

MIM+ Fellowship Case Study

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Using The Precision Model To Enhance Communication In Times Of Uncertainty: Helping Families Prepare For Transition

Human interaction is the backbone of service delivery, especially when it comes to Employee Mobility. However, with the onset of a global pandemic, human interaction has been irreparably curtailed. In such apocalyptic times, the words of Charles Darwin ring true - '[i]t is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.'

As Covid-19 continues to influence the way we live and work, it has become critical for Global mobility providers to adapt to changing times. In their study titled "Human Experience in Times of Uncertainty," Deloitte Digital 2020 highlights three trends for organisations to pay attention to. The first is the need to make digital experiences "more human." The second is a strong focus on "core human values" and the third is the need to invest in "building trust." The study states that only "those organizations that understand best what it means to be human, anticipating and meeting the deeply human needs as they change, will likely be the first to recover and thrive." There is a dire need for Global mobility providers to re-adapt mobility programmes with a strong focus on human interaction in order to survive these times of uncertainty (Deloitte, 2020). In this case study, I aim to utilise a model of communication called

the Precision Model (McMaster and Grinder, 1993) in the context of Global Mobility. The paper demonstrates that an innovative use of the Precision Model may help relocation consultants expand on the incoming assignee's needs with greater clarity during pre-arrival services. This model has been of value in our organisation, Formula Group, by giving our relocation consultants a structure to support their interaction with assignees and build a better understanding of assignee needs.

Introduction

Formula group is a leading provider of corporate service solutions and relocation services. With offices in six locations across India, we have been relocating employees from various industries and diverse cultures since 2004. With a "Single Window Service Solution" motto, we handle all the relocation and fleet management needs of our clients - in country, inbound and outbound. Formula recognises that relocating to new environments and cultures comes with its own challenges. This becomes even more complex with the regional, cultural and linguistic diversity across India. Thus, relocation consultants play a critical role in providing on-the-ground support, information and practical services to the assignee and their family. They shape the overall relocation experience of the assignee, making them feel safe, comfortable and empowered. Formula invests in learning and development programs to build consultant interpersonal skills and provide them with the tools necessary for a successful relocation program.

In my role at Formula, I identify areas to improve service delivery so that we can provide optimum support to relocating families, reducing the anxiety and uncertainty that comes from relocating to a new country. I received a MSc in Clinical Mental Health Sciences from

University College London and since have worked as an Associate Psychologist at a leading hospital in India before transitioning into the field of Global Mobility. During my practice, I was trained in Neuro Linguistic programming (NLP). As I applied the linguistic models of NLP to my client interaction, I saw a significant improvement in my ability to connect with clients. In 2019, post my transition into the field of Global Mobility, I began reading about NLP's application in an organisational context. A book titled : *'Precision: A new approach to Communication. How to get information you need to get results'* (McMaster and Grinder, 1993) caught my attention. It applied the communication tools of NLP to an organisational context, focusing on how managers in an organisation can use these tools to communicate with greater clarity. I was curious to understand how this could be applied to the context of Global Mobility.

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the world, seemingly overnight. As the world went into lockdown, mobility teams responded with a focus on assignee safety: managing those on assignments, handling the temporary cessation of certain assignments, dealing with the sudden repatriation of assignees, etc. (Deloitte, 2020). Today, we are a year into the pandemic. Like the world, mobility providers are adjusting to the "new normal" and forging their wayforward. Various locations across Asia Pacific begin lifting lockdowns (Osborn, 2020). Yet, we continue to navigate a liminal stage, full of confusion, with continuously changing travel restrictions, quarantine rules, delays in visa applications, changes in arrival dates, etc. Some employees prepare to re-commence paused assignments with a focus on reintegration, others prepare to adjust to a new culture post lock down. Some families choose to remain home while others choose to join the re-deploying individual. In the constantly shifting landscape that is post Covid-19 relocation, what remains critical is communication. The purpose of this case study is to demonstrate how the questions of the Precision Model can be used by relocation consultants to understand assignee needs with greater clarity and precision during pre-arrival services, specifically during these changing times.

The impact of Covid-19 is experienced differently by different people. Understanding the specific and unique assignee, their specific needs and concerns, by directly asking them and engaging with them is key to providing meaningful support. The questions of the Precision Model allow precisely this. Moreover, the pre-arrival phase of relocation has become an important touch point to engage with assignees. With a cut down on look and feel visits, orientation tours, etc. Assignee's more and more rely on virtual communication with destination providers (zoom calls, mobile applications, virtual house tours, virtual city orientations, etc.) before arrival. While the influx of digital options is meant to support communication, it often results in a deficit of human connection. Using a communication model like the Precision Model to develop a clear and shared understanding of requirements can help leverage these virtual platforms to improve the mobility experience. It can help deepen trust with personalized human experiences that meet assignees at a point of need.

Moreover, the first telephone call with the Relocation Consultant can be a primary touch point for Assignee's to dissipate anxieties and build tacit knowledge about living in a new location with a different social and cultural context (Feldman and Tompson, 1993). Specific information about the host location, before arrival, can minimize stress caused by the uncertainty and ambiguity associated with living in a new location, especially during a Pandemic (Mezias and Scandura, 2005). The questions of this model can facilitate an open dialogue to share needs and fears. The consultant can set accurate expectations about the location, and highlight relevant information that can provide a greater sense of confidence about the transition.

This model is a comprehensive body of knowledge and to summarise it in a short case-study is no small task. Therefore, the paper will focus exclusively on those tools of the model that are relevant to the scope of the case study. The first section titled 'Theoretical Base' will expand on the basic premise of NLP and the Precision Model. The second section will focus

on application of theory to practice. It will delineate the tools along with examples and case studies of how they can be applied by relocation consultants. The final section titled 'Conclusion' will highlight how the model was used to enhance Formula's Needs Assessment Process, and share the learnings that we continue to take from it's application.

Theoretical Base - NLP And It's Basic Premise:

Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) was originally modelled by Richard Bandler and John Grinder from the linguistic patterns of psychiatrist and hypnotherapist Milton Erickson, founder of Gestalt therapy Fritz Perls, and pioneer family therapist Virginia Satir (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). NLP is about the systematic links between language and the nervous system, and how our language and neurological systems programme our behaviour.

As we experience the world, we obtain information through our five senses. Our language and neurological systems store this information and form internal structures which make up our private maps or model of the world. This internal map of the world consists of all our experiences, beliefs, values, desires, and expectations that guide our future actions and decisions. This model of the world is our current reality of the world, and we interpret the external world based on this reality.

Meta Model of NLP:

The Meta Model, a core model of NLP, is a set of questions that allow us to gather information that specifies someone's experience to get a fuller representation of that experience, in other words, to get a complete picture of their model of the world.

First introduced in a book called ‘Structure of Magic: A Book about Language and Therapy’ (Grinder and Bandler, 1976), the purpose of the meta-model was to remove ambiguity from communication, expand information to unearth what is hidden or missing; and complete the “picture” to the extent possible.

The Precision Model:

While the Meta model was introduced for its application in therapy, Grinder and McMaster (1993) adapted it’s techniques to be applicable in an organisational context in a book titled ‘ Precision: A new approach to Communication. How to get information you need to get results’.

According to the precision model, communication that supports an effective transfer of verbal information is in large part a process of matching one’s map of the world with that of the other person. According to this model, the highest quality information is realised when the object or action of discussion is immediately observable. Since, that is not always the case in an organisational context, highest quality words describe things or actions in the world which cannot be confused with others. For example, when I say Taj Mahal, the listener understands the specific real world object I am pointing to with my words. However, when I say, “customer satisfaction” it could refer to a diverse collection of activities. Depending on the listeners experience, they will have varying internal models for the word “customer satisfaction”.

The illusion that we understand what a person is saying when they use such “low quality” words, leads to errors in communication. Thus, the model offers a set of tools to help the user elicit exactly the information needed to create precise and shared representations for actions and decisions to be taken.

Application of Theory to Practice

The Precision model has three sets of tools (Frames, Procedures and Pointers) which have different specific functions. This case study focuses on one frame, one procedure, and one pointer as relevant to the context.

The Evidence Procedure is a powerful question that asks the individual to take a mental leap to the target state and describe the characteristics of their desired target. Some variants include :

what evidence could you use to know that....

how would you know that you have succeeded in....

what would you see that would let you know that

Consultants can develop variants of the evidence question which is consistent with their own verbal communication and ask a question like:

How would you know that you have found the home for your family?

Such a question allows the assignee to freely expand on their requirements, and gives the consultant a clear understanding of how the assignee defines success. With a clear view of success for the assignee, the consultant can go on to meet those requirements or set accurate expectations about what is available in the new location.

The Case About Jogging Parks

A young couple moving from Dubai to India, filled in our needs assessment form mentioning their basic housing requirements: a 3 bedroom, semi-furnished apartment, close to the assignee's office, preferably at a high floor.

After an initial rapport building on the phone, the consultant reconfirmed the requirements mentioned in the form and went on to ask: *What would let you know that you have found the home for you and your wife?* Surprisingly the assignee's answer was, "a lot of sunlight". As the conversation proceeded, the assignee shared that his current home was on the top floor and has a lot of sunlight coming in. The conversation resulted in an interaction where the assignee felt comfortable to share details that may not have come up otherwise. While a "high floor" had been mentioned in the form, it was simply a piece of information that lacked the nuance of meaning it had for the family. The assignee also went on to share a new requirement of having a jogging route next to his home. He shared that he was fond of his morning routine, and would want to go for a run in the morning. He was worried if there would be any jogging trails or parks around that would not be too crowded.

When the listing of houses was finalised and shared with the assignee, the consultant highlighted the jogging tracks, parks and breakfast cafes around the apartment. Along with the usually crowded hours to avoid. The consultant had a clear view of success for the assignee and as a result was able to reassure and meet his initially unstated needs and gain enhanced feedback.

The As-if Frame is the establishment of an 'as if' context so that additional information becomes available. This would involve asking the assignee to go through various hypothetical or "As if" situations in order to elicit more detailed information. The goal is to encourage the individual to expand one's Model of the World. Such a frame can be used to encourage the assignee to prioritise between requirements, or think of alternatives. This can also be a useful way to set expectations about certain requirements during the initial call. For Example:

let's act as if these requirements have been met, what else would you want to look for?

If xyz requirement isn't available within our budget (or in the location), then what alternatives would you want to look for?

Vague information such as 'I would prefer something closer to the office or the children's school' will be clarified with a question like:

Let's act as if you have to choose between a location closer to the office and closer to the children's school, what would you prioritise? OR How would you decide?

This could lead to additional information that may have been missed out, and give an insight into the families priorities, and decision making criteria.

Another important tool of the Precision Model is called 'Pointers'. These are questions that request increasing specificity of terms that could have more than one meaning. The goal is to clarify low quality words to ensure a shared understanding. The Precision Model identifies four categories of pointers: Noun blockbusters (nouns), Action blockbusters (verbs) , universal quantifiers (eg: any, all, some, never, always) and comparators (eg: less, more, better, worse). The response to any of these words is usually a question like "what specifically", "how specifically." A statement such as 'I would like the apartment to be in close proximity to a medical center' would result in the following responses within this tool:

What specifically do you mean by *close proximity*?

Any medical center?

Is there any specific medical center you have in mind?

Is there any specific reason for this?

While the first question will lead to a precise and shared understanding of the term “close proximity,” the follow up questions will lead to specific information such as the need for close proximity due to a fear about the health of a family member, or a medical condition that needs to be taken into consideration by the consultant, etc.

The Case About The Medical Center

A young mother from Germany was moving to India with her two young children. She mentioned in her form that the apartment should be close to a medical center. During the telephone call with the consultant (beginning with a rapport building and asking the evidence question), she reiterated this requirement. The consultant asked her : *Is there any specific importance of this?* The assignee mentioned that her daughter had Asthma, although she had mentioned this in the form, she shared how worried she was about her daughter. She had even read multiple articles about Delhi's pollution levels reaching an all time high, and was worried if this had been a good decision for her family.

When sharing the listing, the consultant highlighted information about children friendly medical centers, access to pharmacies, and how to reach them. We were able to minimize her anxiety, and provide meaningful support as the family transitioned to a new country. Meaningful support is not always about presenting the best picture, but sharing honest information that could help prepare the assignee to face challenges in the host location. The consultant could share specific and concrete solutions that could reassure the assignee, something as small as ensuring an air purifier in the house.

Large scale improvements in service delivery requires small steps to be taken in the daily service process. The questions of the precision model have been one such such addition to our needs assessment process leading to impactful improvement in service delivery. The Precision Model has informed the development of 'Formula's Needs Assessment Tool'. This tool gives our consultants a structure for client interaction. It encourages them to identify low quality information and ask questions to elicit high quality information related to the property, neighbourhood, location, additional lifestyle requirements, alternatives to requirements, etc. 'Formula's Needs Assessment Tool' was introduced to our consultants via a virtual training program consisting of two phases. The first phase aimed at introducing the concepts of the Precision Model and equipping our consultants with the skills to use it's tools. It consisted of demo sessions and interactive application based activities. The second phase focused on the application of these skills to service delivery. The consultants were divided into teams and given time to apply these skills. At the end of 4 weeks, each team presented a case study of how the tool impacted their service delivery, their primary learnings, it's advantages and disadvantages.

Conclusion

The primary advantage of the Precision Model lies in the consultants ability to clearly understand needs and provide a higher level of personalized service. Since its application we see an immense confidence in our consultant's ability to connect with assignee's, understand their needs and deliver excellent services. We have been receiving excellent feedback from assignee's, highlighting their experience with various consultants.

Moreover, when working in a multicultural environment, language differences are an obvious impediment to effective communication. Different cultures assign different meanings to words and phrases (Asherman and Bing, 2000). The Precision Model helps consultants and assignee's arrive at a common representation of terms that may take on different meanings if not clarified.

The Precision model questions encourage us to communicate from more than our own perspective, and develop an openness to learn about another's experiences, feelings, values and beliefs. This results in a meaningful relationship based on empathy and mutual respect. Assignee's feel a greater sense of comfort in sharing their concerns.

No research is complete without acknowledging its limitations. While we have adapted the tools of the model for use in client interaction, the model in itself is primarily developed for managers in an organisation. As we apply it and adapt to the context of client-interaction, there is lack of information or research to rely on.

Moreover, the model is based on the assumption that the discussion in the organisation is taking place between "native" speakers of a language, it was not designed for speakers of different native languages or bilingual speakers. Even though we notice many advantages of the tool when communicating in multicultural environments, despite the western origins, there may be other models more appropriate for communication in a multicultural context.

During its practical application, we often find cases when the assignee is not available for the first telephone call or disinterested in a detailed needs assessment. Also, the needs assessment form is often filled by the HR of the company and the involvement of the assignee is limited to the property viewing. Therefore, a thorough needs assessment cannot be implemented. Finally, consultants might ask questions in a manner of interrogation rather than a conversation. Thus, it's application requires adequate knowledge and practice.

Relocating to a new location is filled with uncertainty even in the absence of a global pandemic. During this transition, a clear and precise understanding of each assignee's needs is critical to provide meaningful support. The Precision Model offers a set of tools by which relocation consultants can elicit precise information about assignee requirements. It's questions help provide a clear and comprehensive view of success for the assignee, and facilitate an open dialogue for assignees to share their concerns. This model has been of immense value in enhancing our needs assessment process at Formula Group. It has helped leverage our digital communication to be "more human". An innovative application of the precision model can revolutionize customer service in any industry - a revolution required to survive the era of Covid-19.

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