

The Wonderful World of Metaprograms: increasing your flexibility of perspective

Abstract

In the hot house environment of project life wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone were like you? Have you ever worked with a project team or stakeholders and wondered "why did they do THAT?" or "why don't they just GET ON with it?" Welcome to the wonderful world of Metaprograms.

Metaprograms are filters. They are the way we sort and process information and make decisions about the way we perceive things and the actions we take based on that. One of the special abilities human beings have is to be flexible and adapt. As project management professionals we know that this is a critical skill. Being flexible and encouraging team members to be flexible, enables everyone to meet the demands of an ever-changing project environment. Naturally this can be a complex process, however it is possible to identify some of the key filters that project managers work with on a daily basis, and to assess how they might apply and add value in the project environment.

When we see certain behaviours in others or ourselves we sometimes attribute it to "someone's personality" or say "that's the way I've always been". Often, it is simply an example of how we are using our **metaprograms**. Metaprograms are filters. They are the way we sort and process information and make decisions about the way we perceive things and the actions we take based on those perceptions.

Why are metaprograms relevant to project managers?

For the modern project manager, flexibility of perspective and understanding others is essential. Flexibility in project management is not just about risk analysis, preventative actions and contingency planning. It is ALSO about psychological and relationship flexibility, responsiveness to changing needs... and so much more.

It can be a complex process to develop "perspective flexibility". A good starting point is to identify some of the key filters that project managers work with on a daily basis, and to assess how they might apply and add value in the project environment. Doing this can assist project managers to plan productive work sessions, to design effective communication processes, to anticipate potential difficulties between team members and to incorporate project processes that can harness the strengths of project team members.

So what exactly are metaprograms?

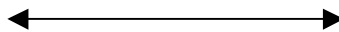
They are perceptual filters. They influence how we “take in” and process information, what type of information is identified as important or relevant, and impact on how we communicate our messages to others. To date researchers have identified over 254 metaprograms. When “troubleshooting” or supporting project teams through challenging times, at LeftField we have observed that that differences in particular metaprograms tend to be present when we are diagnosing and supporting the resolution of conflict or disagreement between project team members. Listed below are six (6) of the key metaprograms that we have found most useful for helping project team members understand how they “*sort*” information, understand more about others’ perspectives and identify practical strategies to “get back on track”.

1. Chunk Size
2. Operational
3. Motivation
4. Relationship
5. Work Relations
6. Black and White

Analytical

Where someone focuses on the details. They need specific information and want the data.

Chunk Size Sort



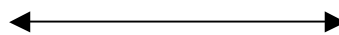
Global

Where someone works at the “big picture” level. They need an overview and the high level ideas, and are less concerned with specifics.

Procedural

Under pressure, the focus is on following procedures. It’s about using the process, step by step.

Operational Sort



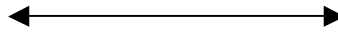
Options

Where there is flexibility around possible options. Under pressure they provide a “menu” of options and are comfortable “juggling lots of balls at once.”

Away from

Where someone is motivated to move away from something perceived as painful or undesirable. They will state what they don't want, what they want to avoid or not want to happen.

Motivation Sort



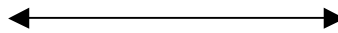
Towards

Where someone is motivated to move toward something perceived as pleasurable. They will state what they do want, what can be done and what is possible.

Difference

Variety is the key. Mismatching adds excitement and presents difference. They track what is NOT the same.

Relationship Sort



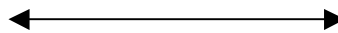
Sameness

Where people track for "sameness" and want to promote harmony. They like what is familiar and track for similarity.

Relationship

Where preference is to work with people, to ensure that people are working together and are "happy".

Work Relations Sort



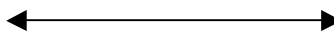
Task

Where emphasis is on the task and the job to be completed.

Digital

Where there is one way or another way, and no "in between". There is a right and wrong, no exceptions in any context.

Black and White Sort



Analogue

Where there are "shades of grey" and no definite position in any situation. Depending on the context, things can always change.

How might a project manager use his/her knowledge of metaprograms?

When people are under pressure they tend to operate from their perceptual "default" (their "usual" position on a metaprogram). As stress increases, people's ability to see other perspectives can be reduced. People who are "at the other end" of a metaprogram can trigger frustration or misinterpretation of intentions in the stressed person (e.g. "they are trying to make things difficult for me"). By establishing team guidelines and agreements that support team member preferences (e.g. including both the "big picture" and a focus on "detail" in a work session) a project manager can proactively build perceptual flexibility into the way team members relate to each other (and the work to be done).

If project issues arise, it can be useful to understand people's metaprogram preferences to identify how they might respond (to those issues). Is their preference to go back to the Project Plan and methodically review it (e.g. procedural)? Or to immediately brainstorm a range of options (e.g. options)? This is particularly useful for the project manager to keep in mind when dealing with risk planning, issues resolution or challenging stakeholder situations.

So what next?

It can be useful for project managers to consider which metaprograms might be relevant for their project team. It is also a worthwhile exercise to reflect on one's OWN metaprograms and where his/her "default" position is located. Where might he/she benefit from some more flexibility? Some further questions to ponder...

- Where do I tend to operate? Where do I feel most comfortable?
- How do I perceive people at "the other end" of the spectrum? What do I think of them and their behaviour?
- What might they think of me and my behaviour?
- How has a lack of understanding in this area previously impacted my team members and key stakeholders?
- What specifically can I do to ensure this does not occur in future?
- Now that I understand this metaprogram, how can I use this knowledge to increase my performance in/of the team?
- How will increased flexibility benefit the project? The project team members? Our stakeholders?

References

Covey, Stephen. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Simon & Schuster, 2004
Bond, Phillippa. NLP Master Practitioner Certification Training. Inform Training & Research Pty Ltd, 1998