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How can emotional intelligence (EI) and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) help leaders with the ability to deal with the impact of COVID-19?

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has borne witness to unprecedented change in business, the likes of which has not been seen since the beginning of the internet revolution. This situation has placed leaders in a unique and challenging scenario, which sees them repositioning their companies and workforce in ways that were impossible to foresee, resulting in unprecedented changes to normal workplace responsibilities. This paper posits that the practical implications of using emotional intelligence (EI) and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) can help leaders act in ways that are more empathetic and intentional in managing the emotional impacts caused by workplace stress, distress, isolation and other factors caused by the pandemic, both professionally and personally. In using the tools offered by EI and NLP, leaders can better understand 'self' and 'other', in the context, not only of the current pandemic crisis but in other more general contexts associated with workplace changes, and the stress associated with those changes.

The phrase "self-isolation" is one that will go into history books and discussed for a whilst to come, long after a vaccine for COVID-19 has reached mass coverage. The impact of COVID-19 is unprecedented. According to a BBC report, as of July 2021, there are 181 million cases, with almost 4 million deaths. The corresponding impact on jobs, study programmes and economic growth and recovery, globally, is immeasurable. Additionally, the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) adds that the world economy in mid-2020 was at its slowest rate of growth since 2009, with a growth forecast at just 2.4% in 2020, down from 2.9% 6 months previous; however, that growth accelerated in the second half of the year and finished the year at 3.3% growth, with an expectation that 2021 will reach 5.6 %, "the fastest post-recession rate in 80 years" (World Bank, 2021).

There are corresponding emotion impacts aligned to the above statistics. COVID-19 has resulted in heightened anxiety, fear, frustration, impacts on mental health, and a more insidious impact on our general human psychology as displayed by way of panic and stockpiling behaviours seen displayed on our television screens. These scenes are such that the one must question the psychological impact of a multi-year pandemic on society and more specifically, what can be done to help people transition in and out of the highs and lows associated with the various stages of the pandemic. This paper asks, what role can leaders of organisations play during this period to manage the impacts of COVID-19 on their employees? This paper seeks to establish an understanding of what leaders can leverage to effectively manage the emotional impacts on their employees of this pandemic specifically, but also other factors that emotionally impact employees by examining leadership styles and behaviours, Additionally, it asks how can leaders look after their own emotions whilst managing those of others?

This paper forms part of a broader qualitative study exploring how emotional intelligence (EI) and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), influences Transformational Leadership (TFL) ability. Current studies in EI and TFL show correlations between both in terms of inherent behavioural dimensions; however, there are no studies showing correlations between EI and NLP. Utilising the literature on leadership, EI and NLP, this paper makes a series of recommendations to address the emotional impacts on employees of the COVID-19, pandemic, but also to other, more general, factors that impact the emotional well-being of employees.

1. Literature review

The principles and practices of emotional intelligence (EI) (Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2004) and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) (Bandler & Grinder, 1975) as per Figure 1, are understood in leadership terms as a leader's ability to understand and manage his/her own emotions, and those of others, as a

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fundamental primaeval task (Goleman, 1996). This process is undertaken through a leader connecting with his/her own abstract mental reality, or intrapersonal awareness, as a mind–body–emotion system (Hall, 1994). Whilst Freedman's Six Second model (2007) begins to move EI theory into practice, the other pioneers in EI, namely, Mayer and Salovey (1997), Bar-On (1997), and Goleman (1995) have provided theoretical explanations of emotions and emotional intelligence, as per Figure 2, which include the meta-correlations of thinking, feeling, language, and behaving, which have been key experiential additions of NLP. In addition to the meta-correlations of thinking, feeling, language, and behaving, NLP includes employing the principles of self-relations psychotherapy (S. G. Gilligan, 1997), and of hypnotherapy as a means of working with the unconscious mind (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Bateson, 1979; Dilts, 1980; Erickson, 1983; Hall, 2008), as part of the mind–body-emotion system.

Both EI and NLP have received criticism for different reasons. EI is criticised for treating emotions as though they are a stable and unitary construct (Kaplan et al., 2014), and as such does not provide a complete picture of leader emotion management (Kaplan et al., 2014) experiences and practices. This notwithstanding, the "self" and "other" focus of both EI and NLP, arguably, are brought together through engagement with the vast reservoir of knowledge that is the unconscious mind (Erickson, 1983), and the patterns for working with the unconscious mind as a critical part of leader self-management, self-regulation, and self-actualisation practices (Maslow, 1971).

On the other hand, NLP has been criticised as a pseudoscience (Witkowski, 2010). Whilst the evidence for the use of NLP as psychological therapy is mixed, it is a concept or theory that has gained widespread acceptance, specifically in organisational leadership (Carey et al., 2010), and therefore, one worthy, if not of psychological therapy use, in theoretical and practical leadership.

The authors argue that these practices, EI and NLP, can enable leaders to guide their own emotions and greatly assist them in dealing with the impacts of COVID-19, particularly in how to best manage and use emotions from an interpersonal and intrapersonal perspective (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; Goleman, 1995).

This paper proposes EI and NLP as complimentary models best suited as tools for leaders of organisations during crisis periods and times of heightened emotional turbulence, or full-blown emotion displays (Watson, 2000). Further, we propose EI and NLP as practical models, not just for leaders leading during the COVID-19 pandemic, but more importantly, for present and future leaders looking to become the best leaders they can be as part of an ongoing process of self-development and self-discovery (Maslow, 1971).
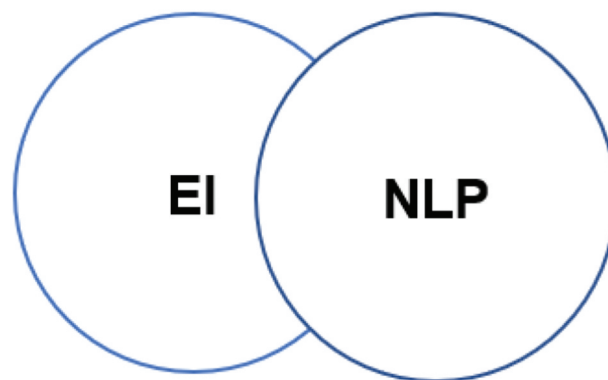

Figure 1. EI and NLP interconnected

Figure 2. The EI Theoretical Principles

In sum, we suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has only helped, surreptitiously, raise a pre-existing leadership crisis, one that if given sufficient attention, will assist leaders managing within and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

1.1. Definition of terms

1.2. Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a theory about the ability to actively understand, process, and influence one's own emotions and those of others, to guide behaviour. Despite the varying iterations and interpretations of EI theory (Bar-On, 1997; Cooper & Sawaf, 1998; Freedman, 2017; Goleman, 1995; Mayor & Salovey & Caruso, 2000), there is general agreement that the dimensions of EI can be categorised under the following four headings; "understanding self", "understanding others", "managing self", and "managing others" (Kewalramani et al., 2015).

1.3. Neuro-Linguistic Programming

As per Figure 3, Neuro-linguistic programming, also known as NLP, is a model of communication, coaching technique and an attitude that specifically focuses
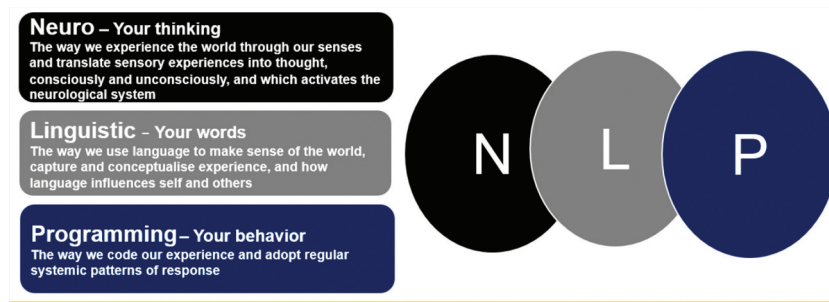
Figure 3. What is NLP?

on individual internal learning to improve self-awareness, develop greater skills in self-management, communication, and interpersonal awareness, the aim being for leaders to gain overall skills in quickly building rapport, and empathy with followers (Thompson et al., 2002).

As a practice, NLP is based on a number of cognitive and behavioural presuppositions (Bandler, 2008), including: "there is no such thing as failure, only feedback, the meaning of communication is the response you get, people have all the resources they need, they just have to access, strengthen, and sequence them" etc., as well as experimental patterns and techniques derived from hypnotherapy (Erickson, 1983) and other therapeutic practices (Batson, 1972; Roggleburg & Satir, 1988; Perls et al., 1951). NLP's unique focus is on the intrapersonal, interpersonal and the intrapsychic processes of reality construction (Tosey et al., 2005).

Given the similarities between EI and NLP, particularly the self (intrapersonal) and other (inter-personal) focus, we suggest that as models of human development they complement each other and propose the following critical approaches based in literature to assist leaders deal with the impacts of COVID-19, and beyond,

2. Suggested approaches

2.1. Demonstrate empathy

Empathy refers to a leader's ability to thoughtfully consider the feelings of others when making intelligent decisions (Goleman, 1995) that show they have considered what it feels like to walk in the shoes of their employees. As a word, empathy has traditionally been frowned upon in the workplace, and in boardrooms, where, as an emotion, it has often been ascribed, unwittingly, to the female gender (Goleman, 1996) and therefore, as something to avoid. COVID-19 presents an array of emotional challenges for leaders, including mental health concerns arising from self-isolation, fear of job loss, redundancy, concern of catching the virus, which includes the associated impacts on friends and family. How does a leader respond in an empathetic manner to these emotions?

To respond to situations with empathy, it is important that the leader first explore and understand what empathy means to them (Hall, 2008). Have they had personal experiences of empathy that they can quickly recall and access in memory? If not, can they imagine what an experience of empathy would look like? Can they vividly visualise it as a picture in their mind? Can they "see" what they saw then, "feel" again what they felt, and "hear" what they heard when they bring themselves back into that empathetic experience?

In effect, the practice of visualisation (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; Erickson, 1985), uses memory and/or imagination to create an internal movie (Hall & Bodenhamer, 1999) of empathy, which then activates and uploads empathetic feelings into the leader's neurological system, or mind–body–emotion unit (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Erickson, 1983), such that the leader, at an unconscious level, internalises the experience and applies it practically, as required.

Based on the NLP visualisation technique, which is also referenced in EI theory (Goleman, 2002), the emotionally intelligent (EI) leader is better able to discriminate between prevailing COVID-19 contexts and to apply the emotion of empathy in particular ways, such as in responding to the concerns people have regarding self-isolation and working remotely. The emotionally intelligent leader, through visualisation practices, is equipped to communicate their own feelings, for example, by being upfront about their own personal views regarding working from home and self-isolation, whilst at the same time providing active support to those that can, and are more emotionally contained (Jordan & Lindebaum, 2015) and able.

2.2. Pay attention to physiology

Research in Leader Emotion Management (LEM), (Jordan & Lindebaum, 2015), EI theory, and NLP, recommend paying attention to the body as an intrapersonal and interpersonal practice, for greater emotional agility (Goleman, 1995) and emotion recognition (Glenberg, 2010). NLP goes further linking the body inextricably to the mind and emotion, such that the entire mind–body–emotion unit is a

communication system to be fully aware of, and utilised, when relating with others (Satir, 1991).

For leading during COVID-19, and demonstrating effective listening skills, it is important that leaders pay attention to the physiology of their employees. To impact greater communication abilities, for example, leaders should learn skills in "mirroring" and "matching" the body movements of their employees. Mirroring and matching have been shown to deliver exceptional results for establishing and building rapport, at both a conscious (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; Perls et al., 1951) and unconscious level (Erickson, 1983). NLP uses the term "mirroring" and "matching" to characterise the process whereby a leader is self-challenged to tactfully observe the physiology (hand gestures, eye movements, posture, rate of breathing, intonation levels) of their followers, and to mirror these back discreetly as part of the process of communicating and influencing outcomes (Roggleburg & Satir, Erickson, 1988).

The approach can also be applied by leaders with their teams at a group and individual level: On a group level, whilst holding meetings with their staff via video-conferencing technology, the leader can match the hand gestures s/he notices being used by an employee asking a question, the tone of voice, their posture, the frequency and rhythm of eye blinks, and even the rate and pace of breathing (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; O'Hanlon, 2009).

On an individual level, there is greater opportunity to mirror the rate of an employees' breathing, for example, as well as other physiological matching sequences. "Cross-mirroring" is recommended when matching is not applicable (Bandler & Grinder, 1979; Perls et al., 1951). In cross-mirroring, the leader uses other bodily movements, such as a discreet tap of the finger aligned to each in-breathe of the person the leader is in conversation with, to "pace" an employee's physiological movements. In effect, the leader is learning to use the body creatively as a unit for communicating effectively and empathetically with subordinates (Satir, 1991).

Whilst some suggest further empirical evidence to demonstrate that mirroring and matching deliver measurable results (Fromme & Daniell, 1984), others suggest that they are a viable guide for facilitating interpersonal understanding (Bradley & Biedermann, 1985), and that mirroring and matching is, in fact, a form of empathy, whereby the leader is fully able to step into the experiencing world of their employees. There is a deep connection that occurs, at an unconscious level, through mirroring and matching that is not known until practiced and experienced (Erickson, 1985). We suggest practising this approach for building rapport with employees experiencing a range of emotions, with beneficial outputs for both the leader and employee.

2.3. Self-regulate thinking

Research suggests that 95% of learning occurs at an unconscious level (Bandler & Grinder, 1979). This why the ability to guide the emotions of "self" and "others", includes understanding the meta-correlations between thinking, feeling, speaking (or languaging) and behaving, as part of the interplay of the movie-mind. As a mind–body–emotion system, the way we think determines how we feel, which informs what we say (through speech or body language), and how we then behave (act). Thinking directly determines behaviour (Hall & Bodenhamer, 1999); consequently, the practice of mental hygiene, or maintaining mental health, by leaders is critical. This is a core tenet of EI (Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2000) and cognitive behavioural therapy (A. T. Beck, 1991).

There are a number of ways for leaders to best manage their thinking to achieve clarity, such that it serves them creatively. They include the following propositions (Bandler & Grinder, 1975), which are consistent with the self-regulation dimension of EI, (Goleman, 1995), and leader emotion management (LEM) practices (Jordan & Lindebaum, 2015):

- Your map is not the territory.
- Bring awareness to the mental noise of thinking
- Pay less attention to the voice in the head
- Stay focused on the present, not the past or future
- Let your intention guide your attention

Where a leader is overrun by their thinking in a negative way, but ought to be displaying behaviours that promote calm, it can have a corresponding effect (by way of "affect") on employees via the process known as "emotion contagion" (Barsade, 2002). This is where followers/employees feel and are affected by the emotions of the leader's verbal and non-verbal communication. This is typical during moments of crisis like COVID-19. For this reason, the job of management is the management of emotion (Leavitt & Bahrami, 1988; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001). Leaders are self-challenged to manage their own thinking first, before they can manage others (Goleman, 1996).

2.4. Embrace emotions as a source of intelligence

Self-isolating conjures up a list of emotions, including fear, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem. These emotions are likely to arise with employees with a preference for teamwork and one-on-one contact rather than working alone. The same applies for managers who may never have had to manage teams virtually and find the experience difficult and frustrating. Given this, a leader's self-challenge in dealing with the heightened emotions characteristic of COVID-19, is not to

try to control them but to accept them (Goleman, 2002). The more that emotions are accepted, the greater the internal flexibility it gives the leader to respond to their employees with empathy (Goleman, 1996) and vulnerability (Brown, 2012).

Emotions are laced together intricately with thinking and thought-processing, or what S. Gilligan (2004) describes as the correlations between "the cognitive" and "the somatic self". Whilst the cognitive self refers to the leader's use of rational intelligence for presenting themselves socially, planning and engaging in predictable activities, the somatic or emotional self, which is the leader's essential nature, is unique, inventive, surprising, spontaneous and playful (S. Gilligan, 2004).

So, whereas routine, controlled information, insistence on rational logic, reliance on tried and tested methods, and cultural conformity, worked in the past, in the present, and particularly by way of effectively managing and leading through the contextual contours of COVID-19, flexibility, innovation, open communication, tolerance of ambiguity, openness to new ideas and cultural diversity are the behaviours that will facilitate leader success in the present circumstances (U. Beck, 2000). Arguably, it is the integrated processing of information between the cognitive and somatic self, that we term emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995).

In effect, where leaders do not have the ability to differentiate between the cognitive and somatic self and with their employees, they are likely to be inept at influencing and leading the emotional well-being of their employees, which could lead to a situation where those employees do not have a sense of psychological safety (Kahn, 1990) in the workplace and will not perform at their optimal level (Hanselman, 2021).

2.5. Linguistics

Words are powerful and can be used to create magic; they can also be used to create a great deal of pain (Bandler & Grinder, 1979), which is why language, and the choice of words used in speech during emotionally heightened periods like COVID-19, are so important for leaders and employees. Words act as a representational system for a leader's experiences, and a medium through which they map themselves, neurologically, via speech, as they communicate and represent their experiences back to themselves (Hall, 2008).

For example, there is a difference between the language a leader could use to openly express feelings of frustration with his/her team about IT challenges faced due to the COVID-19 shutdown: I look forward to when our systems are up and running so remote working is available for all staff; as opposed to the same statement expressed differently: I find it so frustrating that our systems never work. What is the point of IT? Frankly, they should all be fired.

Whilst the first statement uses words to state a desired state (Bandler & Grinder, 1975), the second uses the same words emotively (Jordan & Lindebaum, 2015) to display negative feelings, based on a generalisation of facts (our systems never work); a distortion of the same facts (what is the point of IT?); and, a deletion of the facts based on the same generalisation (our systems never work).

Importantly, in choosing words to represent internal and subjective experiences that "delete = ", "distort", and "generalise" (Bandler & Grinder, 1975), the leader limits his/her view of the world, such that, operating out of that limitation, all s/he can see, is failure. Additionally, it is likely that s/he personally feels the impact of those words emotionally, which apart from having an affect on others via emotion contagion (Barsade, 2002), also has a psychosomatic impact on her/himself. Where leaders are able to manage their feelings more effectively, so as not to take them out on their employees, they begin to notice the energetic quality and intelligence within their emotions (Goleman, 2002) and the corresponding impact it has via the medium of language and speech. To effectively use EI and NLP to manage the impact of stress on employees, for example, the leaders must consciously choose words intentionally, with empathy.

2.6. Bodily awareness

Like all people, leaders are made up of mind, body, and emotions. We have already discussed how leaders can use their mind and emotions to lead better, but how can they use their body to lead? What does EI and NLP say about how the body can be used, including the resources within it, to lead employees through emotionally hard times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic?

The body is the physical representation of the breadth and depth of the cognitive and somatic self (S. Gilligan, 2004). It is a dimension that is essential to both personal development and leadership development. It is an extension of both the conscious and unconscious mind (Batson, 1972), which is why breathing is not just a refreshing activity to relief stress, it also acts as a means of recognising unnoticed bodily sensations, feelings, unconscious structures, patterns, and varying combinations within a person, for self-discovery (Perls et al., 1994; Mijares, 2005).

There are varying embodiment practices that leaders can use to manage the emotional impact of COVID-19, to lead and function more effectively. Intentional breathing, for example, brings focused attention on the in-breathe and out-breathe, with the knowledge that the breath positively impacts the mind–body relationship and provides insight, illumination, and an ability to embrace the neglected self (Mijares, 1995).

2.7. Know yourself

This Socratic maxim is essential for leadership pre-, during, and post-COVID-19. It is a call-out to leaders to invest critical time in self-discovery (Gilligan & Dilts, 2009), also referred to as "internal engineering" (Satprem, 1970).

Specifically, knowing oneself refers to the ability of a leader to know, understand, and experience their mind–body–emotion system, as an intricate and inseparable unit (Bandler, 2008; Bandler & Grinder, 1979) of operation. It also refers to developing an understanding of how emotions function, at a biological level, so as to develop the skills of emotional literacy, whereby leaders are able to identify and name their own emotions as they present (Freedman, 2017) and operate within-person (Gioia & Poole, 1984; Lawrence et al., 2011), on a moment-to-moment basis (Jordan & Lindebaum, 2015).

Whilst knowing yourself (Freedman, 2007) is arguably a subset of the EI dimension of self-awareness (Goleman, 1995), which includes reading ones' emotions, understanding interrelated moods, and knowing how moods affect self and others, we also suggest that knowing oneself for leaders specifically includes other factors as mentioned by Rogelberg et al. (2013)

- Intentionally managing thinking and thought processing, including how we make sense of experience, the meaning and unconsciously.
- Taking responsibility for the use of language, including non-verbal (or self-talk also known as "the voice in the head") and verbal communication, used to influence self and others, and
- Taking responsibility for how we code experience and adopt regular patterns of response.

Whilst Brackett and Mayer (2003) suggested that the process of knowing self is to be attained in the distant future, Maslow (1971) argued that knowledge of self, which occurs in spouts and at differing levels of intensity, happens in the here and now, if only we are able to observe it. Knowing self is experiencing without being self-consciousness. It is the feeling of being wholly and fully human; a moment where the self is in fact actualising itself (Maslow, 1971).

3. Implications

Though there are studies that link EI to leadership and leadership theory, including Transformational Leadership (TFL) ability (Barling et al., 2000; Leban & Zulauf, 2004), there are no studies linking EI and NLP specifically, despite the similarities that are apparent, including the focus on the other and self, or interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. This is surprising given NLP's historical origins

(Bandler & Grinder, 1975), approximately 20 years before publication of the seminal work on EI theory (Goleman, 1995). Whilst the validity of certain aspects of NLP's theoretical foundations have been questioned (Fromme & Daniell, 1984; Owens, 1977; Shaw, 1977), recent longitudinal studies have demonstrated NLP as a structured and systematic method used for mapping the subjective experience and constructed reality of people experiencing transformative change (Linder-Pelz & Hall, 2007; Tosey et al., 2005). This paper lays the path for a further qualitative and quantitative longitudinal studies into how NLP can model and influence transformational leadership ability.

Interestingly, TFL scholars (Barbuto & Burbach, 2006; Gardner & Stough, 2002) suggest that the ability to monitor and manage the emotions in self and others, which are core EI principles, correlate directly with the inspirational, motivational and individualised considerations of transformational leadership (Hur et al., 2011). Similarly, the intrapersonal dimension of NLP, which focuses on the patterns and cues that influence our internal states to create a broader range of choices, immediately accessible, for responding to a situation (Dilts, 1980), including building effective rapport with another (Bandler, 2008) arguably mirrors the self-awareness and interpersonal relationship dimensions of EI (Goleman, 1995).

When considering the use of NLP and TFL one can consider the role of knowledge management within the organisation and the role of NLP in this process. Research suggests that NLP facilitates knowledge and learning capabilities in organisations (Kong & Farrell, 2012). That said, when viewed through the lens of TFL, it is the leadership that allows interactions between and among organisational members to the extent that knowledge, skills and experience can be shared (Kong & Farrell, 2012). In this way, it is the learning process, facilitated by NLP and TFL that allow the culture, system, structure and procedures to align within the organisation, thus creating a learning culture that helps facilitate business operations.

This paper forms part of a broader mixed methods study exploring correlations between EI and NLP, with the aim to draw out, and make available, practical approaches that lead to transformational and self-actualising outcomes for leaders and their employees in organisations and business generally.

4. Conclusion

EI theory has been criticised for not providing depth of understanding on what emotions are, thereby treating them as though they were a unitary, stable, and

predictable construct (Harms & Crede, 2010). NLP theory has been criticised for being a pseudoscience without empirical evidence to suggest its efficacy in psychological and therapeutical treatments (Witkowski, 2010). This article has not sought to prove or disprove the psychological claims associated with either EI or NLP, rather given the popularity of these theories in the business and leadership literature, we have sought to contribute to bridging the theoretical gap between the two and use the mind–body–emotion approach of NLP to provide leaders with a practical research-based approach to addressing emotional distress in the workplace, exemplified by the current Covid-19 pandemic. It is suggested that the combined models of EI and NLP are appropriate not only during times of crisis, but for normal day-to-day leadership practice and functioning given their emphases on self-development. This emphasis on self should be a practical, not just theoretical. Leadership and leading others is pre-eminently a self-actualising practice, not simply a practical skill of influencing or guiding others. The implementation of the practices described in this paper provides the foundations for a human-centred leadership approach capable of transforming both leaders and followers through an intentional focus on self and other.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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