

Using Metaphors with Coaching

[Angela Dunbar, DipM MCIM](#)

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 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 it's importance?

A very powerful method of questioning has been developed by psychologist 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 Client Conversation

With practice, the flow of questions can come very naturally. As an example, for the Client who sees light at the end of the tunnel, you might ask:

"And when you see light at the end of the tunnel, what would you like to have happen?"

It might sound obvious to ask this, but we are all unique and some people may be afraid of the light, be happy to stay in the tunnel, or want to turn around and go the other way. Never assume you know what the Client may want.

The Client could answer with:

"I want to get out of the tunnel and be in the light"

OK, it's a clear goal. Stay with it and find out more about the outcome. Let the Client get a real sense of how it would be to achieve their outcome.

"And when you get out of the tunnel, and you can be in the light, is there anything else about that light?"

They may tell you it's warm, or bright or whatever. They are developing their sense of what it would be like.

"And when you can be in the light, what kind of 'you' is that 'you'?"

The descriptions they give may highlight other metaphors or feelings, which you can continue to explore.

"I feel relieved, like a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders"

"What kind of lifted is that lifted?"

or

"When you feel relieved, whereabouts do you feel relieved?" (all feelings have a location somewhere, within or for some, even just outside their bodies)

or

"What kind of weight is that weight?"

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 take it a step forward.

"And when you are relieved, and in the light, what happens next?"

If all is well, they may go to another level of goal setting. It may be that their perception has already shifted by simply exploring the outcome. For some, this could be where the problem (particularly if this is a 'habit') re-surfaces. Another tunnel comes along, or something similar.

Then you might ask:

"What needs to happen for you to get out of the tunnel, and be in the light?"

And

"What else needs to happen?"

People tend to stick within the logic of their metaphors. They could walk or run out of the tunnel, but presumably something is stopping them, else they wouldn't still be in it. It would be 'unclean' to ask what stops them, as you are assuming that there is a 'what' and a 'stop'. Let them tell you:

"And can you get out of the tunnel?"

"No, because my feet are stuck to the ground."

Ok, now you can explore the problems:

"What kind of 'stuck' is that 'stuck'?"

"Is there anything else about feet that are stuck?"

"What kind of ground?"

"Is there anything else about the tunnel when your feet are stuck?"

"When your feet are stuck to the ground, and you are in the tunnel, then what happens?"

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

All the elements of the metaphor could potentially be resources, something to 'unlock' or 'shift' or 'move' the problem environment. Maybe the ground is wet and the feet can loosen. Maybe they are stuck with glue, and the glue is so cold that it has become brittle. Maybe there is something else in the tunnel that could change the situation. Often, the 'scariest' part of the metaphor can turn into something benign and useful.

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 Client may understand perfectly what all the shapes and symbols and elements 'meant' in the real world, but many won't have a clue 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 Client 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:

“What would you like to have happen?”

To develop awareness:

Gain detail: “What kind of (Client's words) is that (Client's words)?”

Locate in space: “Whereabouts is (Client's words)?”

Expand awareness: “Is there anything else about (Client's words)?”

Encourage metaphor: “That's (Client's words) like what?”

To understand the bigger picture:

“Then what happens?”

“What happens just before?”

“Where could (Client's words) have come from?”

To explore relationships and connections:

“And is there a relationship between (Client's words 'x') and (Client's words 'y')?”

“And when (Client's words) what happens to (Client's words)?”

To find out how the goal can be reached:

“What needs to happen for (Client's goal)?”

“And can (Client's words)?”

© 2005, Angela Dunbar

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.

Angela Dunbar



Angela is an accredited life and performance coach and MD of her own training & development consultancy. She specializes in helping people to find their niche in their career, business or life in general. Through metaphor, Angela enables people to explore their innermost drives and discover their own creative solutions to achieve their goals. For more information go to www.angeladunbar.co.uk