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Less is More ... The Art of Clean Language

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(Version 2)

A gentle genie has escaped from the lamp. His name is David Grove and his magic is 'clean language'.

Ernest L. Rossi

After reading our interview with therapist David Grove (Rapport 33) many people have asked us about David's questioning technique called Clean Language. This article is an introduction to Clean Language which forms the the basis of his fascinating approach to psychotherapy.

The linguistic base of the art and craft of NLP consists of the Meta Model and Milton Model. Students of NLP may be forgiven for thinking these two wonderfully useful tools are all that is needed for the "study of the structure of subjective experience."

In our two-year modelling project of David Grove we have discovered there is another way of representing our internal and external worlds. We call this The Metaphor Model, and its 'modus operandi' is Clean Language.

Clean Language is to David Grove what the Milton Model is to Erickson -- only David came up with his own model and was far too modest to name it after himself!

Celebrated Therapists

In the early 1980's David Grove studied transcripts of celebrated therapists like Virginia Satir and Carl Rogers and noticed they continually shifted their client's frames of reference. He realised they were introducing their own model of the world by subtly rewording what the client was saying.

David wondered what it would be like to fully preserve and honour a client's experience with minimal interference by the therapist. He achieved this by identifying a number of very simple questions with a particular syntax and a unique delivery method. These questions contained a minimum of presupposition and were therefore called 'Clean Language.'

What he discovered was the more he used Clean Language, the more clients naturally used metaphor to describe their symptoms. When Clean Language questions were then directed to the metaphors and symbols, unexpected information became available to the client, often with profound results.

He found that the *less* he attempted to change the client's model of the world, the *more* they experienced their own core patterns, and organic, lasting changes naturally emerged from 'the system'.

Less is More

The 'less is more' philosophy of Clean Language is a different approach to the traditional philosophy of NLP. The Meta Model and Milton Model patterns of language are designed to have *maximum* influence, often through the covert use of suggestion. And very effective they are too. However, they are not the only way to facilitate clients through the change process.

By interfering with a client's description of their symptoms, David Grove asserts that well-meaning therapists can rob clients of the very experience needed to resolve their unwanted behaviours.

In parallel to Grove, Ernest Rossi, co-author of many of Milton Erickson's books, has been developing an approach to hypnotherapy which could be called 'minimalist'. He describes it as a:

"naturalistic approach [which] can be used to help patients enhance their sensitivity and awareness of their personal patterns of mind-body coding and signalling to access and resolve their problems." (page 313)

The title of Rossi's new book, "The Symptom Path to Enlightenment" points to where this type of approach could lead!

Symbolic Meaning

NLP has made great contributions to our understanding of subjective experience: representational systems, sub-modalities, timelines etc. "Work with structure not content" could be an NLP slogan. Perhaps because of this, NLP has mostly ignored the *symbolic meaning of the content* of subjective experience. Working with symbol and metaphor is David Grove's forte.

Clean Language both validates the client's experience and facilitates the 'bringing into form' or 'giving life to' symbolic information normally out of everyday awareness. By doing so it catalyses the processes of self-healing

Information-Centred Therapy

The aim of Grovian Metaphor Therapy is for the *client* to gather information about their own subjective experience, not necessarily for the therapist to understand it. Attempting to understand the client's

experience is replaced with tracking the inherent symbolic process and structure within their 'Metaphoric Psychescape'.

The therapist asks questions *on behalf* of the information sources, staying strictly within the metaphor. Thus this process is not client-centred, it is information-centred.

Common by-products of being asked Clean Language questions are: a state of self-absorption (often an eyes-open trance develops); a sense of connecting with some deep, rarely explored aspects of ourselves; and a sense of wonder, curiosity and awe at the marvellous ingenuity of our unconscious.

Clean Language questions enable the client to experience their own patterns in 'real time.' As a result, naturalistic, organic transformations occur.

Processing Language

NLP has clearly shown we process everything that is said to us. We seem to be biologically programmed to attempt to make sense of whatever another person communicates. For example, when we are asked a question we have to "mentally do" whatever is asked before we can answer. To do this we have to presuppose or infer much more information than is given in the 'surface structure' of the question.

We have discovered that when a therapist makes even minute changes to a client's words the implications can be significant. Clients often have to go through additional translation processes and mental gymnastics to reorientate to the therapist's presuppositions. Thus the therapy subtly goes in a direction determined by the therapist's map of the world.

In Clean Language, the therapist aims to ask the question the client's information wants to be asked. Each response is then utilised by the therapist in the next question. Thus the therapist follows the natural direction of the process rather than leads it.

Unclean Language

To illustrate how easy it is to unwittingly interfere in a client's process, let's explore an example. A therapist could respond in a number of ways to the following statement:

Client: I'm stuck with no way out.

Therapist **1**: Have you got the determination to walk away?

This intervention uses very unclear language as it:

- implies the solution for the client is to be away from their current condition
- imposes determination as the resource required
- assumes the client will 'walk away' (rather than leaping, soaring, melting, evaporating, etc.)

Also the client might well presuppose they have insufficient of the determination required, because if they had enough, they would have already applied it, wouldn't they?!

Therapist **2**: What would happen if you could find a way out?

This is cleaner language as it mostly uses the client's words. However, you may have noticed the embedded command, 'find a way out'. The therapist has assumed the solution of 'finding' on behalf of the client. While this may produce a useful outcome, does the therapist recognise they have just imposed their model of the world on the client?

You may also notice in both of the above examples *the client's perception has been subtly ignored*. The client has said there is no way out of stuck. Our experience indicates it is highly therapeutic to begin by fully validating the client's 'current reality' through the use of Clean Language (See example below).

Perhaps the deepest presupposition in both of the above interventions is that being "away" or "out" is good for the client, and many *therapist's outcome* would be to facilitate this.

David Grove assumes that if a client is 'stuck,' then there is valuable information in the stuckness. If 'stuck' is not honoured and explored, the client may well need to return to 'stuck' at a future date. This may explain why some apparently successful therapeutic interventions can have a short-lived effect.

Clean Language Questions

The aim of Clean Language early in the process is to allow information to emerge into the client's awareness by exploring *their* coding of *their* metaphor.

Let's revisit the above example, this time using Clean Language questions:

Client: I'm stuck with no way out.

CLQ: And what kind of stuck with no way out is that stuck with no way out?

Client **A**: My whole body feels as if its sinking into the ground.

Client **B**: I can't see the way forward. It's all foggy.

Client **C**: Every door that was opened to me is closed.

This gives the client maximum opportunity to describe the experience of 'stuck,' and therefore to gather more information about their representation of the Present State.

Another Clean Language question you could ask would be:

CLQ: And when you are stuck with no way out, where are stuck?

Client **D**: It's as if my feet are frozen to the ground.

Client **E**: I'm in a long tunnel and there's no light at either end.

Client **F**: I see myself wrapped up like a mummy.

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. Thus the client is continually expanding their awareness of their Metaphoric Psychescape. The process ultimately accesses conflicts, paradoxes, double-binds and other 'holding patterns' which have kept the symptoms repeating over and over.

As the process moves beyond this point, symbolic resources naturally emerge which resolve, at a symbolic level, that which the client has been

unable to resolve at an everyday level. *When the metaphor evolves, behaviour changes in the client's 'real world'*. There is a correlation between the two.

Clean Language has three components: The vocal characteristics when delivering the language patterns, the syntactical structure of the language and the questions themselves. Each aspect is explained below.

Voice Qualities

David Grove deliberately 'marks out' his use of Clean Language through changes to his normal way of speaking:

- The speed of his delivery is slower than half normal pace
- He uses a slightly deeper tonality than normal speaking
- He often uses a distinctive sing-song rhythm
- There is an implied sense of curiosity and wonder in his voice
- The client's *idiosyncratic* pronunciation, emphasis, sighs etc. are matched

Syntax

The syntax of Clean Language is peculiar and would sound very strange if used in normal conversation! It uses Pacing and Leading in a particular way. For example, all the questions begin with "and" and are orientated to the clients 'perceptual present'. The generalised syntax, in its full form, comprises 4 components:

"And [pacing clients words] + And as/when + [question] + [refer to this particular experience]"

For example:

C: I've gone blank. T: **And** you've gone blank. **And when** you've gone blank, **what kind of blank is that** blank?

or

C I'm getting confused. T: **And** you're getting confused. **And as** you're getting confused **is there anything else about** getting confused **like that** ?

The Basic Questions

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:

- 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?

Where '.....' is (some of) the exact words of the client.

To help navigate around the client's Metaphorical Psychescape we have devised a 3 dimensional compass:

In Grovian Metaphor Therapy the 80:20 rule of Pareto applies. The 9 basic questions form the bedrock of the approach and get asked at least 80% of the time.

There are a further 25 or so questions which supplement the basic 9. These are used only in response to the client presenting or presupposing information which warrants such a question.

Benefits of Using Clean Language

The results of using Clean Language can be quite astounding. Clients often report that we seem to understand their predicament at a very deep level, and that this in itself is valuable. (Actually this is only true at the symbolic level -- at an everyday content/cognitive level we know much less about their issue than most traditional counsellors.)

Perhaps the most noticeable benefit of this type of therapy is that the client gets to increase their awareness of their own process. They become observers of their own repeating patterns. They make connections

between the symbolic pattern and their everyday life. This separates them from their 'stuff' and allows new perspectives and insights.

At certain a stage the process "takes over" and both you and the client are led by the information. When this occurs profound shifts take place. The client is taken by surprise at the turn of perceptual events as long-standing patterns transform themselves into more useful ways of being and doing.

From the therapist's point of view this can verge on the miraculous. When the most unwanted and fearful symbols transform organically into resources and the client experiences deep physiological changes -- these are sacred moments.

Example Transcript

You may notice in the following transcript, once the opening question was asked, the whole process required just *two* Clean Language questions ... a clear example of "less is more!"

James walks up to a participant [called A in the transcript] who has just been doing an NLP exercise, Circles of Excellence, for the first time.

J: How did it go?

A: It didn't work because the circles won't stand still.

J: And the circles won't stand still. And when circles won't stand still, what kind of circles are circles that won't stand still?

A: Well, the light keeps moving (gestures high up with right hand).

J: And, the light keeps moving ... And, what kind of light is a light that keeps moving like that? (repeats gesture).

A: (Talking increasingly fast) It shines down and I can't catch up with it. Every time I attempt to step into the light it's not there -- it's moved. I'm trying to catch up with it and ... I want to stand in peace and I can't.

J: And you can't stand in peace and you want to stand in peace ... And when you want to stand in peace what kind of stand in peace is that stand in peace?

A: I relax.

J: And what kind of relax is relax like that, when you stand in peace?

A: Deep.

J: And when you stand in peace ... and you relax ... and deep ... and then what happens ?

A: I stop.

J: And you stop. And, when you stand in peace and you relax ... and deep ... and you stop ... then what happens ?

A: The light ... shines on me. (pause) It's not that I couldn't step into the light ... it's that the light couldn't catch up with me.

J: And now the light has caught up with you ... and the light shines on you ... and you relax ... and a deep relax ... and you stand in peace ... and the light shines on you ... then what happens?

A: (Shakes head, eyes fill with tears, looks down)

J: And what just happened?

A: It's amazing. I'm standing on a stage and a spot light is shining on me and I'm perfectly still ... and I'm not saying anything ... And there are

people (gestures towards 'audience') who have come to see me. (long pause)

J: And take all the time you need, to get to know what it is like, now that you're standing on a stage ... and a spot light is shining on you ... and you're perfectly still ... and not saying anything ... and people (gestures) have come to see you ... and take all the time you need.

In the pause James walks away. For the remaining two days of the workshop the participant repeatedly said that she couldn't remember feeling so relaxed in years.

And finally ...

Clean Language questioning is at the heart of David Grove's therapeutic approach and appears very simple. However, to gain a degree of elegance as therapists, we have had to learn a whole new set of skills and a radically different approach to therapy.

In essence, we have learned a new way of thinking. We have learned to think symbolically. And symbolic thinking is as different to process thinking, as process thinking is to content thinking.

What continues to amaze and delight us, as a by-product of learning symbolic thinking, is how our understanding of, and our ability to use the fundamentals of NLP are dramatically improving!

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For an update to this article see: Clean Language Revisited: The evolution of a model, *Rapport*, Autumn 2004.

URL: <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/109/1/Less-Is-More-The-Art-of-Clean-Language/Page1.html>

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