

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at Clean Language

Clean Language is a process that uses metaphor and neutral questioning to ease emotional blocks and the resulting limiting behaviour patterns.

Unlike the guided visualisations widely used in psychotherapy and healing processes, the key difference with Clean Language is that practitioners are led by metaphors created entirely by their subjects, by asking questions that will elicit the metaphors and develop them with the least possible influence from the practitioner.

The techniques are useful in human interaction in general, inside the workplace and outside, as well as for formal use in therapy, coaching and related fields.

Clean Language was developed in the 1980s by David Grove, an Ericksonian therapist specialising in the treatment of traumatic memories. He discovered that his patients naturally tended to describe their experiences in metaphor and that, when encouraged to do this, they were able to resolve the trauma more quickly and easily than by conventional therapeutic methods.

Metaphors are an inherent part of our daily life, both in our waking and sleeping states. We use them consciously to convey a feeling, description or situation. Unconsciously, during sleep, our dreams string together metaphors and symbols, some of which are easily attributable and others so obscure that they remain a mystery. Metaphors we often use include:

A millstone round my neck
Flat as a pancake
I'm freezing
I'm boiling
Throw some light on

Less obvious metaphors are:

What's your view?
I'm under pressure
I can't get through to you
I'm in a relationship

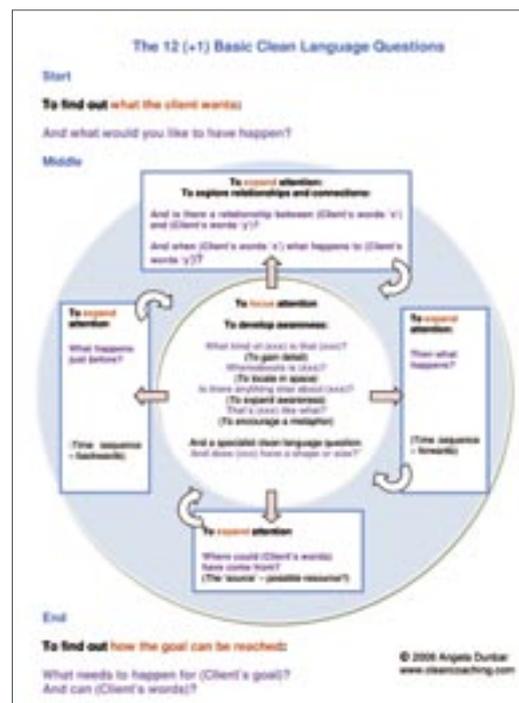
Metaphor has played a significant part in therapy and self development for many years, contributing to Jungian therapy, NLP, transpersonal

psychology, psychosynthesis and, for thousands of years, healing rituals and techniques.

David Grove identified a series of nine questions (now expanded to 13) that would least influence his subjects while they were on their metaphorical journey. He asked only these questions at least 80 per cent of the time and coupled this questioning with frequent repeating back of the subject's exact words. He termed this process "Clean Language" as opposed to language that would interfere with, or 'dirty', the subject's experience.

There is a strong parallel here with the coaching principle of being on the coachee's agenda rather than that of the coach.

The 13 questions currently being used are:



The questions loosely adhere to the framework above, in terms of when each is asked. Not only is it unnecessary for the coach to understand the coachee's metaphors, but the coachee does not need to understand them either. This is a key breakthrough in Grove's work, because deeply embedded trauma may be something that one's

consciousness will protectively block out from memory; hence, if asked to interpret what their metaphors represent, people may be unable to and the process will stop there. Grove's framework allows the subject to move through the effects of the trauma and out the other side, without ever having to consciously remember the trauma itself.

Blocks, fears and phobias are often the result of traumatic experience when we were too young, or damaged too severely, to recall them. In real terms, the trauma may or may not have been serious; it could arise from child abuse, or a difficult birth, or simply being frightened by a dog. The effect of the trauma may be much more intense than the original event.

A protective framework is set up by the psyche, for example to protect against the sound of parents fighting with each other when the child is too young to understand what is happening. Years later, this protective mechanism may be triggered, perhaps by aggression in a business meeting, and the adult will revert to limiting behaviour dictated by a framework that is obsolete but still functioning. Such a framework has an additional disadvantage in that it is likely to be blocking off and limiting some part of our emotions, skills or potential.

The Clean Language and metaphor process dismantles such frameworks and allows people to gain access to all of their inherent energy and talent. For example, it is highly effective in alleviating the fear of public speaking, social shyness, or uncontrollable anger, as well as helping concentration and reducing stress.

Clean Language is a healing process that will home in on wherever it is most needed; the metaphors that come into people's minds develop, as if they are watching a film, and may result in improved function and capacity in areas different to the ones that they originally aimed to improve.

Case history

In this transcript of a Clean Language session, the subject had a fear of public speaking. He regularly had to speak at events in the course of his business and, although he usually performed reasonably well at the event, his anxiety would affect his work and relationships for a week beforehand. Using only Clean Language questions, and repeating his own words back to him, the coach helped him to develop and explore a metaphor. Below are some highlights of the session:

Coachee: *I get nervous for a week beforehand.*

Coach: *And when you get nervous for a week beforehand, that's like what?*

Coachee: *It's like the nauseous feeling before going on a rollercoaster at a fair.*

Coach: *And when it's the nauseous feeling before going on a rollercoaster at a fair, what kind of nauseous is that?*

Coachee: *It's being in one's shell, with the volume turned down.*

[The coach continued to explore the metaphor, using Clean Language questions, then asked:]

Coach: *And what happens next?*

Coachee: *I am seeing light at the surface, and sunshine. Gravitational pull from above, like when you've been scuba diving. There is pressure on your chest from the water. I can hear people talking – a dull quiet sound through the water. I need the gravitational pull.*

Coach: *And what needs to happen for the gravitational pull?*

Coachee: *The pressure needs to turn*

Coach: *And can the pressure turn?*

Coachee: *There is a pressure wave, I can move it. It can take me to the surface*

Coach: *And what happens next?*

Coachee: *The sun's coming out. Serene, relaxing and enjoyable. It feels great. I am on the surface and the sun is reflecting on water. All is quiet. The dull, quiet sound through the water has gone.*

The result for the coachee was that his customary week long anxiety never occurred again. In addition, as is often the case with Clean Language, he noticed some additional benefits in that he became less stressed in his life overall and found it easier to focus on taking his business forward.

David Grove devoted his life to the development of Clean processes until his premature death at the age of 58 this January. He created a spatial method of healing called Clean Space, which invokes metaphors by literally moving people around the room, and most recently Emergent Knowledge, based on applying the principles of the new science of Emergence and the theory of the Six Degrees of Separation to the human psyche.

Clean methods have proved useful to coaches for breaking down blocks, phobias and repeating behaviour in their clients. They fit smoothly into a coaching session and is particularly effective when a client seems stuck, or trapped in repeating behaviour patterns.

By the use of metaphor, issues are tackled at a far deeper level than the conscious mind can reach, and changes in behaviour start immediately. Being 100 per cent client-led, the process is non-invasive and can be performed safely by relatively inexperienced practitioners. (*See Case history*)

David Grove's work continues to progress with the involvement of therapists, practitioners and coaches all over the world. ■

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