

## How clean is our language?

11 Jan 2010 | Bob Selden

Wink wink... nudge nudge... say no more... Do you recognise some of these sayings? Perhaps you've used one or more recently – maybe as recently as the last five minutes!

That's music to my ears  
She ran like the Wind  
I'm Heartbroken  
It's raining cats and dogs  
He's bouncing off the walls  
A heated debate  
Chill out!  
Cool!  
You light up my life  
My memory is a little cloudy on that  
It's like flogging a dead horse  
Let sleeping dogs lie  
Blind as a bat

Yes, they are metaphors. And we use them in every conversation we have. They are a fabulous way of getting complicated messages across or merely speeding up the communication by saying in a few words what might otherwise take paragraphs.

But there may be more to metaphors than we think.

In their book [Metaphors in Mind](#), James Lawley and Penny Tompkins contend that the metaphors we use, whilst simplifying our communication, can also often hide deeper feelings and thoughts. If the issue is really important to us, what's behind these metaphors needs to be understood.

And in terms of day-to-day communication with others, the listener can also better understand what the speaker actually means by using a technique called "Clean Language".

Clean Language is a questioning technique that was first used in psychotherapy and coaching. It has the client discover and develop personal symbols and metaphors without contamination or distortion through the way the questions are put. It is now being used far more widely in areas such as training, coaching, facilitation, marketing, management and even IT!

Clean Language was developed by David Grove (a New Zealander) in the 1980s as a result of his work on clinical methods for resolving clients' traumatic memories.

As authors Lawley & Tompkins describe it, "He realised many clients naturally described their symptoms in metaphor, and found that when he enquired about these using their exact words, their perception of the trauma began to change."

Unlike other forms of communication, such as reflective listening where the listener reflects (and often interprets) what the other person might be feeling and thinking, clean language follows a series of questions that only use the other person's exact words to help them define their thoughts and feelings.

To ensure the questioner stays "clean", every question starts with "and". This means that the questioner has to follow the "and" with the person's exact words. It's how the questioner uses the other's exact words, that gives clean language its power.

Here's an example of clean questioning used in a therapeutic context:

Client: I'm stuck with no way out.

Clean Language Question: And **what kind of** stuck with no way out is that stuck with no way out?

As Lawley and Tomkins suggest, "This question works with the client's metaphor of stuck and only assumes that for something to be stuck it has to be stuck somewhere. When the therapist is in rapport with the metaphoric information, questions like the above make perfect sense, and client's responses have a quality of deep introspection and self-discovery. New awareness of their own process 'updates the system' and the original neural coding will automatically begin to transform; albeit in minute ways at first."

Clean Language questions are then asked of each subsequent response and each symbolic representation is explored. The process ultimately accesses conflicts, paradoxes, double-binds and other 'holding patterns' which have kept the symptoms repeating over and over.

So, in a business context, one could easily see how clean language (or an adaptation of it) could be readily used. For example, in a tense negotiation when the other party says "We seem to be stuck here with no way out", one could easily ask "And what kind of stuck is that stuck with no way out?"

The resulting conversation might very well describe exactly the sticking point and most importantly, what it means to the other party.

Clean language is not only likely to improve specific communication, such as negotiation. It undoubtedly has wider implications for leaders. As leadership mentor and coach, [Doug Long](#) points out:

"For a real leader, the most critical part of communication is 'receiving'. As we all know, receiving information has two key aspects – questioning and listening. Unfortunately our default methods of questioning and listening are often not very helpful from a leadership perspective. Our default methods of questioning and listening are designed to help us – not the party we are seeking to lead.

This is why, even in disciplinary and/or performance issues, we all too often ask leading questions – questions designed to obtain answers that will fit our model rather than providing the information that is really required."

How much better could our leadership be, if we were to truly focus on the other person's needs and put ours aside for the present?

We use metaphors in every conversation we have. In fact, I just used "sticking point" above and didn't realise until I reread the article.

So, as a starting point to improved communication and ultimately better leadership, it could be useful to develop some of the questioning techniques described in Clean Language to uncover the meaning behind the metaphors we use in everyday conversations.

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