Applying NLP to Achieve Resilience in a VUCA situation: My

Covid-19 experience

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1. Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit us all like a tsunami out of nowhere in 2020 and fundamentally changed our lives, personally and professionally. This has been one of the most critical crises in our lifetimes: testing national governmental crisis management capabilities to the breaking point; challenging the financial survival of businesses large and small and how to they deal with their workforce; and challenging us to the breaking limit individually and with our families.

It is in this context that I strongly believe that by applying certain NLP techniques that helped me through this very difficult period.

1.1 Covid-19: A VUCA event?

With the pandemic still ravishing through many countries with the premonition of a second wave, we find ourselves asking many provoking questions: How could we have underestimated the impact of Covid-19? Could we have not been better prepared? How could we have responded differently?

All these begs a more fundamental question: why did this happen the way it did?
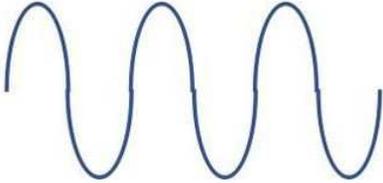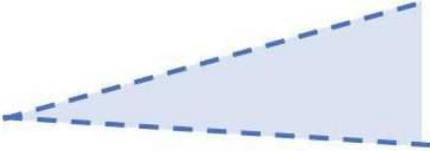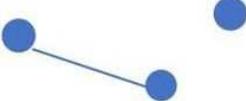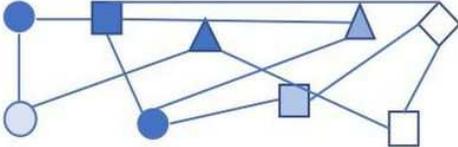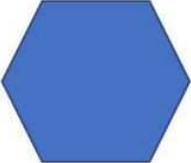
I would dare claim that the Covid-19 pandemic is a VUCA event!

2. VUCA

VUCA is an acronym – first used in 1987, drawing on the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus – to describe or to reflect on the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of general conditions and situations. The U.S. Army War College introduced the concept of VUCA to describe the more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous multilateral world perceived as resulting from the end of the Cold War. VUCA now describes the environment that business leaders face in the war against the COVID-19 pandemic.

- V = Volatility: the nature and dynamics of change, and the nature and speed of change forces and change catalysts.
- U = Uncertainty: the lack of predictability, the prospects for surprise, and the sense of awareness and understanding of issues and events.
- C = Complexity: the multiplex of forces, the confounding of issues, no cause-and-effect chain and confusion that surrounds organization.
- A = Ambiguity: the haziness of reality, the potential for misreads, and the mixed meanings of conditions; cause-and-effect confusion.

For people, organizations and societies affected by VUCA, you have a choice. Either you allow VUCA to overwhelm you, or you accept and adapt to it, so that you and your business can deal with its effects. When you decide to accept the concept of VUCA, you choose to empower everyone to deal with uncertain forces.

So it begs the question how is Covid-19 a VUCA event?

2.1 Volatility

Many people are now working in their home office, perhaps for the first time in their working lives. My company had already started last year a home office scheme that allowed 20% home office time. Nevertheless, working 100% home office remotely meant a great disruption to our normal way of working. Others less fortunate may be facing the end of their own business. Many are struggling with their children at home because kindergartens and schools have closed. Drastic Every day new information is coming in about what you can/can't do and what to watch out for. All these things have been unpredictable for us, but they happened overnight and we are forced to adapt to the situation. Things that were self-evident for us (small talk with colleagues over a coffee, having a personal face-to-face session with the line managers, having air time with senior management) are suddenly no longer there or possible. This describes very well what we understand by volatility. This has been a catalyst for radical changes in our business lives.

2.2 Uncertainty

No one can predict with confidence when the pandemic will end or when we will have a cure or vaccination. When can my company retail stores be able to operate again, when are we allowed to work in the office again, what impact will the country's shutdown have on the economy?

2.3 Complexity

No one can currently predict with any accuracy whether the restrictions made are the right ones and sufficient to contain the Covid-19 virus. Different levels of these restrictions are mixed up, which tear apart known, well-functioning relationships and make them unclear. The decisions that politicians

have been making in the last few weeks have to be made on the basis of the most complex

interrelationships (spread of the virus vs. restriction of freedom vs. economic consequences vs.

social problems vs. political consequences) and it is hardly possible to make a clear statement

whether we are on the right track. The sales for my employer for this year will collapse extremely,

the unemployment figures will rise rapidly in many parts of the world.

2.4 Ambiguity

The last letter, the "A" in VUCA, stands for ambiguity and is intended to express on the one hand

that in the rapidly changing world it is no longer possible to describe reality unambiguously, but on

the other hand that it is also impossible to find the right answer.

2.5 My VUCA situation: Covid-19 for me

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

– Viktor Frankl

The impact on my workplace was tremendous as with most people. Once the lockdown

started in mid-March 2020, we were asked to work from home immediately

Certain situations at the workplace was really stood out. What was even more challenging

for me was that I joined a new team beginning March that included responsibilities from a

completely new functions (Sales Strategy) since March and was only working onsite with my

team for 2 weeks before the lockdown started.

It is at this point that I actively referred to the NLP techniques from my Practioner and

Master seminars to help me overcome this difficult period. What was more enlightening

was that these techniques were being applied in aspect of resilience!

3. What is Resilience?

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. As much as resilience involves "bouncing back" from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth. (link)

Covid-19 is such a crisis situation that has created enormous challenges in my professional and personal world. Resilience has helped me get through and overcome these challenges. There are 6 key aspects of resilience:

- Confidence in yourself
- Stay Flexible
- Healthy Optimism
- See the big picture
- Proficiency
- Endurance and how to rebound

3.1 Confidence in yourself

The Covid-19 crisis often throws up unexpected situations that tests our confidence. For instance, I was given multiple responsibilities to support the Covid-19 crisis senior management team. Now, I was capable to do this given sufficient time to learn and master it but instead had to perform under extreme time pressure. During that time, I questioned

myself if I were able to perform the unexpected new task and my confidence had hit rock bottom at some stage.

One of the key elements of resilience is to maintain and build confidence in yourself. This will helped you tackle challenges effectively that come up unexpectedly.

NLP Format: Mini Change

This NLP technique helped me to gather the "resources" that was required for these particular situations. Key was to identify when the previous situations were and how I felt. Afterwards, the technique helped me identify the resources I needed in the form of a "resource tree":

- trust in my ability based on my previous working and project experiences
- energy to deal with the tight deadlines

When such demanding tasks come up now, I now believe that I can avoid a complete mental meltdown and cope with many of the difficult situations with the resources in me. Often, I try to access these resources again by visualizing how I "pluck" these resources from the "resource tree".

3.2 Stay Flexible

During the course of Covid-19, our team was receiving different priorities. During the first month of lockdown, we stopped non-essential operational projects to focus on core survival topics – if the company could not survive financially, our jobs would be lost. During the second month of lockdown, knowing that financial survival was secured, there was an emphasis to focus on strategic topics that most teams never had the time or focus to work on. During the third month of lockdown, we were ramping up the preparations to restart key parts of the business. This showed how dramatically our priorities were shifting!

Staying flexible is key to be successful during these VUCA situations.

NLP Technique: New Behavior Generator

Since the situations required different approaches, what really helped me was to model myself after colleagues. For instance, when we were focusing on strategy topics during the second month of lockdown, my coach session involved using the New Behavior Generator in order to model from another senior manager in my company who had strong strategy skillset and mindset. By mimicking the way he spoke and talked about strategy topics, the way he held his body posture, his facial expressions, it really helped me jump into the "strategy" role. To my surprise and to the surprise of my line manager, I was able to successfully complete the strategy task.

3.3 Healthy Optimism

Many challenges came up that induced or enhanced many limiting beliefs in me. For example. I did not agree in many topics with my new line manager - the remote work environment made the situation even worse. Additionally, some of planned projects were stopped due to budget freezes. The consequence was that I was instilling unconsciously several negative belief statements, e.g. "I am not doing a good job". The analogy is akin to withdrawing money from an already negative bank account, making the account even more negative than before.

This made me feel negative about the relationship with my managers

A healthy dose of optimism was needed to overcome this!

NLP Format: Core Transformation

This technique helped me understand the underlying motivation that was driving these unhealth feelings and emotions, especially intensifying over time. After a coaching session that involved intensive up-chunking, the coaching session determined that my core belief behind these negative statements which was "inner peace" – it was driving all these negative belief statements in me. The recognition of my "inner peace" core state helped me to counter the negative belief statements: "I am not doing a good job" – it is an extraordinary situation for me starting a new function and team during Covid-19.

I found the inner peace to tell myself: I AM DOING A GOOD JOB.

3.4 See the big picture

Developing the ability to see situations from various points of view has allowed me to be objective and respond to situations in a way that creates a positive outcome. This has motivated me to be open to new, sometimes opposing ideas, and treating challenges as the normal grind for success.

NLP Format: Meta Programs

From a NLP perspective, knowing my meta-programs helped me to better recognize how I react in different situations and just as important, it helped me to identify the meta programs of my business partners.

For instance, my meta program for "Chunk Size" is "Detailed Oriented", therefore I am conscious to avoid diving into details when I know that there are colleagues who have the "Big Picture" overview. In fact, I consciously remind myself when such colleagues in my remote video conference and avoid going into details in an auto-pilot mode. This has tremendously helped me avoid conflicts with these colleagues.

3.5 Proficiency

Being in a new role and function, there were many things for me to learn. Additionally, Covid-19 kept throwing curve balls at me, in the form of new and unexpected projects.

What was imperative for me was while I continuously learn knowledge and improve on my skillsets to achieve the various goals for the different tasks. What happened to me initially was that I was throwing myself into every single topic and working to learn as much as possible. My priorities became unclear, I was jumping into every single new topic and was losing sight of my focus. This was even hindering me from achieving the goals which were quite achievable.

What I realized I needed was a clear goal setting to manage the correct outcome!

NLP Format: Goal Setting

This NLP technique has now become one of my favorite techniques. Previously, I was asking myself, how difficult can goal setting be – just write it down on a piece of paper and execute it. This completely ignored the values and belief systems inside each of us and the resulting emotions that hinder progress. With this technique, I was able to visualize and "feel" the end goal and work towards it. For example, I was given a difficult presentation to prepare for senior management and this technique really helped me focus on the end goal while setting the individual steps that I needed to get there!

3.6 Endurance and how to rebound

Increasing my mental and emotional endurance has enabled me to build the momentum required to "bounce forward" when I hit a roadblock. Understanding and accepting I will get knocked off course along my journey and that my stamina is the key to keeping me moving has helped me to achieve more, even when I faced obstacles.

In my case, after many down periods, I needed to keep myself balanced without losing

NLP Technique: Mindfulness using Meditation

Here I would like to highlight my application of mindfulness in the form of meditation. Even though meditation is not an official NLP technique, it draws upon the basics techniques of NLP Hypnosis and Trance. Using ambiguity in the meditation language and applying rhythm, tonality and flow, I am able to I drift in and out of meditative or even hypnotic states , which generates an extreme level of calmness that I did not have before. I must admit that this has been life changing! Now meditation is part of my daily routine!

Conclusion

Covid-19 has been one of the greatest crises to hit mankind since decades. It is a VUCA event that most of us have not been prepared for. For me personally, it was even more difficult to navigate through the crisis especially since I started a new job with a new function and within a new team before the lockdown started.

Adopting the fundamentals of resilience have been key for me to overcome these challenges. However, to do this involves a lot of personal transformation: mindset, etc. Knowing what to change is only the first step – you have to make the change somehow.

NLP enables these changes in a systemic approach.