

Walking

in the shoes of the client

 **towergate professional risks**

Towergate Professional Risks work with clients of many types – including many therapists – providing them with the liability insurance they need to practice. When they decided to improve the communications skills of their team, they chose NLP techniques to do it. Andy Coote reports on the approach and its outcomes

Many readers of *Rapport* will be familiar with Towergate Professional Risks. They provide specialist liability insurance to psychologists, psychotherapists, counsellors, complementary therapists, personnel and human resources consultants and work with, amongst others, BACP, UKCP and ANLP.

Based in Leeds, Towergate have been in the liability insurance business for 90 years. After a recent period of change – moving offices and changes to technology – Sue Lewis, Operations Manager, felt the need to offer additional training in communications skills. “We are a regulated business and have to provide a lot of training but most of it is Insurance-based technical training. We felt we also needed to provide some personal skills training. We saw it as helping people to help themselves. Most of the work we do with clients is telephone based where it helps to be in a good state and to have clarity in our communications. We were also aware that communication in the right language leads to a happier client and wanted our people to increase their awareness of power and effect of language and voice”.

The decision was made to provide training to some of the management team in the use of NLP techniques. Sue Lewis had already

experienced the effect that NLP can have on communication and wanted the team to realise that they have the power to be able to “make a valuable contribution and proactively help to shape the business”.

After taking recommendations, Towergate chose to work with Nick Kemp of Nick Kemp Training, a locally based trainer with an excellent reputation. Nick’s first activity was to go in and spend time with Sue Lewis and Nick Houghton, MD of Towergate Professional Risks, to understand the need. He then emailed all of the potential trainees and asked what

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three key things they wanted from training in communication. Following that he then spent a day interviewing all of the people selected as a “comprehensive information check against Sue and Nick’s perceptions of the needs and to discover each person’s model of the world especially what was and was not working for them”.

Based on those interviews and the initial brief, common themes emerged allowing Nick



and the Towergate team to agree the main issues to be addressed and to balance the teams. The one-day training to be delivered to two groups was then designed to meet those business needs. Nick Kemp notes that the main elements were to be “Rapport building, problem solving, the effect and importance of state, awareness and use of language and voice and awareness that how and what you ask determines results”.

Despite the NLP content of the course, it was described to the participants as a course about improving communications with the aims of understanding how people communicate, how the participants do what they do and how to get the best from what they were doing.

The training itself was designed to be practical and employed exercises to get the participants using – and embedding – the skills they were learning. The participants were shown the value of open questions in learning what the client really wants and how the right language can produce more detailed and accurate information. The power of specific and clear questioning was also explored. Participants had plenty of opportunity to practice the skills.

One example from the course shows the effect of the right language on eliciting information. “One member’s biggest challenge”, notes Nick Kemp, “was communicating to a group of around 12 people within the business and explaining policy to them. At the end of these briefings, he would ask “do you have any problems?” but no one ever spoke up. As a result he only found the problems once the teams were implementing the policy. I explained that most people won’t admit to problems or talk about them in a ➤

group and he agreed to change the approach to “what else do you need from me before you begin with this?”

Was the initiative a success? One of the participants was Steve Garbutt, Customer Service Manager and a self-admitted ‘cynic and sceptic’. “I’ve been in insurance for 20 years and have experienced lots of previous external training. To be honest, my expectations were not brilliant.” The approach, delivery and, above all, the content, changed that view. “Nick came to speak to everyone, identified our issues which was really good and then tailored the course to what we needed. It was the first time anyone had taken that time to make it relevant to us.” Steve found the interactivity useful as well, “the role plays related to the work I do, so I have the confidence to keep questioning people about the type of work they do and to match insurance more exactly to their needs”. The benefits are also being passed on to others. Steve is now showing other members of his team how to use the techniques both within the team and with customers. “It was a positive experience for me and the whole communication of the company is now much clearer with less misunderstanding or ambiguity.”

The feedback reaching Nick Kemp is that business is going extremely well and that there has been a “definite improvement in communication”. One participant has told him that he is “having a lot of fun putting it into practice with customers”.

One of the direct benefits of the training was that they were able to work on telephone scripts to make them more conversational. “Most people’s perception of insurance is that it is a necessary evil and they want the process to be as easy and pleasant as possible. Towergate’s people are selling peace of mind,” suggests Nick Kemp. “I was also able to help with being able to give bad news by working on their use of language to direct clients into useful states and also to enable them to dissociate from the client’s emotional state.”

The effects will go beyond work and into the participants’ lives. “The course was about how people communicate in a much broader

sense. It will provide them with skills for life. People are being influenced all of the time and it is useful to be aware of when and how it is happening”.

The management team are also pleased with the outcomes. Sue Lewis is now looking at how to build on what has been achieved. “It seems to have worked for everyone but some will take more time to get all of the benefits”. She is now planning to build personal skills training into the ongoing staff development and sees it as a benefit in finding and retaining staff. “It is always hard to get the right staff and we want to hang on to those we have. It isn’t just about money either. We recognise that the skills we are teaching makes them more valuable to Towergate. We want our staff to be empowered and this has helped that. People now have a more open mind and look for wider possibilities. It is a valuable part of what we’ve done in training.”

“The whole process was helped by Nick’s approach. He devised a good programme and delivered it to a mix of people, fully taking into account their individual styles and behaviours. We hope that our customers benefit from the difference the training has made.” ●

