



The Bulletin of the Association for Coaching

April 2009
Issue 18

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Published by the Association for Coaching

www.associationforcoaching.com



Coaching Toolbox: Emergent Knowledge

*We welcome tools and tips that coaches find particularly helpful. Here **Angela Dunbar** describes a technique to help a client take a different perspective on things – quite literally particularly helpful, and would like to share in this column.*

This simple and quick technique is based on the work of the late David Grove, who developed Clean Language, a non-directive process to engage with a client's metaphorical 'sense' of their situation and goals.

This process, known as Emergent Knowledge is even 'cleaner than clean', in that the process relies mainly on repetition of the same kind of question around six times. This has the effect of adding a deeper understanding of the same kind of knowledge, until a new level of understanding breaks through. Although simple, the exercise can uncover and de-tangle very complex issues. For this reason you may prefer to learn more before you use it. For more information go to www.cleancoaching.com

The exercise can be used in any type of coaching situation, for executive and business coaching as well as personal.

Step 1: Have the client write or draw their goal on a piece of paper. Alternatively you can ask them to choose an object that could represent their goal. Some clients will find this a fascinating idea, and start to look around for some object that could encapsulate (as a metaphor does) the goal or issue at hand. Some will instinctively grab something without much thought, but once they consider their choice they become aware that many qualities of the object somehow relate to their goal.

Step 2: Ask the client to place the paper (or

object) in a space that 'feels right' to them. Many people will find they can do this without thinking too much. Some may need you to encourage some experimentation. Very soon they are likely to discover the position of the paper or object does seem to make a difference to how they feel about the goal.

Step 3: Ask them to tell you how they would like you to refer to this paper or object from now on. It could be as simple as 'goal' or they may give it a name.

Step 4: Ask the client to place themselves in a space that feels right, in relation to where they have placed their object or paper, and once more, give some encouragement if necessary.

Step 5: Ask a series of repetitive, similar sounding questions that help bring the dynamic of the positioning alive: *Are you in the right space/ at the right height/facing the right direction / in the right position / angle? Is the goal in the right space/ at the right height/facing the right direction / in the right position / angle?*

Ask any combination of the above options a **minimum of six times**, and keep going until you get a few 'yesses' in a row. If the client is adjusting their position or the goal's position, keep asking the questions. All the while, they are creating a spatial metaphor around them that will encapsulate all kinds of knowledge and insight around the goal they are aiming for.

Step 6: Download information. Once the client is settled in position, ask "And what do you know now?" Ask slowly and deliberately, emphasizing each word and leaving space between the words. This helps the question to

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'land' deep within the person, and is more likely to draw out information from the whole person, including their unconsciousness.

Step 7: Create a 'knowledge network' by adding more and more layers of information until a new understanding emerges. There are many variations of the basic Emergent Knowledge technique that you can use to do this. The process is always iterative (same kind of question) and recursive (each question building directly on the last thing that was said). For example, you could ask: *And what else do you know about that?*, and ask it six times, pausing to listen and reflect on each of the client's answers. Or, have them move to six different spaces asking *is there another space that you could go to from that space there?* Then follow up with *And what do you know from that space there?*

Step 8: Download again. After six questions or moves, ask the same download question: *And what do you know now?*

Step 9: Finish. There are different possibilities. One simple ending would be to ask: *And what's the difference between what you know now compared to what you knew at the start of this exercise?*

Invariably something significant has shifted in their understanding, and sometimes a transformational insight will have emerged.

Angela Dunbar is a communications skills coach, training consultant, Master NLP Practitioner, and is Head of Professional Forums on the Association for Coaching Council

angela@associationforcoaching.com

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Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds

By Wendy Sullivan & Judy Rees

Published by Crown House 2008

£15.99 Paperback

All coaches enjoy observing the effects of their questions on the thinking of their clients. Some time ago I started wondering how, in my questions, I might

be applying my own assumptions to limit unwittingly the freedom of my clients to reframe their issues and outcomes for themselves. It was the desire to avoid contaminating their mental landscape with features from my own that led me to Clean Language coaching, developed by the late David Grove. Wendy Sullivan and Judy Rees have done a great service in producing this excellent and long overdue introduction to this coaching approach.

The authors describe in the book how, and why, Clean Language works, taking the reader through the different types of 'clean questions' and their effects. As a frame for this they emphasise the importance of listening exquisitely. While true of all coaching, this is especially important in Clean Language, with its exacting concentration on using the client's own, un-paraphrased words. They bring out the key concept in Clean Language of closely directing the client's attention to the emerging elements of their narrative. This is quite a different perspective to the more elaborate and interpretative questioning generally found in coaching conversations.

Modelling with Clean Language explicitly uses metaphor because an individual's metaphors replicate the structure and qualities of their experience. As more of the individual's unconscious metaphoric world comes into their awareness, new metaphors and information emerge towards a resolution of their problem or achievement of their desired outcome. Sullivan and Rees place working with metaphor at the centre of their book. They show how we achieve an understanding of our experience, and conceptualise out of the sensory data we constantly receive, not just *through* metaphor but *in* metaphor. Their central point here is that when an individual's metaphor changes, through the artful simplicity of 'clean questioning', so does their experience.

The authors also show the importance of the space in which the 'clean conversation' takes place, and of the client's gestures, since we embody our metaphors in the space inside and around us. A particularly interesting distinguishing mark of Clean Language is the way in which the facilitator uses space and the client's non-verbal communications. The distinction here is that when the coach is symbolically modelling through metaphor with Clean Language, they build rapport with the client's information and its location, as much as if not more than with the client, in order to facilitate the client to model themselves.¹

Sullivan and Rees present a clear pathway into their subject for those new to it, while offering useful reinforcement for others who have some experience of using Clean Language. They balance enthusiasm with pragmatism and give us a practical guide for the curious. This includes exercises that can be undertaken by the reader him/herself and with a partner, which can be adapted for use in coaching and with groups. The authors rightly acknowledge the challenge in using Clean Language in coaching and the need to adapt the strict syntax of 'clean questioning' to achieve a more natural conversational style in the coaching session.

This book will help you if you want to work with your clients without getting in their way, so that they can achieve their own more deeply embedded change. It could also be useful if you are familiar with neuro linguistic programming and want to explore a related but fascinatingly different perspective on modelling. It also has much to offer in the use of language and metaphor in coding and creating our experience. In all these areas I have found this book an invaluable companion.

Ken Smith

¹ James Lawley and Penny Tompkins developed *Symbolic Modelling from David Grove's work. Their book: Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling (2000) is the standard work in this field and is strongly recommended as further reading.*