



Seven Practical Ways to use Clean Language at Work

by Judy Rees

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"I just wanted to express my pleasure with your e-book. I wasn't sure how these ideas would apply to my working environment, but it seems as though my 'concern' has been answered with the explanations in your book. I understand that your book was only a small part of a much larger picture, but the information provided me with the 'push' I needed to search for more guidance through training. Thank you." Rick Burke, Strategic Projects Scheduler, Diablo Canyon Power Plant, CA, USA

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Introduction: Discovering Clean Language

Have you ever wished you had a better way to discover what people were really thinking and feeling? It's such a waste when a silly misunderstanding costs time and money – and worse still when it leads to a bitter argument, with contracts and livelihoods at stake.

The fact you're reading this probably means you already know the value of good questioning and listening skills – and the cost of not having them! Whether you work mainly with individuals or with groups, you'll have developed your own style of getting information.

But I wonder if you're aware of how your skills could be improved? Using the latest techniques can take your meetings and workshops to a new level, make your own job more enjoyable and help your career to take off. It's a bit like switching from black-and-white to colour – you don't know what you've been missing until after you've made the change.

This book aims to help you make that switch.

And of course, there's a story behind it. A few years ago, I was in the middle of a major personal and career crisis: I was leaving behind my life as a journalist and editor and stepping into an unknown future. As a result of chance meeting I came across Clean Language - a remarkable approach to understanding the way people think, take decisions, and make changes. For me, it was like stepping through a door into Narnia - a completely different world.

Thanks to my friend, mentor and eventual co-author Wendy Sullivan, I was able to spend the next four years studying and teaching these skills "in the field", alongside some of the world's leading experts. They were mainly therapists, as Clean Language creator David Grove had been. but it was quickly clear to me that the same techniques could be extremely valuable in the business world.

I was uniquely placed to explore, experiment and discover what really worked in practice. At first hand in organisations, in my role as a mentor to newly-trained facilitators, and by interviewing successful practitioners, I assembled a unique toolkit of "X-Ray Listening" techniques.¹

Seven of the best are presented here. I'm confident you'll be able to use them immediately, to make a difference in your workplace.

It's only natural to feel a certain reluctance to try something new and different, particularly something as unusual as X-Ray Listening, so I've given specific, step-by-step instructions, with guidelines for using each of the practical applications.

This book is not intended as a complete "how-to" guide - there is lots more to learn. In particular, I recommend you read [Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds](#) by Wendy Sullivan and myself, Judy Rees.

¹ I have credited the originators of processes where I know them: apologies to anyone I have missed. I also acknowledge the extensive role of Penny Tompkins and James Lawley (authors of *Metaphors In Mind*) and of my former colleague Wendy Sullivan in developing this work.

So, what is X-Ray Listening?

X-Ray Listening is a way of asking questions to explore another person's mind. The basic steps of the technique are very simple. However, the thinking behind it is very unusual.

At its heart is a shift of attention. For the duration of the conversation, the person being questioned is the central focus, and the questioner fades themselves into the background as far as possible. It's an extreme version of any customer-focussed, client-focussed or user-focussed approach - probably more extreme than any other.

The approach is based on Clean Language, which was devised by the late David Grove, a renowned psychologist. He toured the world giving workshops but was primarily interested in his clients, their inner world and their recovery and development, rather than publishing theoretical material. However, his work has since been supported by the academic work of others, particularly in the field of cognitive linguistics. See *Clean Language* for further reading.

X-Ray Listening principles

X-Ray Listening is based on a limited set of questions. But just as the notes of a musical scale can be used to create a huge variety of music - anything from a nursery rhyme to an orchestral symphony - these questions can be used in a huge variety of different ways.

This is because they are combined with words used by the person being questioned. For example, in the question: "What kind of X (is that X)?", the "X" represents one or more of the person's words.

The principles are straightforward:

- Listen attentively
- Remain focussed on the other person, keeping your assumptions, opinions and advice to yourself
- Ask X-Ray Listening questions to explore what the person says
- Listen attentively to their answers and ask more X-Ray Listening questions about what they have said.

David Grove devised his Clean Language questions for exploring the metaphors which underpin a person's thoughts, constructing a bridge between the everyday, rational, conscious mind and the more mysterious 'subconscious'. However, the same questions can be valuable in a wide range of other contexts. By putting your full attention on a person's inner world, and by asking them questions which encourage them to do the same, you will open up a space for them to do some of their best-ever thinking.

As a beginner, it's most effective to 'go for the good stuff', to direct attention to the things the person likes and wants more of, rather than to their problems. This idea is also central to several of the questioning patterns which follow.

Remember, it's most effective to use the questions exactly as they are written. X-Ray Listening liberates you from having to come up with clever question variations: the art is in selecting which of the other person's words to replace the "X" so as to direct their attention most appropriately.

Seven Practical Ways to Use Clean Language

1. Clarify what someone means

The Crystalliser

Used to increase the clarity of anything a person has said. Ask:

- What kind of X (is that X)?
- Is there anything else about (that) X?

in any order, as many times as you like.

Why can't people just say what they mean? Ambiguity and confusion, resulting in wasted effort, frayed tempers, and increased costs, are common in all business environments.

Misunderstandings can be bad enough when you're face-to-face with colleagues. And the problem gets even worse when technological, linguistic and cultural communication barriers are added to the mix.

Language is a wonderfully flexible tool. But its very flexibility leads to problems: everyone thinks they're like Humpty Dumpty, who said: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less!" For example, if you ask two people to think of a tree, then check the details of the tree they thought of, you'll discover that no two people's trees are ever exactly the same. It's not that one is right and one is wrong - it's just that they are different.

The more novel or complex the topic, the greater the scope for differences of meaning - even when you think terms have been carefully defined in a project glossary.

The two most commonly used X-Ray Listening questions are very effective for clarifying exactly what someone means by what they have said. By using them, you'll reveal as little as possible of your opinion on the topic, hold back from premature judgement - and so reduce your chance of making a damaging blunder.

They can be used in casual conversations, in interviews of all kinds, in meetings - wherever people are talking about anything.

Later in this e-book we'll explore some specific ways The Crystalliser can be used.

- A business analyst claimed that the well-timed use of these questions in a workshop saved a €34.8m project from disaster, when he discovered that the two banks driving the project had differing understandings of a key requirement.
- A project manager used them to bring herself quickly and discreetly up to speed on a new project which used unfamiliar technology.
- A team of usability consultants routinely use them to understand the details of people's interactions with websites under testing.

2. Build rapid rapport

The Connector

Used to enhance relationships in almost any context by exploring the other person's beliefs and values. Ask:

- What's important to you about X?
- What kind of X (is that X)?
- Is there anything else about (that) X?

These three questions can be asked in any order, as many times as you like.

For once, the experts all agree. Rapport - that sense of being on the same wavelength as another person - is vital to relationships. And effective relationships are vital to productive team working, as well as making working life more enjoyable.

From the boardroom to the reception desk... consultants, contractors, offshore teams... salesmen, project managers, helpdesk... wherever people need to work well together, rapport oils the wheels. Without it, your projects run a massively increased risk, since miscommunication is one of the leading causes of project failure.

However, several of the techniques for enhancing rapport which are commonly recommended aren't particularly effective in real-life working situations. Take the idea of increasing eye contact, for example. This works brilliantly for some people, but others find it very uncomfortable, often for cultural reasons. And it's not much use on the phone, text chat or email!

In contrast, paying full attention to what someone is saying, and using their words as you ask them to say more about it, seems to be a universally acceptable way of building rapport. It's particularly effective if you ask about the things that are most important to them: you'll discover the beliefs and values which underpin their actions.

You may well find that you share some of those beliefs and values. But even if not, once you know about them, you can treat them with respect.

You could ask about:

- "What's important to you about this project?"
- "What's important to you about your work?"
- "What's important to you about how the team works together?"
- "What's important to you about the reports I send you?"
- "What's important to you about your new website?"

3. Discover what someone actually *wants*

The Switch

Used to get shift people's attention away from their problems and instead get them thinking and talking about, and moving towards, their goals.

1. Listen as they describe the problem
2. Ask: And when <their problem, in their words>, what would you *like* to have happen?
3. Listen to their answer. Have they actually said what they would like? If not, repeat the question: And when <their problem, in their words>, what would you *like* to have happen?
4. Once they have said what they would like, use The Crystaliser to help them - and you - find out more about it.

Why can't people just say what they want?

In business, it's a constant frustration - and a source of expensive mistakes. For example, 83 per cent of IT projects fail to live up to customers' expectations, mainly because people failed to communicate what was needed.² The developers may deliver something brilliant - but if it isn't what the business needed then it's a waste of time and money.

That's the way it is when working with human beings, and in organisations of all kinds. As discussed above, people may find it difficult to say what they mean. But there's an added twist - most people don't actually know what they want.

They probably know what they *don't* want. They know that there's a problem, and may have analysed and studied it in depth. They know they want the problem to go away. But what do they want instead? They may have only the vaguest notion - particularly when they are creating something which is either completely new or which is outside their area of expertise.

Use this technique to break through the fog. As questioner, it's your responsibility to hold this focus - if their attention wanders back to the problem, simply acknowledge what they have said by repeating their words, and ask again: "And when <their problem, in their words>, what would you *like* to have happen?"

Some ways to use this:

- To find out what your boss actually wants you to do
- To discover what specific results would delight your client
- To gather requirements for a new accounts system.

² See The Standish Report <http://www.projectsmart.co.uk/docs/chaos-report.pdf>

4. Bring boring words to life

The Metaphor Generator

Use this whenever you want to add emotional power to the words you, or another person, is using. This could be useful to breathe life into a report or presentation, or to get deep insight into how they are thinking.

1. An abstract concept is mentioned, e.g. 'user interface'
2. Ask: "What kind of <concept> is that?" and perhaps: "Is there anything else about <concept>?"
3. The person will volunteer some features of the concept. Now ask: "And that's <feature> and <feature> like... what?"
4. The person is likely to volunteer a metaphor. If not, repeat. Remember *not* to ask: "That's <concept> like what?"
5. Once the person has given you a metaphor, you can find out more about it by using The Crystaliser to explore various aspects of it.

If you've done much reading about the way our minds work, you're probably aware of the power of metaphor - comparing one kind of thing to another - to influence and persuade. You'll know that great teachers, statesmen, artists and religious leaders use metaphors to capture our hearts, while great salesmen, marketers and gizmo-makers use them as a fast-track to our wallets.

It's increasingly well-known that a great metaphor will bring a presentation or an article to life. Perhaps, like me, you are regularly asked the question: "Has anyone got a great metaphor for...?" by people from schoolkids to speechwriters.

Everyday language is awash with metaphors – something like six per minute, depending what you include. That's because metaphor is the native language of the unconscious mind, and the metaphors we use in our thinking spill out in our words. But it takes practice – and perhaps training – to notice these spontaneous metaphors as they emerge.

So, you can use this technique to help someone to come up with a metaphor for an abstract concept, such as "user interface". You would ask: "What kind of user interface is that?" and they might answer: "It's simple, colourful and easy to understand."

Your next question would be: "And that's simple, colourful and easy to understand... like... what?" and they might answer: "Like a children's picture book."

You can use The Crystaliser to find out more about the kind of picture book they have in mind. I don't know about you, but I'm imagining Dr Seuss's Cat in the Hat!

5. Help people to do their best work

At Your Best

Use this to help someone develop a personal metaphor, or talisman, to help someone get into the ideal state for doing a particular activity.

1. Ask: “When you’re X-ing at your best, you are like... what?”

“X-ing” here represents an activity: “working” for example. You may want to offer some example metaphors to get things started.

An alternative version of the question is:

“When you are at your most X, you are like... what?”

Remember to ask “like... what?” very slowly, to give the person time to think.

2. Once the person has volunteered a metaphor, use The Crystalliser, several times, about various aspects, to develop a fuller picture of the metaphor.

The power of stories and metaphors to persuade has been known since at least the time of Aristotle. What’s not so widely known - because it has been discovered much more recently - is that each of us has our own unique and personal network of subconscious metaphors, and that these can motivate our behaviour even more powerfully.

In the ‘At Your Best’ process you help can someone discover one of their personal metaphors. As they talk about it, they will probably experience the state it represents - which can be valuable in itself.

And after your conversation, the metaphor may become a talisman or ‘anchor’ for the person, helping them to get back into that ideal state more easily. Some people put a relevant picture on their computer - I have a screensaver of Tigger playing with a bubble, to remind me to be bouncy and yet gentle!

Some ways you could use this process:

- Discover each member of your team’s metaphor for “working at their best”. This often results in greater mutual understanding and improved relationships³
- As a workshop warm-up, where people ask about each other’s metaphor for “being at their most creative”. They’ll soon be bubbling with ideas - and chatting like old friends.⁴

³ Based on the *Metaphors @ Work* model by Caitlin Walker and Nancy Doyle of Training Attention

⁴ Based on *Speed Clean* by Judy Rees and Wendy Sullivan of Clean Change Company

6. Motivate someone

The Mini Motivator

Used to get stuck people moving towards their goals. Ask:

- What would *you like* to have happen this <time period>?
- What needs to happen for X (to happen)?
- And can X (happen)?

Repeat the second and third questions as often as you like.

This powerful little package was originally designed for use in slimming club meetings⁵, where leaders had just a minute or two to chat to each member individually during a weekly weigh-in. But it was found to be so swift and effective at convincing people to take action that it spread across the multinational organisation, right up to senior management level. The central focus is on what the person would like to achieve, rather than on their problems.

The person is setting their own goals. As you probably know, research has shown that people are significantly more likely to achieve goals they have set for themselves than objectives imposed by someone else - even if they have agreed to them. It's also handy in 'matrix management' situations, where you need to persuade colleagues to do certain tasks for you, without having any formal authority over them.

Once the goal is set, it's usually straightforward to establish a feasible way of achieving it. This may well include acquiring additional information or other resources.

If the person's attention wanders back to problems and difficulties, then ask again: "What would you *like* to have happen?"

Some ways to use this:

- With a project team member to establish goals for the week's work
- With a colleague who's overloaded, and struggling to set the day's priorities
- With your boss, to establish how you can be most valuable in the current situation.

⁵ As The One-Minute Motivator by Marian Way, Phil Swallow and Wendy Sullivan

7. Coach people to take action

The Action Planner

Used to devise an action plan in relation to any goal. Ask:

- What would you like to have happen?
- What kind of X (is that X)?
- Is there anything else about (that) X?
- What needs to happen for X (to happen)?
- And is there anything else that needs to happen for X?
- And can X (happen)?

Simple but highly effective, this package of Clean Language questions⁶ has been used as a coaching model in a number of large private- and public-sector organisations across the UK. In some places, managers use it to coach one another; in others, they use it in meetings with individual members of staff.

The great thing is that the coach doesn't need any specialist knowledge of the work the coachee is doing: they simply provide a structure to help direct the person's thinking to what specifically is wanted and how to make it happen.

You can ask these questions in any order, depending on the context. But it's crucial to this process to identify, clarify and develop the objective, using the first three questions of this package.

As I mentioned above, most people know all about their problems, the things they don't want, and have spent very little time or energy considering what they would like instead⁷. But if you can get their eyes on the prize, they can get started. Often, as the actual target becomes clear, the perfect route to achieving it does, too.

⁶ Based on *The Five Minute Coach* model devised by Lynne Cooper and Mariette Castellino of Amicas

⁷ For more on this issue, see also *The Solutions Focus* by Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow

A few tips

- Talk to your colleagues about the fact you are learning X-Ray Listening. Most people are fascinated by these ideas - once they have been reassured that you won't be using these techniques to judge or tease them - and they may have great ideas for practice opportunities.
- Don't assume that because this stuff looks simple, it's OK to dive in at the deep end. Be aware - these questions can sometimes trigger strong emotions. Practice the techniques in low-pressure situations at first.
- Be polite and respectful whenever you use X-Ray Listening. Using the questions in a hostile way, or to make fun of someone, is a great way to make enemies. Ensure you have the person's permission (explicit or implied) before probing their metaphors.
- Go for the good stuff! Using X-Ray Listening to probe metaphors for enjoyable states, goals and solutions, is more pleasant and more effective than exploring problems. If you catch yourself exploring problems, use The Switch as soon as possible.

And what happens next?

I wonder, now you're getting started by using these techniques, you are like... what? For you, will it be like learning to drive? Learning to swim? Or learning to fly?

For me, discovering these techniques was like crossing the threshold into a new world, a new way of understanding people and the way they tick.

It's easy to test these techniques - you don't need to wait for an important meeting or a serious interview. Just try one of them out!

And what difference has knowing all of this made for you? I'd love to hear your experiences - email me at info@xraylistening.com



Once you've tried it and seen how it works for you, there's more that I'd like to share with you. Email your phone number to info@xraylistening.com and suggest a couple of good times to call within the next week, and I'll set aside 15 minutes to talk you through it - absolutely free and with no obligation.

I look forward to talking - and listening - to you very soon.

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Appendix: The basic Clean Language questions

Devised and developed by David Grove

- What kind of X (is that X)?
- Is there anything else about (that) X?
- Where/whereabouts is X?
- That's X like what?
- Is there a relationship between X and Y?
- When X, what happens to Y?
- Then what happens? or (And) what happens next?
- What happens just before X?
- Where could X come from?
- What would X like to have happen?
- What needs to happen for X?
- And can X (happen)?