

Using Metaphors with Coaching

By Angela Dunbar, BSc Psych, HFAC

(First published in Sept 05 in the Association for Coaching Quarterly Bulletin.
Modified on 4th Feb 2021)

Why Metaphors?

I first came across the powerful effect of metaphors in coaching, when I was being coached. At the time I was an NLP Practitioner, working towards Master level with my own relationship issues. I thought it would be beneficial to get coached by someone with an NLP background.

I went into the first session with my normal, logical thinking patterns, and came out with a completely different awareness of life, the universe and myself. I felt like Alice, having fallen down the rabbit hole and finding herself in Wonderland. I was in total awe of my own internal metaphoric representations, and amazed at how deeply I was affected by them.

Since then, I have been on a journey; a treasure hunt; a quest for more knowledge and understanding; a thirst for learning how other people use metaphors, and a love that fills my heart and radiates out a belief in the magic inside us all. How metaphoric is that? Metaphors are a wonderful, descriptive tool for communication that can inspire others, but they are also much more.

A metaphor can be viewed as simply one person's description of something as 'like' something else. In George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's mind-expanding book, *Metaphors We Live By*, they say: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." (page 5)

When one acknowledges that most of our thought processes go beyond our conscious understanding, metaphors give a unique perspective into how someone thinks, feels and experiences their world. Consider this - the tangible world around us is made up of billions and billions of constantly moving atoms and lots of empty space in between. What we see is our own internal perception – colours, shapes, patterns....isn't it all just a metaphor for the real thing? Perhaps metaphors are the closest we ever get to the 'true' experience of reality!

Carl Jung explains the importance of the unconscious mind in his book, *Man and his Symbols, Chapter One*. At some point of perception, we reach the edge of certainty beyond which conscious knowledge cannot pass. The unconscious, however, has taken note of all events and experiences, and will store this information in forms and symbols that may be somewhat obscure. Jung was convinced that by analysing those symbols that appear through connecting with our unconscious, we have access to a much wider and more comprehensive understanding of ourselves, our relationships and the wider world around us.

Our use of metaphors in everyday language is one such 'key' to deciphering our unconscious wisdom.

Metaphors give the Coach Insight

As a tool for coaching, the client's metaphors give you an insight into their unique perception of their situation and their goals. When the client tells you that they can 'see light at the end of the tunnel', that is what they are experiencing. There is light for them, and they are in a tunnel. They will unconsciously 'know' much more about their situation from this metaphoric viewpoint. They are very likely to know in which direction the light is, how far away it is, and where the light comes from. They will know about the structure of the tunnel, how it feels and looks, how narrow the passage, and whereabouts they are in relation to the tunnel.

And more – this is where the power of metaphor comes in. The Client will know, on some level, what needs to happen for them to move towards the light and get out of the tunnel. The answer can come in pure metaphor, the person's 'real' perception of their tangible situation will shift as their perception of the metaphor evolves and alters.

It is estimated that the average person uses a metaphor in everyday language once every twenty-five seconds. If you start to really listen to the language a person is using, metaphors begin to jump out at you. See what I mean, a jumping metaphor! I wonder how it jumps, and what kind of metaphor is one that can jump? Right now, I can picture tiddlywinks; bright, shiny tiddlywinks of different colours and sizes. And each tiddlywink, when you look closely, contains a miniature world.....and there I go, with my own metaphoric description again!

Developing Metaphors Using Questions

When you 'spot' a metaphor used by a client, what can you do to help them pay attention to it and understand its importance?

A very powerful method of questioning has been developed by psychotherapist David Grove, called 'Clean Language'.

The language you use is 'clean' because you say nothing to contaminate the client's own perception. You merely direct their attention towards the metaphor, and the shapes and symbols that evolve from it.

Penny Tompkins and James Lawley took David Grove's process and developed it into a model for coaching, and other therapeutic uses. They call it "Symbolic Modelling". It is a modelling process because, through the use of specific questions, you are attempting to 'replicate' the client's experience in your own mind.

The basic principles are congruent with any good coaching practice:

- Ask questions to find out what the client wants.
- Ask questions to find out what needs to happen for them to get there.

If problems, barriers or blocks are identified, ask questions to find out what needs to happen to overcome them.

Sounds simple enough, and indeed it is, although the questions themselves may sound a little unusual and unfamiliar to begin with.

The questions need to be phrased in a very specific manner. There are just 12 basic questions to use, and that may sound limiting, but believe me you can easily go to other worlds with them!

Example Coaching Conversation

With practice, the flow of questions can come very naturally. As an example, for the client who describes their situation as like 'going around in circles', you could ask:

Q: "And when you going round in circles, what would you like to have happen?"

From the metaphoric description of a problem, a different kind of outcome could emerge:

A: "I want to move forwards in a straight line"

Once the coachee is focusing on where they want to be (rather than what they don't want) you can help them explore further, for instance:

Q: "What kind of straight line is that straight line?"

By focusing on the elements within the metaphor, it helps the coachee to imagine them in their mind's eye, sometimes picturing what they are describing, and/or getting a felt sense of it.

So for instance,

A: "It's solid, firm and goes on for miles"

With a few more questions, a clearer image could emerge:

Q: "Is there anything else about that solid firm straight when it goes on for miles?"

A: "Yes. It's made out of bricks"

To continue you might ask:

Q: "And that solid firm line that's made out of bricks is like what?"

A: "It's like a wide wall that I can walk along"

You can also return to the initial outcome and explore another element to it. For instance:

Q: "And you would like to move forwards in a straight line, And when you move forwards, what kind of move is that?"

A: "It's like walking with purpose"

Q: *"And what kind of purpose is that purpose?"*

A: *"A resolve. I have a sense of certainty. I'm really feeling it"*

Q: *"And when you're really feeling that sense of certainty, what kind of feeling is that feeling?"*

A: *"A solid feeling. A strong resolve"*

Q: *"And when a strong resolve, a solid feeling, whereabouts is that solid feeling?"*

A: *"Deep inside me. In my gut."*

(A 'feeling', is usually something that is actually physically 'felt' somewhere in or around the body)

Once the outcome has been really explored, generally you will be able to see/sense/notice that the client is 'connected' to a different reality. Many clients will go into a light trance. It usually feels quite good to be 'wallowing' in one's own outcomes.

You could then ask a question to help take the 'story' forwards:

Q: *"And a solid strong resolve in your gut and a wide wall you can walk along. And when there's a wide wall that you can walk along, then what happens?"*

Often this is enough for the coachee to gain a shift in perspective and back in the 'real world' tacitly *know* how to move forwards (rather than go round in circles). And you can help cement that understanding by asking Clean language questions to help them to discover the conditions for this change to happen.

For example:

Q: *"And what needs to happen to walk along that wall with a strong resolve?"*

A: *"Just take the first step forwards"*

Q: *"And can you take that first step forwards?"*

A: *"Yes!"*

It's often worth exploring in more detail any new part of the metaphoric picture or 'landscape that emerges, for example:

Q: *"What kind of step is that first step?"*

Like an explorer, you seek to learn all you can about the terrain. The solution, will, inevitably be within the problem somewhere. The coachee is exploring the terrain with you and will gradually perceive more and more as you continue asking questions.

If a problem emerges at any point, go back to the first Clean Language question and ask for a new outcome, eg if the coachee said “no” in answer to “*And can you take that first step forwards?*”

Q: “*And when you can’t take that first step forwards, what would you like to have happen?*”

A: “*I’d like to leap over the mess I can see directly in front of me*”

Q: “*And what kind of leap is that leap?*”

And so on. All the elements of the metaphor could potentially be resources, something to ‘unlock’ or ‘shift’ or ‘move’ the problem environment.

Once a client ‘shifts’ their awareness, you can see the release in the way they suddenly relax, or laugh, or cry. After the session, the coachee may understand perfectly what all the shapes and symbols and elements ‘meant’ in the real world, but some may not fully understand it all on a conscious level. The great thing is, it really doesn’t matter if they don’t. The shift has happened subconsciously, the change has already happened. One remarkable, but sometimes frustrating thing is that the coachee simply ‘forgets’ they ever had a problem once it’s gone – you might not get any recognition for helping!

The 12 Basic Clean Language Questions

To find out what the client wants:

(And) *What would you like to have happen?*

To develop awareness:

Gain detail: *What kind of (coachee’s words) is that (coachee’s words)?*

Locate in space: *Whereabouts is (coachee’s words)?*

Expand awareness: *Is there anything else about (coachee’s words)?*

Encourage metaphor: *That’s (coachee’s words) like what?*

To understand the bigger picture:

Then what happens? (or)

What happens just before?

Where could (coachee’s words) have come from?

To explore relationships and connections:

And is there a relationship between (coachee’s words ‘x’) and (coachee’s words ‘y’)?

And when (coachee’s words) what happens to (coachee’s words)?

To find out how the goal can be reached:

What needs to happen for (coachee’s goal)?

And can (coachee’s words)?

References:

Grove, David J. & B I Panzer, *Resolving Traumatic Memories: Metaphors and Symbols in Psychotherapy*, Irvington, New York, 1989.

Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors we Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Jung, Carl, *Man and his Symbols*, Aldus Books Ltd, London, 1964

Tompkins, Penny & Lawley, James, *Metaphors in Mind*, The Developing Company Press, 2000.

By Angela Dunbar,

Clean Coach specialising in Communication, Confidence and Creativity.
Accredited (AC) Coach and Coach Supervisor
NLP Master Practitioner

Contact details:

Email: coach@angeladunbar.co.uk

Tel: 01404 891125

Address: Garden Cottage, Dunkeswell, Devon EX14 4RE

Angela Dunbar Bio:

Angela is a highly experienced coach and coach supervisor, accredited with AC and a former council member (now a life-long fellow). Angela's passion is Clean Language, a powerful non-directive facilitation process that engages the coachee's non-conscious resources through the metaphors they use. Angela teaches 'Clean' techniques through The Clean Coaching Centre: www.cleancoaching.com.

Angela has twice been nominated for the AC's coaching Honorary Award for "Impacting the Coaching Profession" and holds a degree (first class) in Psychology. Angela's is author of "*Essential Life Coaching Skills*" (2009) and "*Clean Coaching: The Insider Guide to Making Change Happen*" (2016).

For more information on Clean Language, visit the website www.cleancoaching.com to access a wide range of papers, articles, 'how to' guide and recordings. You can also sign up for a newsletter to be kept informed of future events and training courses.

For more information on Angela's book "Clean Coaching: The Insider's Guide to Making Change Happen" click [here](#)

For more general information on Symbolic Modelling and Clean Language go to the Clean Language website: www.cleanlanguage.co.uk