

Robert Dilts

Helping different kinds of groups work well together with NLP

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

Robert Dilts has been involved with NLP since its very early days. As well as studying and working with John Grinder and Richard Bandler, he studied with Milton Erickson and Gregory Bateson.

He says, “I use NLP for everything except breathing. In some ways, NLP is my daily life. I’m constantly modelling language patterns and I’m constantly eliciting people’s values and preferences. I have my own metamodeler inside so when I say something, I ask myself ‘how specifically?’ So really, it’s not something I do it’s something I have. To me, NLP has always been a description of what works. One of the things I try to teach people is that it’s not something you just do in exceptional circumstances. It’s something you do all the time.”

Anyone who knows anything about NLP will be familiar with at least some of Robert Dilts’ contributions to the field. He is largely responsible for techniques and developments in neurological levels, allergies, “sleight of mouth” (also known as criteria utilisation) patterns, re-imprinting and gentling exercises and many more.

He also did a lot of work around beliefs and values. When his mother, Patricia, had cancer, her doctors said that nothing more could be done. Reluctant to give up and figuring at least he couldn’t do any harm, Robert did some NLP work with her himself.

He didn’t want her to visualise the cancerous cells as violent or to have any war metaphors. Instead, he asked her to

think of them as overgrown grass and to see her healthy cells as a sheep gently grazing and keeping any cancer in check. Ultimately, she lived another 13 years (longer than some of those doctors) and wrote a book about her recovery.

I interviewed Robert when he was in London delivering some training. It was pretty amazing to watch him be so generous with his time with so many of the participants. One person, who had attended the whole course with him, told me that he’d been taking time to talk to people like that throughout. He always seemed to be smiling (I was beaming myself after the interview) and it was lovely to see that someone so

focused on other people is doing well for himself.

His interest in other people and a more systemic approach means it’s logical that Robert should be very interested in Generative Collaboration.

He says, “‘Collaboration’ is about working together and ‘generative’ is about creating something new.

Ultimately, generative collaboration is about working together creatively. It is different to basic collaboration where everyone knows there’s something to do and you assign roles. The result is the sum of all the parts. But in generative collaboration, we don’t know what we’re going to do when we get started.



“I was showing a video of some musicians spontaneously improvising together and it is quite different than saying ‘OK, here’s the piece we’re playing, you rehearse your part and I’ll rehearse mine. You do what you’re supposed to do and I’ll do what I’m supposed to do.’ In this piece, they created something new that had never been played before. There’s excitement and it’s uplifting. So the idea of generative collaboration is to help people in all kinds of different teams work together in that way – whether it’s at work or in families or even in NLP associations.”

Dilts is excited about NLP’s potential in areas like politics. He remembers, “I got involved in NLP through politics. I studied Linguistics and John Grinder was my professor. I’m still in touch with Grinder and the others. The biggest challenge with staying in touch with people like that is that we all travel. John and I both live – or shall I say, we both have houses – in Santa Cruz. Last time I was there, I phoned John but he was in Saudi Arabia. But John’s a mentor. I also keep in touch with David Gordon and Stephen Gilligan who was there at the beginning. I keep in touch with Richard from a little more of a distance.

“One of the problems with NLP, frankly, is that John and Richard were brilliant but they were rebels. They were revolutionaries. And the people that they studied were loners and so there wasn’t work as a community or in teams. NLP was definitely generated collaboratively - there was a group of us. But the focus wasn’t on getting along. It was a very individualistic approach. One of the great challenges for NLP is finding structures that work and fit the NLP type of person.”

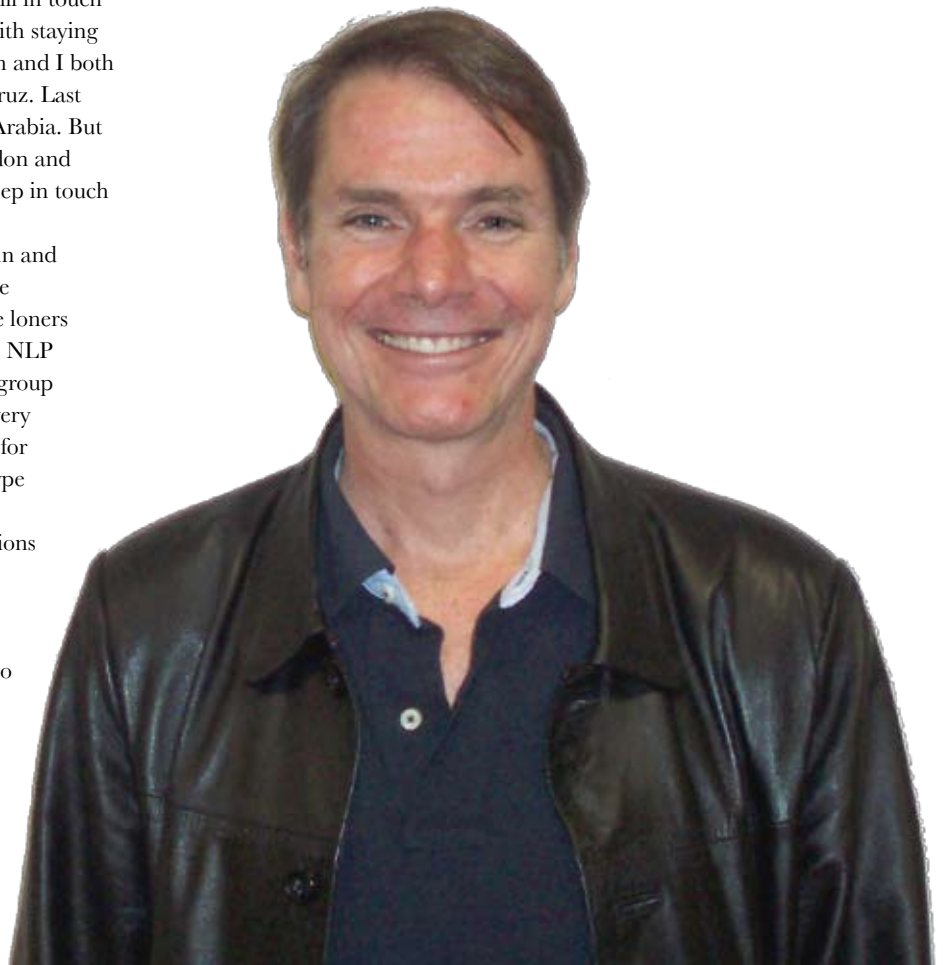
Robert has recently been coaching in NLP associations in France and Germany and says he’s really enjoyed the work. He says, “I’ve seen, of course, a lot of NLP associations come and go over the years. They’ve worked the best when they’ve been places for people to come and share ideas, to network and to generatively collaborate. They start to cave in when they start rigidifying standards and controlling the market place. But I know they have a positive intention.

“When it started, NLP was such an innovative field but many people are still using organisational structures from the 12th century. Structure is needed to give benefit to the associations. But it can run into difficulties when it becomes exclusive. Like saying, ‘You can’t do that; you have to do this, only this is allowed.’ Let’s have a strong sense of identity but then reach out from there.

“One of the associations I’m founder and still a director of is the public Institute for the Advanced Studies of Health. Part of the goal is not just to say ‘this is the only correct way to work in health’ but to ask ‘How can NLP help make people healthier?’”

For anyone who has ever worried about NLP being manipulative, I would refer them to Robert Dilts to help them see NLP at its best. ●

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Resources

Robert Dilts has written several books including: *Neuro-Linguistic Programming Vol. I* (with John Grinder, Richard Bandler and Judith DeLozier, 1980), *Changing Belief Systems with NLP* (1990) and *Beliefs: Pathways to Health and Well Being* (with Tim Hallbom and Suzi Smith, 1990), *Tools for Dreamers* (with Todd Epstein and Robert W. Dilts, 1991) and *Skills for the Future* (with Gino Bonissone, 1993), *Effective Presentation Skills* (1994), *Strategies of Genius Vols. I-III* (1994-1995), *Dynamic Learning* (with Todd Epstein, 1995), *Visionary Leadership Skills* (1996), *Tools of the Spirit* (with Robert McDonald, 1997), *Modeling with NLP* (1998), *Sleight of Mouth* (1999), *The Encyclopedia of Systemic Neuro-Linguistic Programming and NLP New Coding* (with Judith DeLozier, 2000), *Alpha Leadership: Tools for Business Leaders Who Want More From Life* (with Ann Deering and Julian Russell, 2002) and, most recently *From Coach to Awakener* (2003).