

Using metaphors to unlock your thinking

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Purpose

People are often unaware how much they talk in metaphors to describe their thoughts and feelings in everyday conversation. In a coaching capacity, asking your coachee to describe their issue or thoughts in this way can help to unlock their thinking and provide new insights.

Description

This exercise gets the client to use a metaphor as a way of describing a situation or issue. The process generates insights.

Process

Ask your coachee to describe the issue/situation as an object or image. Ask them to describe the object/image as fully as possible. Use prompt questions such as:

- What can you see?
- What shape is the object?
- What size is it?
- What colour is it?
- What is it doing?

Usually, thinking of the issue/situation in this way provides new insight for the coachee. Once they have finished exploring the object, ask them to think about the issue again and

establish whether their thoughts are different in any way. Explore this information with them to help them look at the situation from a new or different perspective. To move them forward into action, ask them how the new information can help to resolve the situation.

Example

Clare was keen to be promoted but felt that her boss didn't always take her seriously. In exploring the reasons for this she thought she was maybe giving mixed messages but wasn't sure how she was doing this. I asked Clare to think about the situation and think of an image that represented it. 'It's like being a set of those Russian dolls; sometimes I'm the big doll, sometimes I'm the little one.' This information enabled Clare to examine how she behaved in different situations with her boss and to create an action plan for being more assertive in some of them.

Pitfalls

- Some people find it difficult to work with metaphors; therefore this approach may not work for them.
- New insights often have a powerful effect and a coachee may need some time to adjust to or digest the new information. Initially, they may also be concerned that they don't know what to do with the insight, for example how to move to action. The coaching may need to help the coachee work through these concerns before the individual is ready to move to action.

Bibliography

MacKewn, J. (1997) *Developing Gestalt Counselling*, London: Sage Publications.