



## Coaching at Work road-tests Clean Language

# DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

### 1 The tool What is it?

Clean Language was developed by psychologist David Grove to resolve traumatic memories. Many coaches find the techniques useful to help their clients resolve deep-seated emotional impulses, such as stress, fear, anger and frustration.

The approach is particularly relevant in today's business world of change and uncertainty, according to Carol Wilson, who worked with Grove from 2004 until his death in 2008 to create techniques that would be safe for coaches to use with no training in therapy. She now delivers training in these methods with colleague Angela Dunbar. Two years ago she embarked on a doctorate at Middlesex University to explore Clean techniques.

#### How does it work?

The practice is called 'clean' because the practitioner repeats the client's exact words, interspersed with questions which least contaminate the client's experience. It opens up communication between the client's conscious and unconscious mind, with the latter often communicating in metaphors and symbols.

Grove also developed Emergent Knowledge. This stands on the shoulders of his previous work, but spatial movements and references take the place of, or combine with, metaphors elicited by Clean Language.

### 2 The administrator Using the tool

Wilson has trained 16 of the BBC's highly qualified internal coaches in Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge. She is monitoring what happens as they use the techniques with their clients and each other.

The following is an account of sessions between two of the coaches: Claire Taylor as coach and Vali Lalioti as client. The session combines Clean Language and its metaphors with an Emergent Knowledge technique called Clean Boundaries.

Taylor asked questions using the following framework:

#### ● Clean Start (enabling the client to find the right space from which to start the session).

- And what kind of space is the space around [xxx]?
- And is there anything else about that space?
- And does that space have a shape or a size?
- And how far does that space go?
- And what kind of boundary or edge does [xxx] have?
- And is there anything else about that boundary?
- And what does that boundary know?
- And what does the space between those two boundaries know?

#### ● Clean Finish (enabling the client to finish the session comfortably and consolidate what has been learned).

### 3 The experience The client

I was faced with a relocation decision that felt like a 'zero-sums' situation, rationally positive, but emotionally negative. Logically thinking, it was clear to me that the relocation presented a great opportunity, but there was an emotional aspect that made it feel very negative too.

I initially found it difficult to look outside the ugly rock that this zero-sums felt like. The coach continued with the questions and I was able to move away from the rock and look at the space outside it that felt vast and beautiful, like the universe and the Milky Way.

At some point the word 'edge'

### Clean Language: pros and cons

#### UPSIDE

- Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge 'reach the parts that regular coaching can't', converting blocks and phobias into new energy and resources
- Coaches need little training as processes are 100 per cent client-led
- The techniques help people develop greater resilience during uncertainty

#### DOWNSIDE

- New practitioners sometimes experience an initial 'clunkiness' in following an unfamiliar format
- Introducing techniques into a session can be awkward, particularly as metaphors and spatial techniques may be seen as 'touchy feely'



sounded louder in my head. I think that was a shift moment – that just the sound of the word somehow unlocked something, and I was holding a baseball bat, swinging it to hit the rock (that had already turned into a more flexible, semi-milky transparent object that I was pushing to expand from within) to effortlessly see it move in Space and become one with the Milky Way.

*Five days later, Lalioti reported:*  
“What happened in the following days was like a flood that started and was impossible to stop and I had to experience it fully and hold on and see what would come on the other end, when the flood waters subsided.

I spent two days mourning deeply for what had happened, crying and sobbing at times that I least expected, being unable to move forward, frozen by the irrational fear of what would happen if I relocated.

But at the same time, something was healing. Something deeply traumatic has come back, but it was healing itself. I am not yet at peace with it, but at least through this process I was able to understand that my research and ‘professor’ past was screaming to be part of me again. My technology expert self, so eagerly abandoned to escape an ‘ugly blob’ of the past, has lifted its head,

thinking there is an opportunity to find ways to become whole again, and all this thanks to the impossible challenge of relocating and the journey through feelings and emotions and the help of Clean Boundaries and metaphors.”

*The “becoming whole” comment crops up frequently in Grove’s work. Traumas are often embedded at a young age and then forgotten by the conscious mind. Meanwhile, defensive mechanisms are set up deep within the psyche, growing more convoluted over the years, and grinding into action when triggered by events reminiscent of the original trauma. These mechanisms use energy and resources which could be put to a positive use and, when resolved, often result in the client uncovering a talent or ability previously unknown to them.*

**Carol Wilson**

### **The coach**

One of the areas I want to improve on as a coach is to allow and help the client to explore more their space, issue and thinking and avoid a tendency to get to action space too quickly. I found the boundary approach gave me this ‘permission’ to explore – almost for the sake of exploration.

Once I’d got over the self-consciousness of following the question format, the flow of the questions and the timeliness felt authentic and natural. That may sound like an odd contradiction: it’s the experience of unlearning my original coaching model, with which I am very familiar, and using a less familiar one, which I therefore need to keep checking to ensure I’m using it correctly.

When I relax and trust my instincts I rarely make a mistake. It is trying too hard that has led me to stray into non-Clean interpretation. It is difficult to explain how I decide which direction to go in; it just feels right to ask that Clean question there. If I think too much about responses, I over-interpret.

**Claire Taylor**

● See *Coaching at Work*, ‘Speech therapy’, vol 5, issue 3, and ‘A room of your own’, vol 3, issue 2