

Noticing and paying attention to metaphors

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Purpose

This is a strategy to help you and your clients become more aware of how the everyday metaphors they use may be shaping their thoughts. By paying attention to metaphors and asking questions about them, clients gain understanding about their situation and how they are thinking about it from a very different perspective. The exercise is a really useful way to explore difficult or sensitive issues, as the client can describe the metaphors in detail without needing to worry about explaining the ‘real situation’ to you. It can also be time saving.

Description

People use metaphors all the time to describe how they feel and what they want. You may just think of metaphor as simply a creative way to impart a message, but many linguists and psychologists believe now that they are far more than this. In fact, a metaphoric description may be a closer representation of what’s really going on in our minds, as highlighted by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) in their book *Metaphors We Live By*: ‘the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined . . .’ (p. 6).

Metaphors are being expressed constantly as a way of describing our thinking patterns all the time – Penny Tompkins and James Lawley (2006) suggest that the average

person uses several metaphors in every minute of conversation. And that doesn't tell us how many unexpressed metaphors may be 'just outside' the person's awareness, but be part of their thought processes. Many facilitators and coaches are discovering that Clean Language can have extraordinary results. This is a questioning process created by New Zealand psychotherapist David Grove, which enables clients to go deeper into their own thoughts, habits and perceptions, where they can find their own unique solutions. The 'deepness' of thinking is enhanced by asking clean questions of the metaphoric content of the client's language. This focuses their attention on the *structure* of their thinking and experience, rather than the same old problem-content that they've thought in the same old way many times before. This enables a different level of thinking, leading to different kinds of creative solutions. To paraphrase Einstein's thoughts on creativity: *no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.*

Process

Rather than plan to use this as a stand-alone exercise, just begin to notice how often the client gives you metaphoric descriptions of their situation and what they'd like to do about it. Here are some examples you are very likely to hear:

- 'I feel like I'm banging my head against a brick wall.'
- 'She's closed herself off from me and I don't know how to break through.'
- 'I need a bit of a jump-start.'

When you notice a metaphor, ask a few simple Clean Language questions to have the client become more aware of their metaphoric thinking. When using Clean Language in this way, generally you want to repeat back the metaphoric words to the client exactly as they used them: 'You're off balance today. What kind of "off balance" is that "off balance"?' Make a note of whatever the client says next and again repeat back their words.

Then ask: ‘And when you are feeling “off balance”, is there anything else about feeling off balance?’. Continue to explore whatever the client says, paying particular attention to the metaphoric language they use. Repeat back the client’s words and use these two questions only: ‘*What kind of [xxxx] is that [xxxx]?*’ and ‘*And is there anything else about that [xxxx]?*’. The idea here is to have the client become aware of something about their pattern of thinking that they weren’t aware of before. Metaphorically, the exercise is like holding a mirror up to the client, and everything you say is reflecting back to the client their own pattern of thinking.

If the client starts to go a bit ‘dreamy’ and seems deep in their own thoughts, the chances are they are accessing deep stuff and probably gaining some new insights. This example process has no ‘formal’ beginning, ending or time limit. You can use it as and when appropriate. You may choose to move on to another kind of questioning or continue with another Clean Language process or exercise (see the other strategies in this book).

Pitfalls

Some people don’t use metaphors so frequently. It doesn’t mean that they don’t think in this way, just that they may not be able to consciously access these thoughts too easily. So, typically when you ask questions of any metaphors these kinds of people do use, they’ll give you lots of conceptual descriptions rather than develop their metaphor. If this is the case, work with them on whatever comes up, even if there are no metaphors. Bide your time and when they do give a metaphor, be patient when exploring it. These kinds of people, when they do ‘get into’ their metaphors, often find it immensely rewarding as it really gives them insights at a very different level to their normal conscious thinking.

Bibliography

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