



Leadership Insight

Clean Language - A framework of powerful questions

By Paul Field

Clean Language – A Framework of Powerful Questions

Clean Language is a method of communication developed by the therapist David Grove. It embodies modern communication values such as listening, understanding and empathy as opposed to persuasion and self-interest.

It's a powerful approach for anyone in business: from leaders wanting clear, accurate information, through business analysts trying to uncover business needs, to project managers clarifying issues and plans. And its potential for rapidly creating high-performing teams is second-to-none.

It's the core framework that I teach under the banner of Powerful Questions and, in this article, I'll share the fundamental concepts of the approach for a business context.

What is Clean Language?

Clean Language helps people communicate their own meaning, free of interpretation from others. It promotes ease of understanding and cooperative, productive relationships.

There are many components to the concept of "Clean". We'll start with the concept of Clean Questions and this summary [from David Grove](#).

Clean questions are clean, simple and repetitive. The small iterations, repeated over and over are what make the questions powerful.

Clean questions do not introduce ideas to the client... Clean questions use only words the client has already said...

When questions are kept clean the client's own model of the world is able to come out and the solutions come from within them. When questions are repetitive its predictable what the next question will be so the client isn't involved in trying to out guess the therapist or the next question.

David Grove discovered that by minimising the use of his own assumptions and metaphors, he gave the client maximum freedom for their own thinking.

An Example: Clean vs Dirty

An example of introducing assumptions is the classic manager's question "Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?".

There are a number of assumptions in this question: the manager has assumed that the person "sees" but it might be more important to the person how they "feel" or perhaps what they're "hearing" (maybe from other people). Also, what's so special about 5 years? It's an arbitrary time picked by the manager.

One clean approach is to ask about "a great career". You could ask "A great career for you is like what?" and then develop the answer using "is there anything else about X?" and "what kind of X?", plus a few "then what happens?". For example:

M: A great career for you is like what?

P: I'd get to work on more and more new and challenging things

M: And what kind of challenging?

P: Something that's just beyond my current skills

M: And what kind of new?

P: Using the latest technologies, things that very few people are using yet

M: And when you work on more and more new and challenging things, then what happens?

P: Then I'll get to be an expert in my field

M: And when you're an expert in your field, then what happens?

P: Then I'll have a lot of respect from my peers and lots of opportunities to do new things

In this conversation the manager has simply asked clean questions and used the person's own words – the manager added nothing else. By listening carefully, the manager learns valuable information about supporting and motivating this person. By being asked questions like this carefully for, say, 20 minutes, the person themselves is likely to have a far clearer personal view of their career too.

The List of Clean Questions

When being Clean, you typically use only questions from the list below. When you're experienced, you can use other questions too but that's a more advanced topic.

In the questions below **X** and **Y** represent a selection of the person's *exact* words:

Developing Questions

- What kind of X (is that X)?
- Is there anything else about X?
- Where is X? *or* Whereabouts is X?
- That's X like what?
- Is there a relationship between X and Y?
- When X, what happens to Y?

Sequence and Source Questions

- Then what happens? *or* What happens next?
- What happens just before X?
- Where could X come from?

Intention Questions

- What would X like to have happen?
- What needs to happen for X?
- Can X (happen)?

The first two questions: "What kind of X (is that X)?" and "Is there anything else about X?" are the most commonly used. In a typical session, they would account for around 50% of the questions asked.

Exact words

It's very easy to make assumptions about what people mean by a particular word. And often in conversations we'll paraphrase what someone said and we'll use words of our own that we believe convey the same meaning. For example:

I'd like to meet new people

Why do you want to make new friends?

Err, No... I don't want to make friends.... I want to talk to people about different careers

OK, so you phone them up and....

No, no... I want to talk to them face-to-face....

Clean teaches you that every word spoken has potentially different meaning for the person speaking and the person listening. So, a Clean question uses exactly the words spoken and that allows you to enquire into exactly what that person does mean. For example, the Clean version of the conversation above might be:

I'd like to meet new people

What kind of new people?

People with different careers to mine

And when you meet those people, what kind of meet?

Face-to-face – maybe for a chat over coffee

And when you meet those people, then what happens?

Then I can write a book about choosing your ideal career

Listening and Directing Attention

Once you know the basic questions, you can start using a more advanced structure for the questions that can help people to feel listened to and can direct their attention to where you'd like it to go. The full structure is:

And <exact words> And When <exact words> <clean question>?

For example:

And you'd like a great career and to earn lots of money and when it's a great career, what kind of great?

There are three parts that serve three purposes...

1. “*And <exact words>*” provides a summary and proves you were listening and taking the person seriously. When people hear their own words come back, they sometimes clarify or correct them. You don’t need to repeat *everything* the person said – just a few key words or a key phrase.
2. “*And when <exact words>*” is a way of placing the listener’s attention onto something you’d like them to talk about.
3. The question itself is usually targeted onto something very precisely.

In the example above, notice how attention is “zoomed in” from the great career and lots of money onto exactly what “great” is.

When you use the structure, you can use any of the 3 parts as you need to:

- *What kind of great career?*
- ***And a great career and to earn lots of money, and is there anything else about that great career?***
- ***And when you earn lots of money, then what happens?***

Principles of Clean

Clean is not just about the questions, there are fundamental principles of being Clean, and here are 5 that I think are particularly important:

1. Listen attentively
2. Keep your opinions, ideas, judgements and advice to yourself
3. Ask Clean Language questions to explore what the person said
4. Be really curious about the person and what they’re saying
5. Know what outcome you and the other person want and ask questions that help you progress towards that outcome

The first 4 principles create a very unique experience for the person you are working with. How often does someone spend quality time with you, listening carefully and

with great interest and not judging or turning the conversation back to their own stuff?

Keeping on track

The 5th principle is important to keep you on track when you're curious and you're asking so many questions – it's easy to go off in the weeds. Clean people call a series of questions with a purpose or outcome a *vector*.

Learning to mentally check whether the question you're going to ask is in support of an outcome is a key skill. In the manager conversation above, a technical manager might get very interested in "latest technologies" and ask questions that explored that; but is that the right place to explore if the outcome is understanding how the person can have a great career? Instead, the manager might explore "respect from my peers" or "just beyond my skills".

Metaphors

Clean used in coaching and therapy has an additional principle: *Take the client's metaphors literally*. So if someone says, "I'm banging my head against a brick wall", the facilitator will assume that is the literal truth and might ask "what kind of banging?" or "what kind of wall?".

It sounds strange, but absolutely magical things happen when you treat metaphors literally. In therapy, metaphors allow people to talk about extremely traumatic events that they couldn't discuss directly. In coaching, metaphors can provide access to unconscious resources and knowledge.

In business, treating metaphors seriously creates a whole different way to have conversations about difficult issues. If you ask someone "your job is like what?" and they answer "it's like I'm a soldier in the trenches – there's constant shelling and I'm up to my knees in mud" it's possible to explore the nature of the trenches, the shelling and the mud and what that person would like to have happen. It creates a whole different way of understanding in a far less emotionally charged way than if you talked about the situation directly.

Applications of Clean in business

There are numerous ways to apply clean in business. Here are a few:

- **Coaching your staff**, where you get to deeply understand what motivates your people and become the boss they really want to work for
- **Creating high-performing teams**, where team members understand how each other tick
- **Meeting management**, where meetings have a clear purpose, stay on track and are valuable to everyone attending
- **Eliciting requirements**, where a business analyst can quickly uncover a stakeholder's needs
- **Project planning**, where work can be quickly and completely broken down into manageable chunks
- **Process mapping (Kanban)**, where people can uncover precise details of what a business process really is or of how they operate as an organisation

Get in touch

If you are interested in discussing the content of this White Paper in more detail, or would like to talk to us about your competitive challenges, please get in touch with us:

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