

# Achieving an outcome by exploring metaphors

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## **Purpose**

Most coaching processes begin with setting a clear outcome. This exercise is slightly different in that we are encouraging the client to set an outcome using metaphoric language to aid getting a deeper, more fundamental goal to motivate the client to action. This exercise belongs to what is referred to as ‘Clean Language’.

## **Description**

You can ask a Clean Language question to encourage the client to set an outcome. The question is: ‘What would you like to have happen?’. You can ask this question at the outset of a coaching session, or you could ask it at any point during a session when the client describes a real or perceived problem in metaphor. To help the client stay in their metaphoric thinking, repeat their description of the problem back to them just before the question. For example, ‘And when you are banging your head against a brick wall, what would you like to have happen?’.

## **Process**

If you ask the question at the beginning of a session and you get a logical, non-metaphoric answer like: ‘I want to get that promotion’, you can explore the outcome using the two questions given in the strategy ‘Noticing and paying attention to

## 6 CONFIDENCE BUILDING

metaphors' (p. 232), paying attention to any metaphoric descriptions they may use to describe the outcome.

Just because you ask for an outcome, it doesn't mean you'll get one. Quite often you'll get a re-statement of the problem such as: 'I just don't seem to be making progress'.

As above, repeat their summary of the problem (and the metaphoric description if they have given one) and repeat the question 'What would you like to have happen?'. Sometimes the client will answer the question by stating a 'remedy' rather than an actual outcome. So, rather than an end result, the client describes a proposed solution that they think will help them move forward. For example, 'I'd like to break through the wall and find a path'. Or, they say they would like to reduce or remove the problem, whatever it is. For instance, an outcome of 'I'd like to stop smoking', in this context, would be considered a proposed remedy rather than an actual outcome.

Ask the client, what would happen next if they were to achieve their proposed remedy. This is likely to get you a real (and more motivating) outcome. Here's the phrasing of the Clean Language question (once again start with a repetition of the client's description):

*Coach:* And when you break through the wall and find a path, then what happens?

*Client:* Then I can finally get to a place where I can just be myself, and be happy.

This sounds like an outcome, so once again you can start to explore it with the two simple Clean Language questions above.

Any time the client gives you a problem, repeat their description of the problem and ask: 'What would you like to have happen?'. Any time the client gives you a remedy, repeat their description of the remedy and ask: 'Then what happens?'. This exercise is used often enough for a client to get a real sense of the outcome, the problems that have been stopping them achieving the outcome so far and what strategies will/will not work to get them there.

The exercise and the questioning can be carried out without a special focus on metaphors; however, it is much,

much more powerful if you focus your questions and attention in this way. By doing so you help bypass the client's ability to block or censor their answers as metaphors hold a different meaning than simple statements.

Like many coaching strategies, this one works on the basis of concentrating the client's attention on where they want to be, away from what's stopping them. This different, positive perspective is usually motivating and refreshing for the client.

### **Pitfalls**

Depending on the problem or issue the client is working with, they may find it very difficult to give a clear outcome. Some clients are so hypnotized by the problem that they find it very difficult to talk about anything else. Some clients are stuck in a bind. By wanting whatever it is they want, this creates a conflict that in itself creates the problem. In this situation, the client won't automatically move forward with this exercise, but it might help you to identify and understand their 'stuckness'.

### **Bibliography**

- Tompkins, P. and Lawley, J. (2000) *Metaphors in Mind*, London: The Developing Company Press.
- Tompkins, P. and Lawley, J. (2006) *Coaching for P.R.O.s (Coach the Coach*, February edition), Littleport: Fenman.