

That's not my elephant!

How modelling the way your colleagues use their five senses can lead to deep team-level behavioural change



By Jacqueline Ann Surin and Caitlin Ann Walker



We could start to detect deep, set and repeating patterns in people

One quick and effective way to bring about change within your team is to help them find out how differently they each think, to share this with them in a quick, lasting and engaging way, and to give them simple tools for overcoming those differences.

Our favourite exercise does just this. It was designed originally to help children to reflect on their own thoughts and develop their own conclusions rather than trying to guess what was in the teacher's head.

It consists of giving an instruction to use one of the senses, i.e. see an elephant, and then uses Clean and Clean-ish Questions (see box, 'What are clean questions?') to inquire into what just happened in the child's thinking. We ask two questions per child and then ask, 'Who's different to that?' or 'Who did something different?'

Doing the exercise

Here's how the exercise works.

Facilitator: See an elephant. What kind of elephant is it?

Child 1: Mine's big and grey.

Facilitator: And yours is big and grey, and where is that big grey elephant?

Child 1: In the zoo.

Facilitator: And is there anything else about that big grey elephant in the zoo?

Child 1: He's with his mummy in the pond.

Facilitator: And whose elephant is different to that?

Child 2: Mine's a cartoon.



People got curious about each other without feeling judgmental or judged

Facilitator: What kind of cartoon?

Child 2: It's from a book.

Facilitator: And yours is a cartoon from a book, and is there anything else about that elephant?

Child 2: It's patchwork.

And so on to gently tease out the differences in attributes and location, and encouraging the children to notice the differences between them.

When we shared the exercise with adults, particularly with a team of police interviewers who were interested in 'cleaning up' their interviewing skills, we began to see the wider benefits of such an exploration into the way we make sense of the world and the differences between us.

We could, using this very simple set of actions, start to detect deep, set and repeating patterns in people. Who always generated three options? Who regularly imagined things they didn't like? Who always had lots of detail? Who related everything to their childhood?

We could uncover these patterns and share them, and ask questions about them in a non-judgmental forum. In this exercise, we're paying attention to what *is* rather than what we think things should be.

Because we were modelling what happened 1/10th of a second between stimulus and response, this took away the idea that people had choice about their patterns. Additionally, people got curious about each other without feeling judgmental or judged.

The key is in getting the group to get really curious about what they do, what others do and the practical differences between them. It's all about the quality of attention that you get them to pay to their own stuff and to each other's stuff.

It raises self-awareness – and who doesn't like to find out

more about how they think? It heightens awareness of diversity and answers a lot of questions team members will have had about why someone does things that don't make sense to them. It's micro and non-work related enough to seem like a bit of fun. It's deep enough and creates the kinds of interpersonal insights that last for years.

In one fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) company, the R&D head uses, 'That's not my elephant' as a stock phrase for meaning, 'You've misunderstood me' or 'You're talking as though we're on the same page but we're poles apart.'

The evidence we have with clients, including the case study below, is that with the new awareness that comes from the Five Senses exercise, individuals can begin moving from contempt to curiosity about each other. As a result, they learn how to communicate, collaborate or support each other better, and this leads to more of the individuals changing the way they behave and treating each other. In the FMCG company, the shared experience the group had through the Five Senses exercise meant that they are now quickly able to move from issue to inquiry to resolution.

Why the five senses?

This exercise is part of a set of adaptations of David Grove's Clean Language for use in group settings, known as Systemic Modelling. (*1)

Underpinning the Five Senses exercise is the fact that humans experience the world around us with our five senses – sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Alongside this fact is the notion that as well as taking in primary information, we use the five senses to re-present information in our thinking. We imagine things, see sense, have internal debates, get funny feelings, have gut reactions, smell a rat, and find some things leave a bad taste in our mouths.

Introducing the Five Senses exercise is also a way to get individuals to notice their preferred representational system and the subtle differences in how they access and make sense of information around them.

The beauty of the Five Senses Exercise lies in the fact that ►



- ▶ it could be the only thing a facilitator does with a group if time was limited. And it would still be enough to bring about curiosity and respect for diverse opinions, unique ways of being, and preferred styles in any group. And from that one exercise alone, these individuals can learn to detect patterns about themselves and others, making it easy to teach them about meta-programs if necessary.

The exercise is a corner stone of Systemic Modelling training and is being applied in different parts of the world. In Malaysia, organisational coach and facilitator, Jacqueline Ann Surin, who is also a Systemic Modeller, used the Five Senses exercise to help a board of directors resolve communication issues around the issue of their company's direction.

Malaysian case study

Sitting everyone in a circle, Jacqueline introduced the Five Senses exercise in this way:

This is an exercise to illustrate how we each represent what we receive through our senses differently. Hence, what we interpret can be significantly different from what is presented. Sit back and relax, become aware of what images / symbols / sensations emerge for you when you hear my instructions.

Then Jacqueline gave an instruction: 1 See a house.

After giving the group a few moments, she asked: And what happened when I said, 'See a house?' And who has something they would like to share?

This is how the directors from the Kuala Lumpur based social enterprise responded:

Director 1: My imagery is very simple. It's like something a kid would draw. It's square, has a roof, and a path with green on the side, leading straight to the door.

Jacqueline: And it's square, has a roof and a path, and green on the side, is there anything else about the house?

Director 1: It's funny, I don't see any windows. Maybe I saw a door, but no windows.

Jacqueline: And whereabouts is that door?

Director 1: Right in the middle.

Jacqueline: Who's different from that?

It's micro and non-work related enough to seem like a bit of fun

Director 2: Two images. First was a red brick house, and the second was my childhood home.

Jacqueline: And a red brick house, and your childhood home. And whereabouts is that red brick house?

Director 2: It's in front of me.

Jacqueline: And is there anything else about that red brick house in front of you?

Director 2: No.

Jacqueline: And who has something else when I said, 'See a house?'

Director 3: I see my own house.

Because these directors had already been introduced to Clean Language, Jacqueline invited them to ask each other Clean-ish questions about their experiences of a house. And so:

Director 4: And when you see your own house, what happens to you?

Director 3 answered, and then somebody else in the group asked another Clean question of that answer. And so on but not more than three developing questions per person before moving on to others so that everyone was given a voice in the group.

And so, after getting three examples, the facilitator would repeat back these three examples, and invite others who may not have spoken yet to share their experiences:

Facilitator: And who's not like that? Who has something different when I said, 'See a house?'

The process is repeated, with the facilitator repeating back a few of a person's words, and then inviting the rest to ask questions:

Facilitator: [Repeat back a few of the person's words about their experience of seeing a house]. And who would like to know more about that [one or two



descriptive words about their house]?
 [Or] What are you curious about and what question could you ask him / her about that?
 [Or] Do you have enough information about his/ her house? What else would you like to know?
 What Clean question could you ask to find out more?

This whole exercise is then repeated with other instructions that rely on the other senses, for example:

- 2. Hear music
- 3. Taste mango
- 4. Smell smoke
- 5. Feel velvet.

Detecting patterns

Apart from asking the group to share their unique and individual experiences of house, music, mango, smoke and velvet, the facilitator could also ask the group to begin noticing patterns after doing about three of these senses.

- What are you noticing about yourself? What did you learn about yourself?
- What are you noticing about others? What did you learn about others?
- Who's different from you?
- Who's similar to you?

With the social enterprise group in Kuala Lumpur, Director 1 noticed that he was more likely to be conceptual than the others. He had a conceptual visual of a house and later on, of an 'idealised mango with a black background'. For Director 2, the group noticed that her experiences were usually dual and involved a memory of her childhood. Her response to 'Smell smoke', similar to her response to 'See a house', was:

Director 2: The first thing that came to my mind was the smell of cigarette smoke. And then the next thing that came to mind was open burning of leaves in my parent's home. My parents would rake up dry leaves and burn them.

Director 5: What kind of open burning is that?

Director 2: The kind that reminded me of my childhood.

Additionally, the group was asked to notice each other's thinking process when responding to these instructions.

For one director, she had to think a lot about seeing a house: It didn't just come to me.

For the others: It just popped up for me. It popped up in front of me. It just kind of conjured up for me in my mind's eye.

Benefits to the organisation

At the end of the exercise, Jacqueline asked the group: So what is your learning from all of this?

Their responses: It seems to trigger different experiences for all of us. We're colouring these words with our past experiences. Each word had different connotations and impact on us.

What were the benefits to organisational change for this

social enterprise?

When this board of directors first commissioned Jacqueline to work with them, their challenge was in getting all the directors aligned as to the company's direction and development, and what their respective responsibilities were. There were frustrations from a lack of communication between some directors about issues that affected some of them but which they seemed unable to speak about.

After they learned how to be Clean or Clean-ish in their questions, and had experienced a day of Systemic Modelling which included the Five Senses exercise, they subsequently had a board meeting. They reported that unlike previous meetings, decisions were made, they finished the agenda and also nearly finished the meeting on time.

When asked what they had done differently at this meeting, they said, among others:

Director 3: People were listening more attentively. The evidence was that there were no interruptions and no laughing when somebody was making a point.

Director 2: Even though I had a reaction to what someone else was saying, I understood that it was my stuff, my baggage. So, there was no judgement of the person and I was willing to give the person a chance.

The Five Senses exercise isn't rocket science. And it has the potential to get people to begin noticing their own stuff, when most of the time, this would be information that would likely be below the radar. Additionally, with the use of Clean Language, the exercise is a proven way of helping individuals appreciate difference and suspend judgments about others so that they can listen and collaborate even better with each other. ●

What are Clean Questions?

Clean Questions, originally developed by David Grove, are a simple set of non-leading questions that can inquire about:

- Location*
 - Where?
 - Whereabouts?
- Attributes
 - What kind of...?
 - Is there anything else about...?
- Sequence
 - What happened just before...?
 - Where did...come from?
 - What happened next?
 - What happens after...?
- Metaphor
 - That's like what?



Clean Questions invite the listener to keep their attention on their answer and to extend their awareness.

Reference (*1) Caitlin Walker, *From Contempt to Curiosity: creating the conditions for groups to collaborate*.

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