

## **The Use of Clean Language and Metaphor in Helping Clients Overcoming Procrastination**

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### **Abstract**

*Modern cognitive science has revealed that human beings think in metaphor (Pinker, S., 2008) and analogy (Hofstadter, D.R. & Sander, E., 2013): by comparing and connecting one kind of concept to another kind of concept using the simple equation “X is like Y”. This process occurs both at the conscious, rational level – for example, when we write that “Juliet is the sun” – and, much more frequently, unconsciously. Studies have found that about six metaphors a minute are used in English, with similar numbers in other languages (Gibbs, R. W., 1994).*

*When it comes to psychotherapy, coaching and personal development, problems are often framed in terms of metaphor. For example, procrastination might be described as a “mysterious” force, holding the client back from creating the happy, fulfilled life he often dreams of. Clean Language, created by the late David Grove between the 1980s and the 1990s, is a process designed to use such client metaphors as an engine for positive change. In this article, we show how it works in a typical one-on-one session.*

**Keywords: clean language, coaching, metaphor, procrastination**

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## **I. Introduction**

Clean Language is a precision technique for discovering, exploring and working with people's own personal metaphors. When someone thinks or expresses something in terms of another concept, we consider it to be a metaphor. For example, expressions such as "under the weather", "over the moon" and "in a spin" count as metaphors. The person is not located literally speaking at a place higher than the moon - the metaphor is often the most natural and easy way to convey a meaning.

Regarding the use of metaphor in everyday speech, Gibbs (1994) concluded that the average frequency in a person's speech is 1.80 for novel metaphor and 4.08 for frozen metaphor per minute. The novel metaphor, is being described as a non-literal expression created spontaneously and the frozen metaphor as a metaphor in which the metaphoric sense stands on its own, having only a subtle relation to the literal semantic. Sullivan, W. and Rees, J. (2008) used this information in developing Clean Language for practicing psychotherapy, counseling, coaching and personal development and concluded that six metaphors a minute is the average frequency used by a client in a typical one-on-one session.

Clean Language uses the casual metaphors that occur naturally in speech to reveal the hidden depths of the thought processes, bringing thoughts and feelings that clients have not been conscious of into their awareness, where these can be shared and understood.

New Zealand-born psychotherapist David Grove (1950-2008) created Clean Language while he was working with trauma cases such as sexual abuse survivors and war veterans during the 1980s and 1990s (Grove, D. J. & B. I. Panzer, 1989). Grove devised a set of 'Clean' questions, which he used to explore the metaphors his clients used. 'Clean' in this context meant that the questions introduced as few of Grove's own assumptions and metaphors as possible, giving the client (or patient) maximum freedom for their own thinking. Aside from psychotherapy, (Lawley, J. & Tompkins, P., 2000; Harland, P., 2012; and Campbell, G., 2013), Clean Language can be used also effectively in coaching, (Sullivan, W. and Rees, J., 2008; Cooper, L. & Castellino, M., 2012; and Way, M., 2013), but the relative simplicity and the unusual approach to metaphor makes it useful in a wide range of other contexts, working with individuals and with groups (Walker, C., 2014).

### **Clean Language Principles and Practice**

The fundamental principles and practice of Clean Language are the following:

- The facilitator must listen attentively to his client.
- The facilitator must keep his opinions and advice to himself and as far as possible.
- The facilitator asks Clean Language questions to explore a person's metaphors (or everyday statements).
- The facilitator listens to the answers and then asks more Clean Language questions about what the other person has said.

David Grove created twelve basic Clean Language questions, plus a few other supplementary questions which are used much less frequently. The questions are combined with words from the client, with no additional words from the facilitator.

While at first sight this might seem constraining for the facilitator, once the questions are familiar they become a flexible, multi-purpose toolkit. Like the notes of the musical scale, they can be used to create anything - from a nursery rhyme to an orchestral symphony.

Clean Language is not a method for forcing people to change, the aim is to help and enable and change may happen naturally as a part of the process.

### **The Core Clean Language Questions**

The twelve Clean Language questions used in a typical session, are the following (Sullivan, W. and Rees, J., 2008):

- "(And) what kind of X\* (is that X)?"
- "(And) is there anything else about X?"
- "(And) where is X? or (And) whereabouts is X?"
- "(And) that's X like what?"
- "(And) is there a relationship between X and Y\*\*?"
- "(And) when X, what happens to Y?"
- "(And) then what happens? or (And) what happens next?"
- "(And) what happens just before X?"
- "(And) where could X come from?"
- "(And) what would X like to have happened?"
- "(And) what needs to happen for X?"
- "(And) can X (happen)?"

\* The client's own word or words used to describe his metaphor.

\*\* The client's own word or words, used to describe another metaphor to make a description of the initial metaphor

## **II. Case Study**

Dave, 30 years old, worked in an 8 hour job doing logistics and maintenance. He wanted to set up his own coaching business, and he had followed much specific training towards that end. But every time he

came close to an official launch, something stopped him from going ahead.

1. *Facilitator*: "What would you like to happen during this session?"

*Dave*: "I would like to get a better understanding, I suppose, of anything that's been holding me back, perhaps. Because I know it's got nothing to do with what's going on in the world, it's all what's going on inside me. And I'm hoping that by exploring the metaphors I'll be able to do that in a different way than I've done it before."

2. *Facilitator*: "You'd like to get a better understanding of anything that may be holding you back. Is there anything else about that?"

*Dave*: "I suppose it always, because always I've been the caretaker for a long time for my father and unfortunately he passed away a couple of months ago. It's kind of... I don't have any reason not to do now but I'm still finding it... it's still not happening as such. So I'm still holding myself back."

3. *Facilitator*: "You're still holding yourself back?"

*Dave*: "I am, yeah."

4. *Facilitator*: "What kind of holding yourself back?"

*Dave*: "It was interesting because when I thought about that, I felt like there was a band across my chest, and I was actually holding it behind me."

5. *Facilitator*: "There's a band across you and holding it behind you, is there anything else about holding it behind you like that?"

*Dave*: "It's taut."

6. *Facilitator*: "Taut. And when you're holding it behind you, what kind of holding is that holding?"

*Dave*: "Kind of like a firm grip."

7. *Facilitator*: "And that band across your chest, what kind of band?"

*Dave*: "Like a really thick elastic band."

8. *Facilitator*: "And what's in between that thick elastic band and your holding?"

*Dave*: "Space."

9. *Facilitator*: "Space. You're holding this thick elastic band and then what happens?"

*Dave*: "It kind of pulls my chest back I guess."

10. *Facilitator*: "When you're holding that, where are you holding it from?"

*Dave*: "From back there (points to a space behind him)."

11. *Facilitator*: "Is there anything else about you and back there?"

*Dave*: "All I see is this big hand, my hand, large and gripping."

12. *Facilitator*: "Your hand, large and gripping. Which hand?"

*Dave*: "My right hand."

13. *Facilitator*: "What kind of hand is that hand when it's large and gripping?"

*Dave*: "I can't describe it exactly, I can see it but I can't describe it as such. I suppose in a way I'm thinking it's similar to my dad's hands. My dad had these big loppers, like giant hands he had, like big gripping fingers I suppose."

14. *Facilitator*: "Big gripping fingers, like your dad's hands?"

*Dave*: "Yeah."

15. *Facilitator*: "But it's you that's holding you back."

*Dave*: "Oh it is, yeah."

16. *Facilitator*: "But it's just like your dad's hand."

*Dave*: "Yes."

17. *Facilitator*: "And when you're holding yourself back like that with that big gripping hand like your dad's hand and elastic band across your chest, what would you like to have happened?"

*Dave*: "Two things actually. I would like to let go of it, and also to push forwards."

18. *Facilitator*: "You'd like to let go of it and push forwards?"

*Dave*: "Yeah and it sounds a bit contrary but also to break through it. I don't want to only let go of it, I also want to break through also."

19. *Facilitator*: "So let go of it, push forward and break through it."

*Dave*: "Yeah."

20. *Facilitator*: "What kind of let go of it?"

*Dave*: "Like a fast release."

21. *Facilitator*: "Anything else about that fast release?"

*Dave*: "I feel it snapping away."

22. *Facilitator*: "Where do you feel it snapping away?"

*Dave*: "In the palm of my hand and across my chest and in my back."

23. *Facilitator*: "That fast release, is there anything else about that fast release when you feel it there?"

*Dave*: "It makes a loud noise as well."

24. *Facilitator*: "What kind of noise?"

*Dave*: "Like a 'swoosh' noise but louder and a sharp sound as well."

25. *Facilitator*: "Loud noise, 'swoosh' noise and sharp sound. Is there anything else about that fast release?"

*Dave*: "It's like a roughness at the sides actually as it moves."

26. *Facilitator*: "As it moves, then what happens?"

*Dave*: "I can breathe better and the pressure goes."

27. *Facilitator*: "What kind of better, breathe better?"

*Dave*: "Freer, more relaxed...and calm."

28. *Facilitator*: "Freer and more relaxed, you can breathe better and calm. That's what happens as that

fast release. What needs to happen for a fast release like that?"

Dave: "Just need to let go."

29. *Facilitator*: "Just need to let go, what needs to happen for you to let go just like that?"

Dave: "I need to loosen my grip."

29. *Facilitator*: "What needs to happen for you to loosen your grip like that?"

Dave: "I need to step forward."

30. *Facilitator*: "Step forward, what kind of step?"

Dave: "A solid step."

31. *Facilitator*: "A solid step, is that a right footed step or a left footed step?"

Dave: "A right footed step."

32. *Facilitator*: "A solid step, right footed. What kind of solid step?"

Dave: "Very firm and I feel it go through my leg, solid."

33. *Facilitator*: "A solid step like that. And as you take a solid step like that, what happens to your grip?"

Dave: "Just lets go."

34. *Facilitator*: "You take a solid step and it just lets go, and then you can breathe more freely and easily. And push forwards, so let go and then push forward."

Dave: "Yeah."

35. *Facilitator*: "What kind of push forward is that push forward?"

Dave: "Something like pushing my chest through it."

36. *Facilitator*: "Pushing your chest through it, is there anything else about that?"

Dave: "It's like I'm breathing deeply and push forward."

37. *Facilitator*: "Then what happens?"

Dave: "It just breaks."

38. *Facilitator*: "Breaks, and then what happens?"

Dave: "I can take another step."

39. *Facilitator*: "You can take another step, what needs to happen so you can push forward like that?"

Dave: "I'm not sure."

40. *Facilitator*: "When you push forwards it breaks, is that the same or different to breakthrough?"

Dave: "It's different."

41. *Facilitator*: "When you'd like to break through, what kind of breakthrough is that?"

Dave: "Like... forceful."

42. *Facilitator*: "Forceful, what kind of forceful?"

Dave: "Like a solid push forwards again."

43. *Facilitator*: "A solid push forwards and forceful and then break through?"

Dave: "Yeah, all at the same time."

44. *Facilitator*: "And at the same time, what kind of break through is that break through when it's at the

same time?"

Dave: "Like a ripping breakthrough."

45. *Facilitator*: "And a ripping breakthrough. And when there is a ripping breakthrough like that, what happens to a solid step?"

Dave: "Becomes firmer."

46. *Facilitator*: "What happens to your breathing?"

Dave: "Becomes bigger."

47. *Facilitator*: "And breathing becomes bigger and step more solid, and then what happens?"

Dave: "I can go forward."

48. *Facilitator*: "Which direction forward?"

Dave: "There, yeah actually there (points)."

49. *Facilitator*: "There. And a solid step and then move forward there."

Dave: "Yeah."

50. *Facilitator*: "How far that way?"

Dave: "Don't know, it feels like a hundred meters."

51. *Facilitator*: "And then what happens?"

Dave: "It's gone."

52. *Facilitator*: "It's gone. What's gone?"

Dave: "The band."

53. *Facilitator*: "The band's gone. And what happens to you?"

Dave: "I just keep going."

54. *Facilitator*: "And what happens to your business?"

Dave: "Gets going."

55. *Facilitator*: "And what needs to happen for you to let go?"

Dave: "I'm not sure."

56. *Facilitator*: "Can you just let go?"

Dave: "In theory yes, in practice not yet."

57. *Facilitator*: "Not yet? So is there anything else about that big hand gripping?"

Dave: "It's sort of squeezing."

58. *Facilitator*: "Squeezing?"

Dave: "And can sort of feel it in the palm."

59. *Facilitator*: "And that's your hand but it's like your father's hand."

Dave: "Just because of the size and the big loppers."

60. *Facilitator*: "Where are you in relation to that hand?"

Dave: "I'm still here; it's just my hand back there."

61. *Facilitator*: "What's the relationship between you here and your hand back there?"

Dave: "It's just reaching back."

62. *Facilitator*: "It's just you here and your hand is reaching back to there."

Dave: "Yeah."

63. *Facilitator*: "Is there anything else about that?"

Dave: "It's a strong arm."

64. *Facilitator*: "Which arm is it?"

Dave: "This one."

65. *Facilitator*: "It's a strong arm and reaching back and holding there and gripping there. Is there anything else about that arm?"

Dave: "It's like my arm used to be when I used to train a lot, a muscly strong arm is what it is, and holding on tight."

66. *Facilitator*: "And when it's holding on tight like that, and it's your arm, and it's a strong arm, what would you like to have happened?"

Dave: "Like to just relax and let go."

67. *Facilitator*: "You'd like to just relax and let go. What kind of relax is that relax you'd like?"

Dave: "Like a kind of floppy relax."

68. *Facilitator*: "Floppy relax."

Dave: "Yeah just that kind of..."

69. *Facilitator*: "Anything else about that floppy relax?"

Dave: "It just falls by the side."

70. *Facilitator*: "And then what happens?"

Dave: "And then the band is gone."

71. *Facilitator*: "Then the band is gone. So floppy relax then the band is gone."

Dave: "Yeah because then you just need to let go and it's gone."

72. *Facilitator*: "And what happens to your need to break through?"

Dave: "I guess it's not necessary because now it's kind of pinged off and it disappeared."

73. *Facilitator*: "It's kind of pinged off and disappeared? What kind of pinged?"

Dave: "Like a cartoon bullet, that high pitch."

74. *Facilitator*: "Then what happens to you, when it's pinged off like that, like a cartoon bullet?"

Dave: "Well I can just be me."

75. *Facilitator*: "Just be you. And then what happens to your solid step?"

Dave: "I guess it's not needed actually."

76. *Facilitator*: "And it's not needed. And what needs to happen for you to move in that direction?"

Dave: <gesture>

77. *Facilitator*: "And when all of that, what happens to your business?"

Dave: "It can commence."

78. *Facilitator*: "And where are you now in relation to understanding anything that might be holding you back?"

Dave: "It just doesn't feel like it's there. Feels like it's not something I need to think about."

79. *Facilitator*: "It's not something you need to think about."

Dave: "No, no."

### III. Discussion

Although Clean Language questioning does sound a little odd when reading them for the first time on a sheet of paper, for the client, however, it is very different. After some initial discomfort with an unfamiliar process, a profound rapport develops. Clients tend to feel heard and understood, at a very deep level. "It was like you knew everything about me!" is a typical comment after a first session. It would be very unusual for a client to notice that only a limited set of questions was being used. The inclusion of the clients' own words, particularly their own metaphors, makes every question feel new and different.

#### The importance of the Clean Language questions

Before expanding on the background of the questions asked by the facilitator in the session transcribed above, we should briefly pay attention to the questioning process itself. For example, what is happening when someone is asking another person a question? Most people think about the question and then they search for the answer.

From what we know until now, it seems that human beings cannot help but go inside them to search for the answer when they are asked a question. The obvious and interesting thing about this matter is that by asking a particular question, we are directing the other person's attention. For example, notice what happens when we ask a question like, 'When was the last time you were really curious about something? What did that curiosity feel like? Where in your body did you feel that curiosity? Did that curiosity have a size or a shape?'

The attention is being directed to that emotion of curiosity and, as a result, it increases the current sense of curiosity. If we, as the questioner, can direct someone's attention with our questions, we can direct their energy, because where attention goes, energy flows. That's an interesting feature of questions that is hidden in plain view, and we think it deserves to be made more explicit. And this is our conscious goal whenever we use Clean Language questions in coaching.

#### The process of choosing the order of the Clean Language questions

While the limited Clean Language question set might seem prescriptive, in fact it is extremely flexible. Every user of Clean Language has their own personal style, expressed in the questions they choose to ask, and what they choose to ask about. One widely-taught model of question choice is the The Five-Minute Coach Model for Change (Cooper and Castellino 2012), but even these structured models leave

considerable freedom to the questioner to choose the questions they ask, and what they ask about.

#### **Question choice: connecting to the physical side**

When the general public first hears the phrase “Clean Language”, they normally expect an approach which is based exclusively on language. Metaphor is a way of thinking, at an unconscious level, before being a way of expressing those thoughts in language, and that thinking is fundamentally embodied (Lakoff, G & Johnson, M., 1980). We are not brains in jars: we are human animals, constantly interacting with the real, physical world. We have feelings in our bodies (both physical and emotional) which are fundamentally metaphorical: the heart sinks, jumps or sings; the stomach is full of butterflies; the head is overflowing with ideas. When a client’s attention is directed toward these metaphors using Clean Language, it often happens that the metaphors will themselves spontaneously change, without the client consciously changing them. And when the metaphors change and the way the client feels will change, too.

Many traumatized psychiatric patients seem to lose their connection to their bodies and emotions (Van Der Kolk, 2014), but David Grove created Clean Language as a treatment for traumatized patients, and in his later life moved on to create therapies, which were more explicitly body- and space-based. We believe there may well be a connection.

Drawing a client’s attention to these metaphors using Clean Language questions will change their relationship to the associated feelings, potentially in a number of ways:

- They may become aware of feelings that were previously outside consciousness
- By describing a feeling in metaphor, they “name it” and so are able to think about it as something distinct from themselves
- They have the option to speak about their feelings to another person
- The Clean Language facilitator will treat the feeling as “real” and ask respectful questions about it
- As the metaphor develops, the feeling can take on a life of its own.

#### **Regarding the questions in the “Dave” transcript**

Focusing our attention on the questions chosen for the above one-on-one Clean Language session, we started with a “standard opening” from the Framework for Change by asking “What would you like to happen in this session?” and followed it up with “Is there anything else?”

We noticed one very obvious physical metaphor in the client’s first statement, “holding me back”. We repeated it in our next question, and, sure enough, it appeared again as “holding myself back”. That seemed for us like a place with a bit of energy, a sensible place to dive in.

Notice that we did not allow ourselves to get distracted by Dave’s story – that he’d been his father’s caretaker, and the father had recently died. We can all appreciate that experience must have placed Dave under significant emotional strain, and that it probably had a lot to do with his “failure” to launch his business. But in the Clean Language method, it is considered to be a distraction. Instead, we aim to place attention on the client’s metaphoric landscape. To do that, we asked quite specific, focused questions about this metaphor, “holding myself back”. The aim was to encourage the client to get really specific, so that the metaphor becomes vividly real for him. With each question, Dave’s description became more and more precise as more details emerged: the band across his chest, the firm grip of the holding and so on.

Our Clean Language questions here were mostly “What kind of X?” and “Is there anything else about X?” These are by far the most commonly-used Clean Language questions. The metaphor we were exploring, “holding myself back”, was a metaphor for something the client *didn’t* want. In asking my initial questions about it, I was using what’s been nicknamed “the Dark Side Process”, deepening the emotional state associated with what the client *doesn’t* want. When a beginning practitioner first learns Clean Language, he is encouraged not to do this. Instead, he is invited to “go for the good stuff” and explore metaphors for positive states and desired outcomes. This is due to, as discussed above, asking questions about a metaphor will deepen any associated emotional state – and it is much easier to learn when the client is feeling positive.

At question “17.”, we changed the course, asking what the client would like instead. We notice that he replies in terms of the metaphor: “Two things actually. I would like to let go of it, and also to push forwards.” From this point, we go back to the first two basic Clean Language questions, asking about his metaphor for what he would like. A transcript cannot fully convey the energetic shifts that I was noticing in the client as the process continued, but it does capture some aspects. Also, we invite you to notice how the tense of Dave’s answers changes at about question “30.”: instead of saying “I need to X” he starts describing something that’s happening in real time, here and now, in the present.

At question “51.”, we notice that even the written word captures the client’s surprise: “It’s gone!” Throughout this process, we behaved as if the client’s description of his metaphoric landscape was, at some level, literally true. As one student of Clean Language described it, “it’s as if we all agree to treat our imaginary friends as real.” The items described by the client have real physical locations, and can be assumed to obey the ordinary laws of physics – even though they may be “imaginary”.

When something changes in the client’s metaphorical world, he will usually experience changes in his psychological world, too. As the “imaginary” elastic band “pinged off like a cartoon bullet” (as seen in question “72.”) and disappeared, the client was released from whatever was holding him back. At no stage does the process require either the client or the coach to unpick the metaphor, to work out what each element means in the real world. The work is done entirely in metaphor until the very end of the process (question “77.”), when it is time to verify with the original desired outcome, “And when all of that, what happens to your business?”

#### **Follow Up**

It has been a couple of years since this session took place in 2014 to be more exact, and by coincidence we have spoken to Dave recently. He has quit his old job, and is making a living as a coach in just 20 hours a week, helping his clients to achieve things

that they’d thought were impossible. To mark the transformation, he is now known as David, and not Dave.

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