NLP with Sheep
A metaphor for what you thought you could not do

By Clare M Smale

In July I was sitting listening to Robert G. Allen at the National Achievers Conference. As he told us there is an author in all of us, I started scribbling the notes for this article in my conference workbook. Robert, Anthony Robbins and many of the other speakers talked extensively about modelling and strategies. The principle of modelling is to find someone who has already achieved in an area that you would like to experience better results yourself, discover their strategy and then use it. Tad James describes a strategy as 'an internal and external set of experiences, which consistently produces a specific outcome'. Looking around the room, I wondered how many of the 10,000 people present knew how to put this into practice. Anyone who has been trained to NLP Practitioner level will have learnt the basics of modelling and this leads me nicely to the topic of NLP with sheep.

Using sheep was a 'beer mat idea'. With the help of Chris Farnsworth, an experienced shepherd with a deep interest in people, NLP with sheep is a unique experience. Together, we work with groups of between 4 and 12 people and the first task is to round up a small flock of sheep without the help of a dog. A short video clip from sheep dog trials gives participants the opportunity to notice how the dog and shepherd work together and, if they choose to, they can model (or copy) some of the strategies they have viewed. This is a great team building exercise with established teams and it also works brilliantly with groups

of people who have never met before. It draws out many levels of learning around communication, how we filter our world, watching the expert, team working and leadership (or lack of it!). What are our natural tendencies in life – to be the shepherd, the sheep dog or the sheep? These are 'wild' animals and are reluctant to be penned – they have plenty of opportunity to escape and run in all directions to test the resilience of the group in achieving the task. Plenty of strategies do not work, the field is re-defined and the approach continually adjusted. Once everyone is committed and at least one person has stepped up to assume the overview of the shepherd, the sheep are finally penned and we then invite everyone to experience turning a sheep over onto its back. This does not involve the strength that you might think is required, but instead a specific mindset and technique that anyone can be taught.

Fire walking and board breaks are powerful tools commonly used on personal development courses to help transform fear and to inspire people to do things they initially did not think possible. Instead of hot coals, we use sheep! Participants often worry about working with the sheep, as for most people it is outside their area of experience. However, by the end of the session, they discover that their limitations may simply be the result of self-limiting beliefs and fears. They can then apply these insights to situations in their lives where they would like to make changes. To date, without exception and whatever the prior level of

fear and apprehension, every participant has demonstrated their new skill and accomplished more than they expected.

We use the TOTE model (George Miller 1960) to give structure to the goal of turning a sheep over.

TOTE model
The TOTE model (Figure 1) starts with a goal in mind. In the case of working with sheep, the goal we present to participants is to turn a sheep on its back. This is one of the most important skills of a shepherd as it is the prerequisite for shearing, checking feet and monitoring health and well-being.

TEST – the trigger – are we ready to start working towards the goal of turning a sheep on its back? There may be visual, auditory or kinesthetic requirements that have to be satisfied.

OPERATE – run the strategy for turning the sheep over successfully. We use NLP tool of neurological levels (see Figure 2) as a structure for finding out everything we need to know.

TEST – has the goal been reached? Is the sheep on its back in a way that enables it to be calm and comfortable so that the shepherd can start his or her work?
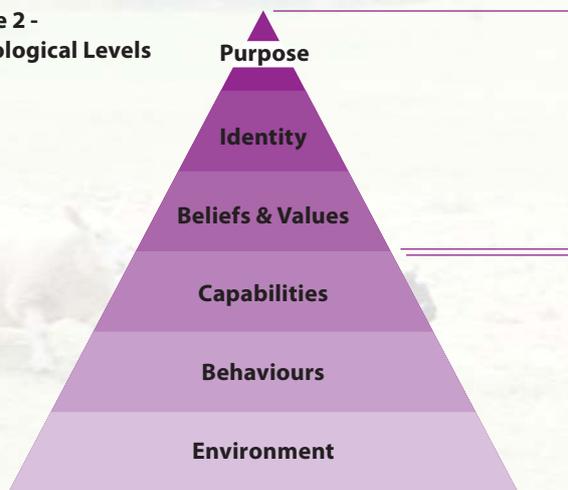
EXIT – the strategy has worked. The next task can begin (e.g. shearing) or the sheep can be released.

We use the very well respected NLP tool of neurological levels (Robert Dilts 1990) to elicit the strategy from the shepherd in order to be able to carry out the operate stage of the TOTE model.

Figure 1 - The TOTE Model

TEST → OPERATE → TEST → EXIT

Figure 2 - Neurological Levels

Purpose
Identity
Beliefs & Values
Capabilities
Behaviours
Environment

Sources of passionate commitment

Evidence of passionate commitment

Neurological levels

This model breaks information down into different categories and it is most commonly shown as a hierarchy (see Figure 2). When we copy the strategy of another person, we tend to focus on the observable skills and behaviours that they exhibit, plus the environmental conditions that may be needed. In the case of learning to turn a sheep over onto its back, some common questions would be:

Environment – are the sheep in a small enough pen in a safe place?

Behaviour – what do I do next? What do I do with my hands, feet and posture? What order do I do things in?

Skills and capabilities – how exactly do I hold the sheep? How can I do that?

These three levels are observable and external. The real power and motivation to complete the task and overcome anxiety or fear however, comes from the next three levels, which are internal and hidden. By asking really great questions at the next three levels you will gain a much more intimate understanding of the strategy. Sometimes people struggle with the goal of turning a sheep, because although they can observe the skills and behaviours, they do not quite believe they can do it or may even believe the sheep is going to be hurt in some way. Recognising a conflict like this and then adding a more useful belief or identity, can transform the alignment of goal and make it more possible.

Beliefs and values – what do you believe to be true of yourself when turning over a sheep? What do you believe to be true of the situation? What is important to you about this task?

Identity – who are you in this situation?

Purpose – what is the bigger picture? For what or to whom does this relate?

By uncovering these areas of the strategy it is possible to create a better alignment with the new skills and behaviours that are required and your inner self. Confidence and motivation for the task grows and the 'can do' mindset also grows. Stepping through all of these levels before operating the strategy allows participants to gather the practical information, self belief and motivation they need.

The goal becomes clearer, more compelling and achievable. Now you are ready to start applying the TOTE model. It fascinates me to notice that women tend to be much more successful at men in achieving this particular goal. I think perhaps many women know they cannot rely as much on brute force or strength to operate the strategy and therefore they listen and watch very carefully. They often complete the task quicker and more elegantly than the men as they more effectively execute the specific hold and sequence of movements required.

The photos speak for themselves and those participants who are initially most reticent, experience a huge sense of achieving something new. When we succeed in doing something we believed to be very difficult or actually impossible, it shows we have learned to break through our limiting beliefs.

There have been additional and unexpected benefits of participating in NLP with sheep. Suzan has since used the same structure to model a local bee-keeper and has been so inspired that she has since been on a course in order to produce honey of her own. She is even talking about adding a couple of sheep to her menagerie! Russell has used neurological levels to model a professional rock guitarist in order to be able to gig for the first time himself and Sam has discovered the secrets of painting religious icons.

We recently used this process with a group of ward sisters in the NHS. They are all aspiring to be matron and as part of their leadership and management programme with inspired2learn they were asked to model high performing matrons in their local hospitals using the process described in this article. This had a huge impact on their development, revealing unexpected values, beliefs and identities that were of great importance in making a successful transition from sister to matron.

Modelling and strategies is one of most useful aspects of NLP. It does not need to be complex to be powerful and neurological levels provide a simple yet effective structure for getting going. ■

Clare Smale is an NLP master practitioner, trainer and coach. She works extensively within the public and private sectors. Clare will be presenting at the NLP Conference in London (17–18 November 2011) on 'Reaching your goals by developing alignment between values and vision'.
For more information about Clare's events (including NLP with sheep), the Devizes NLP Practice group and other interests visit **www.inspired2learn.co.uk** or **www.whitehorsenlp.com**