Bell Laboratories interviewed by Tom Dotz

As a systems engineer at Bell Laboratories, Ralph coaches a group of people that does the design and specification of multi-media messaging systems. They work with different technologies integrating voice, text, fax, and text-to-speech technologies for access over the telephone, fax and computer.

Tom interviewed Ralph as he was completing the Master Practitioner Training in Winter Park.

Tom: Well, tell me Ralph, how did you happen to come across NLP?

Ralph: The short story is that a friend of mine was talking about it and I asked him "how do I find out more?" He happens to run a bookstore so he sold me a book called Change Your Mind and Keep the Change. I read that first and from that book I wound up picking up Connirae Andreas' book Heart of the Mind. I was in a rather difficult personal situation and I used one of the processes in there on myself with no training and it worked! So I thought, "Gee, I think I should find out some more about this, the universe is telling me something." That's how this all got started.

Tom: Tell me, how have you been using what you've learned in your professional life?

Ralph: I use it quite a bit in my professional life. Personal communication skills are tremendously valuable because the position I have in the company is located squarely between marketing and engineering. So, part of my job is to be an effective translator of customer needs in the technical requirements. The communication skills are incredibly important. Being able to establish a good channel with folks and being able to have them hear what you have to say, even when it's "the technology won't do it," which people sometimes don't want to hear or "it's too expensive to develop." So from that standpoint it's important. I think the tools I've picked up here have actually helped me to create a very positive sub-coach who has made a lot of creative space for people. That's been really helpful. You can just see there's a lot of things that have happened as a result of just approaching things from different points of view, of just asking the right kinds of questions to open it up to make some room for creativity. Because often the corporations put people in a position of produce, produce and its not a good idea to produce if you're providing away on the method and you don't know what the goal is. So we spend a lot of time doing well-formed outcomes and getting clear goals before we run off and start people coding. It's very expensive to build a bunch of software that nobody wants to buy.

Tom: That's something that's happened often enough in the field.

Ralph: It really happens very often. I've noticed in the technical environment that these skills have helped me out a lot with that. It's so easy for even the managers who are promoted on their technical prowess to argue about the method of doing something but there's no agreement on the goal. That's really a classic in the engineering environment. It's just so much fun to talk about what they know. I mean, setting goals is hard.
So, to get people focused on the goals and mediating I've used my NLP skills a lot. There's actually something parallel to a Dilts' Logical Level model which I've used. Where the lowest level would be facts, and then your interpretation of the facts, and then the goals and methods. You really need to get the whole hierarchy nailed down before you have an agreement about something.

Tom: So you were able to take one of the models that was presented here and modify it to your own environment? You could bring a team together around a common goal that was well defined? They all knew what the goal was and how they would know when they had achieved it and the different elements that were necessary to support that goal?

Ralph: Exactly right. Occasionally I get into situations where I'm dealing with different factions within the com-pany. You might have somebody who's in charge of services and somebody else who's in charge of selling equipment to large companies and other folks who are selling equipment directly to businesses. It turns out that those markets have different needs and different rates of adoption. If everybody tries to focus on their own specific goal and they don't get it up to a larger chunk size to where you're trying to get all the products to work together, then you've got a problem. That's where my NLP skills come in.

Tom: So the goal is getting people to see their part in the bigger picture and coordinating the efforts between these diverse elements within the company? Is there anything you'd like to say particularly about NLP in terms of, for instance, if you were talking to one of your colleagues or associates, that would describe the benefits you've gotten from it?

Ralph: Well, I think the single biggest thing that brought me back, aside from the fact that the techniques are very valuable, was the emphasis here on ecology.

Tom: Ecology? What do you mean by that?

Ralph: Looking at things in a broader context, making sure that you aren't changing something that either doesn't need changing or if you change it, change it in a way that may be optimal. I think being able to make change in a larger context, to me is very, very important. I know some people who have done training in different areas and with different motivational strategies and skills where they got what they wanted, but it wasn't what they needed.

Tom: Oh. After they got it they found it wasn't really what they wanted. It sounds to me as though, in those cases, they hadn't really gotten to the bottom of what they wanted, to the real need behind it.

Ralph: That's exactly right. They either hadn't gotten to the real need or they hadn't looked at the consequences of getting it and maybe modifying the need in such a way as to make it more inclusive somehow.

Tom: Right. To make it fit better with the rest of their life.

Ralph: Yeah. So being a systems engineer, being part of the whole system was really important.