Council, the trading standards service looked for a different approach and led the way by asking me to run a training programme

known as *Hear What?* The delivery was specifically designed to address communication issues using neuro linguistic programming (NLP).

Margaret Butler, investigations team leader at West Sussex Trading Standards, who commissioned the training, said: 'I have been intrigued by NLP ever since I was shown how con artists deliberately manipulate language in their scam emails and literature sent to unsuspecting traders and members of the public.

'During a credit crunch, of course, these rogue traders can exploit this even

further as people become more susceptible. I worked with Laura on a peer review and, as it became clear to me that NLP techniques are a powerful tool that can be used for positive effects as well as negative, it seemed a logical step to ask her to put something together for the team.'

Using Margaret's brief, the *Hear What?* one-day course was designed for managers, as well as a two-day course: *Seeing the Voice*, plus *Thinking Sights* for front-line staff. *Hear What?* gives insight into communication during times of stress and change, while the two-day programme investigates tricks used by unscrupulous traders, and how staff can turn these

around to address breaches of practice.

NLP uses language, both verbal and hidden, to unlock the mind and challenge

assumptions. It's about how language is delivered, unconsciously interpreted and then shapes a person's behaviour. The concept was developed in California in

“It became clear that NLP techniques are a powerful tool”



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the early 1970s, and has gained popularity in the UK in the last five years or so. A very powerful tool, it is widely used in the business world and can significantly improve communications, especially in times of stress.

In a number of peer reviews I've undertaken, a constant theme was that the service concerned was either about to, was in the middle of, or had recently completed a period of change. Effective communication within the staff group, or with businesses and members of the public, was even more vital in these times – yet frequently became its first victim. As anxiety and stress built up on all sides, messages were lost or misheard.

This was reflected in many self-evaluations where poor or inadequate communications were identified as an issue. Because NLP deals specifically with understanding communication and improving behaviour, it was the obvious solution.

Graeme MacPherson, head of service and a participant on the *Hear What?* course, said: 'Nationally and locally the service faces increasing

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pressure, which impacts on how we operate. How do we keep the messages clear?

'With this course we covered a wide range of scenarios, looking at how we unconsciously use language. Particularly useful for the managers was hearing about eye patterns and investigating how to reframe or chunk an objection or problem to make it more accessible to a solution.



It was a practical event which, by using our new skills, allowed us to experiment on the communication issues we each brought to the day. It was certainly worthwhile.'

Margaret commented: 'It was a stimulating and challenging day and very ambitious, so perhaps we asked for too much in the time that we had. Everyone felt confident, though, that they could apply the skills they had learnt.'

When asked what else she would have done differently, Margaret replied: 'We had an exercise where communication

was deliberately subverted. The resulting changes in behaviour would have been starker, and the lesson more easily observed, if we had shared the day with a neighbouring trading standards service or environmental health team, where we didn't know each other quite so well. It was a small point and the course would have been flexible enough to allow this sharing to happen. It would

also have helped to improve partner communications.'

So does it work? 'Oh yes!' said Margaret. 'We were charged with doing one thing within a week to consolidate our learning. I was all ready to do mine – and the battle I thought I would have, I didn't get!'

That outcome was because Margaret was unconsciously using the techniques. The beauty of NLP is that it gives you a whole new range of options. And once you begin to understand how NLP works, you can start to model positive behaviour: motivate yourself and your team; address under-achievement; convince a trader to abide by the regulations; or deal with the most vociferous complainant.

So, it looks as though West Sussex Trading Standards is well on the way to tackling any communication issues it might have within its own service. And if trading standards teams take up the opportunity to use this technique, perhaps there'll be fewer complaints about poor communications with the next round of peer reviews – especially with all those changes on the horizon!



TSQF and the Grandfather Rights Period:

The Trading Standards Qualifications Framework has given candidates the ability to claim automatic exemptions within the framework by using past TSI qualifications gained within the last five years. This period of transferral is called 'Grandfather Rights' and will run until 31 July 2009. If you want to take advantage of this transferral, please complete the registration forms before the end of July.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: contact Margaret Butler, investigations team leader at West Sussex Trading Standards, at margaret.butler@westsussex.gov.uk