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The Art of Clean Language

If you would ask me, I consider Appreciative Inquiry to be a form of art, in which one can improve endlessly. From this 'artistic' perspective it might be a wise thing to study AI-related forms of art; gaining some knowledge about Clean Language could be very valuable. That's why we included a learning experience around Clean Language in our AI100 learning journey.

In my beginner's definition, Clean Language has to do with 'minimal questions' and 'maximal freedom for the other'. Why is it valuable to (up and coming) AI-practitioners? First of all, because both AI and Clean Language make specific use of language, and every new 'language exercise' can help improve our conversation skills. But there's a more significant reason.

If you think about it, performing Appreciative Inquiry makes use of questions that invite the other to think in certain directions. You could also call it a form of positive discrimination of ideas... If you look at it carefully, there is only a thin line between appreciation, influencing, directing, manipulation... Assuming that your appreciative intentions are okay, you still can get carried away whilst AI interviewing and maybe your questions become 'stronger'. Can you imagine what I'm trying to address?

Clean Language is a conversational practice based on the utmost neutral usage of language. As a method it has been developed by therapist David Grove, and in 1997 Penny Tompkins and James Lawley wrote the first official publication about it: Less is More ... *The Art of Clean Language*¹.

So, let me recall that Clean Language is not the same as Appreciative Inquiry. However the ideas behind CL and the set of questions used in CL can be very helpful in practicing AI, because they can serve as a measure. They provide a 'frame of reference' for you to assess whether your AI-questions might be reaching beyond pure inquiry and appreciation. And of course, besides serving as a measure, the CL questions can be very useful in AI interviewing. To get a general idea, please read the following fragment of the article by Tompkins and Lawley.

[...] There are 9 basic Clean Language questions. Two questions request information about symbol's attributes and two ask for locational information. There are two questions which

reference the past and two which reference the future (from the client's perceptual present). This leaves the odd-one-out which offers the client the opportunity to make a lateral and therefore metaphorical shift in perception . The 9 basic Clean Language questions are:

[The dots (.....) refer to the exact words the interviewee has mentioned before.]

And is there anything else about?

And what kind of is that?

And where is?

And whereabouts?

And what happens next?

And then what happens?

And what happens just before?

And where does/could come from?

And that's like what? [...]

Please note that I am aware of taking a fragment of CL and relating it to AI. I fully respect the psychological therapy context in which Clean Language is positioned. In my view, the line between inquiry, consulting and therapy is a thin one. To both CL and AI practitioners I would still suggest: 'please try this at home', when relational being and human wholeness are your aspirations.

Can you recall a conversation you were a part of, and your language was mostly 'clean'?

What would you consider a preferable situation to prepare and practise clean language?

Can you think of other 'enablers' to provide maximum freedom for your conversation partner?

¹ This article is still considered to be the source of information about Clean Language.

Find the complete website at <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk>.