

This is a transcript for a 20 minute video chat James Lawley and I did on August 21, 2017. All grammatical anomalies simply reflect the conversational nature of this document. (3000 words, approximately 10-15 minutes reading time)

James and I are doing another Clean Interview training January 19-20, 2019 near San Luis Obispo in California. Links in the document have been updated to represent this newest training date.

*Would you like to listen to this post? Click the sound cloud image below
Are you a paper person? Click here for downloadable pdf*

On Clean Interviewing with James Lawley

Sharon: James it's really nice to see you again and thank you for meeting with me to talk a bit about Clean Interviewing.

We're going to be doing that training in January 2018 [[Clean Convergence 2019](#)] here in California and I thought it might be interesting for people to know a little more about Clean Interviewing; where it comes from, what it is exactly, where it can be applied and the benefits of it compared to other interviewing methods.

You've been involved in Clean language and Symbolic Modeling much longer than me, being the creator of Symbolic Modeling, could you tell me, I'm curious, where did Clean Interviewing come from?

James: Well, it came out of the work of David Grove's therapeutic approach that used Clean Language as its main questioning technique. But primarily David was a psychotherapist, a brilliant psychotherapist, and it was left to other people, myself and Penny Tompkins and other people to take his work and see how it could be applied elsewhere.

And fairly early on, people began, without much conscious thought, applying clean language in interview situations where they were trying to gather information about ... like some people who went into a company, they want to find out what's going on in the company and interviewed people. What did they do? They asked them Clean Language questions.

A colleague of ours was trying to find out about the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland, so he interviewed some people from the para-militaries and the armed forces about their experience. And so a few of us, slowly, but surely go "hello, hang on, there's something going on here, this could become a thing."

Sharon: That's kind of what happened with the root cause interviews. With just my background in Clean and Symbolic Modeling I started applying it. So I was really thrilled when I started to see more formalized thinking about the interviewing, and that's something you have done a lot of work with, formalizing, how do you know if it's clean?, how are you calibrating?

James: Ya, that came out of it. And as always when you put that kind of thinking in you start to realize there is a richness and a depth to this you didn't appreciate at first. But also what you realize is that you don't need to go on a full training in Clean Language in order to be able to pick up some of these skills and improve the way anybody interviews. And what we realize is people could learn them fairly rapidly and that would improve the quality of their interviews very, very quickly.

Sharon: So what exactly is clean interviewing? How would you describe it? How is it different?

James: Ya, definitions ... I mean it's principally based on the notion of 'what is Clean?' And the idea of the metaphor of Clean is the person who is asking the questions is aiming to put as little of themselves into the interview as possible.

Now lots of approaches do that, or say they do that. Because of the detail paid to the language, Clean goes much, much further than most, than any other approach that I've ever seen. I've seen a lot of transcripts of interviews from different people and the key thing is that the interviewer does not know how much of their own thinking, their own assumptions, their own metaphors they're bringing in.

They are simply unknowingly doing it and because of that, they can't not do it, because they don't know they're doing it. Whereas with Clean Language, to some degree, it prevents them from doing that.

Sharon: So in a way it's bringing in an awareness and a more, I'm going to use the word tactical, a more tactical thinking when you're eliciting information from other people. We had a manager attend our training last year, the Clean Interview training, and she's gone back and reported to me that it not only changed the way she does her interviews, but it has changed how she elicits information from her everyday workers and helps them find their own solutions. It's been a real life changer for how she does business.

James: And especially in business, I think, where there is such a pressure to get things done fast. One of the ways that happens therefore is you kind of unwittingly suggest an

answer, or the manager has already got an answer in their mind, or the interviewer, so they ask a question that just leads the Interviewee just towards the answer, because that's obviously the answer, isn't it?

And those are so subtle language, it can be the structure of the question, it can be presupposition, it can be framing. There are four or five key ways in which interviewers unwittingly bias, or potentially bias the interview towards answers they are already making an assumption about.

And a clean interviewer tends to minimize those. You can't stop it entirely, but you can take out a huge amount of them. And then the real key is, not so much the interview, but the data you end up with, it's more robust, authentic because you know it came from them and not from you.

Sharon: A couple of the areas I've use the interviewing in is cause evaluation interviews and CAP (corrective action programs) program development. And in those it is so easy for the interviewer, often the interviewer is a specialist and when they are looking at an event, it's so easy for them to slip their knowledge into the interview without meaning to.

And there are a couple managers that have taken this into the CAP program and noticed the real difference between letting people, having the skill to let the people (involved) devise their own corrective action. Something that will work in their environment, rather than having the corrective actions put their ideas on top of (the people involved). Now you've use the techniques in a couple of other areas.

James: Ya, I've primarily been involved in using it in a qualitative research method for academics, and been involved in supporting a number of academic programs, one in the Czech Republic, one in Australia, in Britain. So, trying to gather high quality data that meets rigorous academic standards, it's absolutely ideal for that. And one of the reasons is, that to my knowledge, theres an additional feature called a 'cleanness rating' that allows you to go back through the interview and look at just how clean or how leading what the interview and come out with a quantitative method.

There is no other interview method that allows you to go back and look at that and assess the reliability of the data gathered during the interview. That's a big, big bonus in that area.

Sharon: And even in interviews where there's not recording capabilities, like with a lot of the businesses I work with, they can't record, but they can go back and look at their notes. So if your aware of asking clean questions and staying clean in principle, keeping

your stuff out, you can still go back and ask “How did I do?”, “Where were areas that I interjected?”, “Where were areas that I changed the frame or even the topic?”.

James: And, I’m not directly involved in some of these areas, but I know people who use it quite extensively these days as a market research tool. And again, if you want to find out what people really think, you better keep your own stuff out of it. It’s also in focus groups, for example gathering information that way. It’s particularly now being used as a specification tool, like in information technology (IT), gathering the users requirements for example.

Again, its similar to what you were saying. Theres a specialist in the IT industry who’s interviewing someone who’s not a computer specialist, and its very easy for specialist to start making all sorts of assumptions.

And one area I am particularly interested in is in the health field. There are no more specialists than doctors. Highly, highly specialized. They have their own language, their own way of thinking. And its, you know we’ve all been interviewed by a doctor. And its really important, I think, that the patients own way of expressing themselves is preserved and not lost.

Sharon: I’m wondering, pretty much what I’ve found is that pretty much any time, any kind of conversation where your eliciting information from someone else, whether it’s a coaching intake, hiring, HR (human resource), I mean, this frame of thinking, this kind of thinking and using these questions can be really useful.

James: And what surprises a lot of people when they first come across this idea is how even changing a single word in a question can have a significant effect on the answer your given. It can get down to that level of influence, unwitting influence. And, as you said, people become much more aware of their language. Instead of just throwing out questions, they take time to ask questions that are formulated to give the other person the maximum opportunity to answer in any way they want. That’s the kind of key benefit of the process.

Sharon: So in a way, better questions and a different kind of listening, lead to more authentic answers which eventually leads to better qualitative data, and results, what ever needs to happen from that data.

James: I think it’s an important point you make that what people report is the more they ask clean language questions the better listener they get, because they actually hear what’s said.

It's a strange kind of by product that comes out of it. But what I reckon one of the reasons is that when you actually get the few basic clean language questions under your belt, you know, easy ..they roll off the tongue quite easily, you've got loads of space to actually listen to what the person is saying and actually think about what they've just said. But, without formulating what's the next question going to be or formulate some clever question which can take up too much cognitive space.

Sharon: or go down your pick list.

James: Exactly, that's right. So those interviews where you don't necessarily know the kind of information you're going to get, you're trying to discover that, discovery interviews, Clean Language Interviewing is really tailor made for those kinds of interviews.

There are some interview techniques where, as you say, you've got a standard set of questions, well that's fine, they work in that way. But other ones, where more exploratory, trying to discover information, that's what their best for.

Sharon: So some of the benefits are becoming a better listener, more accurate listener, lets frame it that way, asking simpler questions that are in context with the information your actually receiving, so you don't have to be as clever and try to figure out what question's going to happen next, you just need to know what context your asking in, Keeping your stuff out so, making assumptions, minimizing the influence of your own language, ... What other benefits from Clean Interviewing?

James: Well there's the one I said about if you want to actually go back and check the interviews that you've done, meet your own criteria of a high quality interview, a clean interview, you have a method for doing that. Or even having someone else, an independent reviewer do it. The other thing is that I think it is really useful when you want in-depth information.

You know, it seems to me, I'm not an expert, I don't know about root cause analysis - critical incident interviewing, but what I guess is you want to try to get past the kind of surface things that people say, get them to think deeper about what actually happened and describe it in more detail. And that's one of the things Clean Language allows you to do, get depth of information.

Sharon: And so earlier before we started recording we were talking about the benefits compared to other interview methods, and I think that what you said about being able to

really qualify, quantify, the cleanness rating is a massive benefit from other interview methods. What other benefits do you see as compared to ...

James: Well, it's interesting what you said about that person who went back and said it changed the way they asked questions generally, not just in an interview.

And when I think about the word interview, for me its gotten broader and broader. You know, potentially if I stop someone on the street and ask directions, that's a kind of interview. I'm trying to get some information out of them. And even in that context its valuable.

What happens, its like many things, the benefits grow over time. At first it seems a bit clunky with the questions, you're not quite sure what to do. But slowly but surely, the more people practice, the more they relax, the more that relaxed the interviewee, and allows them to sink into their own experience in a very gentle way.

And because of that a level of rapport, an interesting level of rapport is built up without trying. And, also, what happens in some interviews there is a kind of belief that I have to encourage the interviewee with things like 'good', "oh ya, right, good good'. Actually, one I don't think its necessary and two I think its kind of already telling the interviewee that they think some information is better than others. Its already kind of sorting it out. And, Clean Language, if you stick to Clean Language, you don't need to do any of that either.

And the proportion, if you look at the proportion, of words asked by an interviewer in a Clean Language Interview is very small compared to the amount of words by the interviewee. And it seems to me that the more an interviewee tells you, the more you're going to get valuable information.

Sharon: Thats a really good point, having that ratio between the interviewers words and the interviewee's words. And also keeping the questions really simple, so you're not inadvertently asking two or three questions in one long bit. Often its 'and, ...and, ...and ...' and suddenly you have three questions in one which can be really confusing to the interviewee.

James: And similar, like sentence structure. On the course we're able to show the kind of sentence structures where in the first three words you can tell if it's a leading question. It doesn't matter what comes afterwards. And, you know, once you get those clear, those questions that are just slightly pushing the interviewee towards a particular answer or

restricting their answers, then you can leave those aside and ask a much more, a question that gives the interviewee more freedom to answer in the way they want.

Sharon: So, you and I are going to be doing an interviewing class, Clean Interviewing class, in January, 2 days, January 17-18th, 2018, here on the Central Coast of California, near San Luis Obispo.

James: Lovely

Sharon: It's beautiful, ya. And I think what's nice about our combination of working together is we have both been using Clean Interviewing skills and thinking in very diverse areas. Your working with academics, more subjective quality of interviewing, and then I've been in business and getting very specific information, like what you were saying, deeper information about what actually happened from their perspective.

James: So, I think it's really useful that we bring those two backgrounds. But what I think we share though, is a real desire to make it practical. And that's our primary thing to make it, one, practical, and two make it so people go away with some really useful learnings that they can apply the next day, straight-a-way!

Sharon: And like the interviewer that I was talking about, not just apply it in their interviews, but also apply that kind of thinking and skill across the board.

James: Well I've had several people tell me it's actually changed the way they talk to their children. Because, although it's not an interview, parents want to find out what their kids are up to. And that leads to all sorts of situations and, you know, the more you stay clean when you're asking your children, the more you allow them to answer from themselves. They're much more likely to give you the truth about their situation, because they aren't being pushed to give the kind of answers parents wish, so want to hear.

Sharon: I've had some personal experience with that.

So, I see this interviewing that we're going to be doing in January as a really nice, not just a nice introduction to interviewing, but a really nice introduction to Clean Language. And for people to get an idea, is this something they might want to learn more of. And also, if they are not in a coaching or therapy field, or doing a lot of in-depth work with clients, the Clean Interviewing is a wonderful way of learning clean and applying it to their context, their work space.

James: Good point.

Sharon: And its beautiful where we are.

James: Sure is, we're coming all the way over there

Sharon: For those that are watching or reading, James is in the UK and I'm on the Central Coast of California.

James Lawley and Penny Tompkins will be coming to California in January to join me for quite an extensive training

Clean Convergence 2019 with Clean Interviewing January 19-20

<http://cleanlanguagetraining.com/clean-convergence-2019-sharon-small/>

Sharon: Today I really just wanted to have something to share about Clean Interviewing, because I think it is really particular, it's one of the more vital smaller processes that have come out of Clean Language and Symbolic Modeling, and can just be so useful for people to see - what are they doing. Especially with the cleanness rating you've created, being able to really go back and look at something and get clarity on whats happening.

James: Looking forward to it.