

The Magic of NLP in Career Coaching*

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18 May. The woman named Marissa who called this afternoon said she needed help. She had lurched from job to job for many years and again she's not happy where she is. She needs to decide whether or not to leave her present job. Why now, I asked.

"Because I'm feeling trapped."

What did she mean by that?

"I don't know... I have good job and good qualifications but I feel like a square peg in a round hole. Maybe I'm just not suited to the culture of the organization."

She wondered whether she had what it took to succeed in her sort of work, teaching at a business college. "Maybe I should consider doing less teaching and more of a management role. Should I stay in an educational setting, or look elsewhere? I've done marketing and product management in the corporate world and quite enjoyed it but I'm not sure I want to go back into that world. I've got too many options, too many ideas running around my head. How do I find out what will really make me happy? I've got to get clear once and for all what I should be doing, and feel less trapped."

Then came a note of challenge in her voice. "But I'm going to be a hard nut to crack. This is not your usual situation—it's all so complicated: the organization, the people I work with, and all my own conflicting ideas."

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25 May. Today Marissa started to explore what sort of work she really wanted. She is aged 40 and is not new to personal development work, having done transformational workshops and read several self-help books. She said she's come a long way but has reached a dead end and feels trapped. Again that word. What did she mean by it?

“In my head I know I can make things better, it's just that I'm stuck on how. I can't see any clear options. I seem to want so much. I want to find work that's stimulating and not too superficial, where I can use the knowledge and skills I'm trained for. But not only that, I keep asking myself how can I get my work to fit my lifestyle. Am I being unrealistic?”

Not necessarily, I replied. It's good to get really clear what you want—and what you don't want— so you can then look and apply for jobs accordingly. It's about clarity and focus.

“Exactly! That's what I need: focus!”

Marissa did tasks designed to have her see and get a sense of what sort of work motivates her. She discovered how much she preferred using her people and creative skills even more than her analytic and management skills. She also saw that people development and writing interested her more than what she called the ‘the dry parts’ of business management. New roles for her to consider included research psychologist, organisational psychologist, psychotherapist, psychodrama facilitator, employee relations manager, human resource strategist, training and development consultant, marketing communications consultant and marketing manager for publishing house.

“This is exciting. I haven't thought, or even heard, of some of these. I'm starting to feel there's a light at the end of the tunnel. But it's also a bit unnerving.” She shifted in her chair and her voice dropped. “All this opening up is shaking me up a bit. It makes me realise how much I hate my present job and how much energy— 85%—goes into managing the frustration. Only about 15% of my energy goes into actually doing the job. That's why I feel so trapped.”

Apart from identifying her skills and interests, Marissa saw that her values did not fit those of the large, competitive and politicised organisation in which she worked. She discovered how important it is for her to work independently, have challenging work and get acknowledged for her results

One option for Marissa will be to gradually opt out of full-time teaching work. She may keep up some teaching as a reliable source of income and supplement it with income from other activities she enjoys. She needs to explore all the options that have come up and prioritise them. This way she may well become a free agent and design for herself either a 'portfolio' or a 'modular' career which will give her the variety, flexibility and balance she wants.

Marissa sparkled at the prospect of a portfolio career, feeling relieved that she wouldn't have to choose just one career or job, having realised that one of the reasons she had felt so trapped in previous jobs was that she did not have enough variety. Until now she had not realised there were other career models beyond the one full-time job with one employer.

I wondered whether discussing her needs and seeing her options was all it would take for Marissa to make her decision, feel less trapped and more focused. Or would we need to do more work on these issues?

Just then she broke the silence. "But now I'm feeling anxious again. The possibilities are overwhelming. How will I stay focused? I flit from one idea to the next; I don't stick to a plan." In a future session we will deal more with the focus issue, but in the meantime, she will explore the options that came up as one way to feel less trapped and more focused. She will get some realistic information from people in the fields and roles we discussed, get a sense of what a portfolio or modular career looks and feels like, then visualise her ideal work week in as much detail and colour as possible.

13 June. Marissa fears making the wrong decision. With some questioning she was able to loosen and reframe that 'fear'. Had she learnt anything from previous jobs about what she now wanted

and didn't want? "Yes, definitely." Can you now think of those previous jobs as valuable experience, rather than 'mistakes'? "Yes." Do you really have to choose one type of work and one only for the rest of your life? "No, I suppose it's common nowadays for people to move jobs and change careers."

What's the worst thing that can happen if you decide to change jobs again? "Very little, other than inconvenience, because I will have gained more marketable experience and achievements." Have you considered that employers often look for experience and achievements rather than for a continuous and stable employment record? "Well, I didn't know that until now, but it makes sense." How can you minimise the chance of getting into work you don't like? "Well, by researching my options thoroughly." And Marissa, too, found that the word 'feedback' was more useful than focusing on 'failure'.

17 July. Today Marissa started to feel more confident. For her it came from confronting a crippling script, a limiting belief. I had asked what had she been thinking and feeling about the option of a modular career. "It's OK, it makes sense I guess, but I still flit from one idea to another." I was expecting her to bring up the focus issue but, rather abruptly, the conversation went in a different direction. "For my career to get on track I need to feel more secure in myself. I need to feel confident in my own ideas and how I present them; I need to confidently handle people at work who disagree with my ideas. I think, for me, security is having that self esteem."

Marissa reflected on how her poor self-esteem came from the way her parents put her down even when she was in primary school. She wasn't as single-minded and serious as her brother and sister. She was always flitting from one interest to another, and though she did well at everything—including sport, having boyfriends—somehow it wasn't what her parents expected. She realised that her parents' expectations had a lot to do with their own backgrounds and she recognised that their words and actions were not intended to hurt her. Then suddenly her voice fell to a whisper and she looked down. "Deep-down I've always felt I'm not lovable... because I don't really know

enough and I'll be found out. I'm a fraud." A fraud? I realised she will need deconstruct this label she had given herself and disconnect it from how she felt. "Yes, people will discover that I'm not as smart as they think I am."

Getting Marissa to identify the feeling of being unlovable and a fraud, as well as how that looked and sounded, was the way to start changing it. She agreed that her 'being a fraud' was an old, illogical and untrue belief and one that certainly was not serving her well at this point in time. She was ready to let go of that limiting belief and, instead, take on more accurate and useful beliefs about herself and thereby start to feel different.

The first step was for her to notice how she knew she was a fraud. She said it was a feeling she had in her abdomen; a high level of anxiety, sometimes almost explosive. This feeling had a bright reddish colour and was accompanied by a high-pitched, jabbering voice in her own head going on and on about being a fraud and unlovable.

She then identified a limiting belief she used to have but no longer held. She then gave the limiting belief ('I'm not lovable') the exact same feel, sound and picture as those of the belief that for her is no longer true. Next, she thought of a belief she already had that was positive, true and empowering, "that I am willing to learn" and described how that belief felt, looked and sounded. Then came the final part of the process: she thought of a new belief that she would like to take on board, a positive and empowering one. It was that "I can feel confident in, and respected for, my competency." She gave this new belief the same picture, sound and sensations as of the one that was already serving her well.

For a few moments Marissa processed this in silence, with her eyes closed and head down. Then she slowly opened her eyes and lifted her head. "Oh my god. Now I *do* feel confident about my competency," she said punching the air with an affirming fist. "And now, as I think about not being lovable, it doesn't feel as intense or explosive as before," she added. I asked her to think about how

she used to feel trapped in her work situation and to notice what she now feels. After a short silence she said: “Oh my god; it’s evaporated!” She had just taken on board a new pattern of thinking and feeling about her confidence and self-esteem.

4 September. Marissa has done well in exploring a modular career. She had talked to lots of people, in business and marketing as well as in psychology and the publishing world. She has decided to stay with marketing and sees herself consulting and writing; she also wants to continue doing some teaching in her field. With a portfolio career and lifestyle Marissa will use more of her skills, have more flexibility, more variety and more challenge.

Marissa sees herself working from home, getting an income from teaching as well as from the fledgling consulting business. She recognises that for a year or two she will have less income than when teaching full-time, but she is prepared to make the trade-off and the lifestyle adjustments in the short-to medium-term in order to have the fulfilling work and lifestyle she wants in the longer term. When I asked her about the explosive feeling, the anxiety, she used to have in her stomach, she found it had gone. But staying focused was still a challenge.

A goal-setting technique would help her so we talked about SMART goals—ones that are specific, measurable, achievable (or realistic), responsive (to ones own needs and considerate of other people in ones life) and with time frames. Without SMART goals Marissa would continue to feel overwhelmed whenever she thought of all the things she had to do. In the past she could only see the big picture; it felt overwhelming and she would easily get sidetracked with all the dramas at work and in the rest of her life.

To begin with, Marissa pictured her ideal work life. She articulated her goal positively and in terms of what she will see, hear and feel. “In two years’ time I will be enjoying part-time teaching and consulting in marketing; I will see in my bank account an income from both and will be hearing very positive feedback from students, colleagues and clients.” Then she detailed the small, manageable

steps or sub-goals that would make her dream a reality. Her top priority, her first step, was to negotiate part-time work at the business college. She continued to write out all the steps or sub-goals, stating each positively, specifically and with time frames. For example: by the end of this year she will be using better time management skills and by the end of next year she will have the consulting business set up. Now she has clearer and more specific goals, including short-term goals (using more empowering language, negotiating a part-time teaching role), medium-term ones (establishing a marketing consultancy, starting to find clients) and longer term ones (enjoying a portfolio career and lifestyle and earning well).

We talked about goals being great motivators and how they will keep Marissa focused. But goals need not be a noose around her neck. If she doesn't complete each step in the set time she can simply revise that goal and make it more realistic. Reviewing and revising is part of good goal setting. Marissa will get more satisfaction from seeing herself set and get goals all along the way than from waiting to attain one ultimate end result.

Then Marissa learnt another neat technique to help her stay focused. It started with her recalling a time when she actually did feel really focused, when she was an athlete in the school 'A' team'. She had trained regularly, loved it and done well. She pictured herself training, and noticed the feeling, the buzz it gave her. She saw herself fleet-footed and fast, and heard the shouts of support. She recalled the feeling of elation when it was over and people congratulated her. She then came up with a short phrase that she associated with that feeling, the words 'stay on target'. She practised saying those words at the very moment she felt most elated and in future will say them to herself whenever she wants her mind to stop flitting from one thing to another.

Marissa is well aware that she still faces challenges: of making the business profitable, of staying focused when her life felt overwhelming, of having to deal with feelings of loneliness from having neither a life partner nor children. But she left the last session smiling and calmer than before.

“Now I’m back on track. Before, I couldn’t see the woods for the trees. I’ve become more clear, more focused and more secure in myself. And now I have the courage to go after whatever I want and make it happen. I’ll call you early next year and tell you where I’m at.”

28 December. Marissa called today. “It’s been such a relief to realise that a modular career was right for me. It’s also a bit scary but the goal setting has helped. In the past I just kept generating choices and felt unable to choose among them. Now I no longer feel I’ve lost the plot. It all makes sense now—given my skills, interests, values and personality— and it also feels right when I picture myself actually doing it.”

She has negotiated a part-time teaching role starting in a few weeks' time and enjoys the networking and market research to develop the consulting business. In few weeks she will start her first semester of part-time teaching in the business college.

Contrary to her belief when she first called, Marisa was not a ‘hard nut to crack’. Her crisis was neither unusual nor difficult to resolve. Today she recapped what she had achieved in six months: she had broken a pattern of negative self-talk and had taken on board more useful beliefs about her competency. She no longer felt trapped nor that she was a fraud. And she had learnt new ways to stay focused: setting SMART goals and accessing the feeling she had as an athlete by using the trigger words ‘stay on target’. And she had talked of having a big insight: “The anxiety that comes with poor self esteem stops you thinking straight, stops you realising that you know as much—if not more—than other people. I now feel more brave and less defensive and bound to others’ opinions. And now that I’ve made my working life better, the whole of my life has started to improve. I’ve even started seeking out relationships with men with whom I don’t have to feel defensive about my career aspirations. I’m seeing someone new and it feels more ‘right’ than in the past. So I feel I’m making progress on all fronts.”

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