

***Benchmarking Intangibles: The Art of Measuring Quality*, L. Michael Hall,
Neuro-Semantic Publications, 2011**

Reviewed by Dr Susie Linder-Pelz, author of *NLP Coaching: An Evidence-Based Approach* (2010)

Dr Michael Hall has again lead the way in thinking about, testing, refining and communicating an important topic for people coaching and leading change. This book breaks new ground in addressing the what, why and how of benchmarking the *intangible* skills, qualities and mind-sets to which excellent change agents aspire. With ease and clarity Michael explains benchmarking, guides the reader through the process and gives examples.

Benchmarking is, in essence, the ability to: identify expert or 'best practice' of a skill or quality that is important to improve; model the component variables of that skill or quality; create a scale from the lowest to highest (best) expression of that skill or quality; distinguish very specific see-hear-feel indicators at each point on the scale of development of the skill or quality; and use that scale in giving and receiving sensory-based feedback for learning and development.

Michael reminds us that even intangible experiences (values, beliefs, skills etc) are *embodied* in our mind-body-emotion system and therefore can be identified in terms of specific place, time and kinesthetics. "If something is real it will show up in objective [observable and measurable] reality" (p.48). And he discusses different types of measures and measurement, all of which are about *comparison*. He presents the principles of measuring performance and then, with amazing specificity, drills down to the detail (Chapter 3). He also deals with the complexity of there being *optimum* levels of performance or mastery beyond which a behavior ceases to be mastery and can even be damaging. He even offers specific questions to help us recognize the optimal range of a behavior we are benchmarking.

Michael suggests there are 13 component activities of any performance that is 'best practice'. For one component alone—verbal expression and precision—he comes up with eight further distinctions: speed, focus, intensity of effort, state, deliberation, time, style and adaptiveness. He goes on to present in detail the six-point scales of each of the 13 component activities of a best practice performance!

Having described the benchmarking of behaviors (performance) in Chapter 3, Michael turns to the measuring of experts' knowledge and thinking (meaning) at all levels of the mind (Chapter 4). Here he is following his Meta-States Model, which explains the creation of *abstract* knowledge out of *empirical, see-hear-feel* knowledge. Actualizing of any skill or expertise is based on two factors: *meaning* and *performance* (Chapter 6). Meaningful actions comprise *intention, purpose* and *movement*. For example: listening is a meaningful action when there is an intention behind it as well as purposeful, goal-oriented behavior.

The skill and state of *meta-detailing* is central to benchmarking and Michael links the skill of meta-detailing to the precision questions of the Meta-Model which are key to NLP. In Chapter 5 he continues his discussion of the importance of *linguistic precision* in benchmarking. He then distinguishes—again in great detail—*descriptive* and *evaluative language*.

Michael takes a systemic approach to benchmarking (Chapter 7). He asks, “How do you benchmark a meaningful action that is dynamic and systemic in nature?” This big essay on systems theory draws on the huge body of work in diverse disciplines. I feel it may have been useful if he had placed the section called ‘The Human System’ earlier in order to pre-frame this long digression from the topic of benchmarking.

Michael's core interest is *actualizing*: making potentials real and “becoming fully human in all our fallible humanity”. In Chapter 8 he presents his Self-Actualization Quadrants model. Given that actualization requires a two-fold development—on the outside the development of skills and on the inside the development of meaning—Michael uses a graph to plot where a person is in actualizing their skill or expertise. The graph has two axes: meaning and performance. Experts or highly actualized people, who are high in both meaning and performance, show up in quadrant IV of the graph while people whose skill/expertise is undeveloped and who have low scores in both meaning and performance, show up in quadrant I. Michael adds the insight that meaning and performance distinctions relate to differences in perceptual filters or *meta-programs*.

In Chapters 9 and 10 Michael lists, in a really clear and practical way, tools for benchmarking; in Chapters 11 and 12 he describes and benchmarks a total of 19 coaching skills.

Speaking of benchmarking: in the book publishing industry there are benchmarks relating to page layout, editing, proof-reading, illustrating, quoting, referencing, indexing and more. *Benchmarking Intangibles* could be even more useful if Neuro-Semantics Publications were to make improvements in these areas. For example, the publishers could use a more consistent format to reference ideas and quotes so that the reader can access the original texts. (Weber is quoted several times without details and doesn't appear in the Bibliography or in the Index; Maslow's seminal work on self-actualization, mentioned on p.161, needs to be fully referenced.) The figures that have two axes would be easier to grasp if the axes were always labeled and if the behaviors that typify Quadrant I appeared alongside that quadrant. The layout of tables, too, could be improved. For example, the table of good and bad questions needs column headings (p. 206). A more conventional index would allow readers to find topics such as 'Meta-Model' and 'NLP' more easily.

The reader of *Benchmarking Intangibles* will be inspired by the breadth of Michael's knowledge and his enthusiasm for this subject. At every step he demonstrates his uncommon skill of seeing, understanding and explaining the big systemic picture and of drilling down into amazingly specific questions and detailed observations. This is meta-detailing in action! Other stand-out features for me are how he explains his systems approach to benchmarking, how he works with the complex dynamic structures of states, beliefs, values etc that create intangible skills and how he shows the contribution of NLP and Neuro-Semantics modeling to benchmarking.