

# On Symbolic Modeling Lite

with Penny Tompkins, James Lawley & Sharon Small

This is a transcript for a 19-minute video chat on August 28, 2017 with Penny Tompkins & James Lawley about their original three-day training format "Symbolic Modeling Lite".

This is the same training that I (Sharon Small) will be presenting January 7-9, 2019 in California. It will be our 4<sup>th</sup> year of Clean Convergence – a four-part Clean Language training program offered yearly that includes Symbolic Modeling Lite, an advanced training course, a self-development retreat, and Clean Language Interviewing training.

Symbolic Modeling Lite is designed to give a broad-stroke overview of the entire Symbolic Modeling process and the basics of Clean language that provide a scaffolding for practical application of, and continued learning in, this process.

All grammatical anomalies simply reflect the conversational nature of this document. (2500 words, approximately 10-12 minutes reading time)

**Sharon:** Hi Penny, Hi James

**Penny & James:** Hi Sharon

**Sharon:** It's good to see you this morning. Thank you. I'm so glad you were able to make time.

Today we were just going to have a conversation about the Symbolic Modeling Lite format and what we've found with that being very useful for people, grounding them in Symbolic Modeling, getting them used the process, giving them a bigger picture.

I'm really curious, because it's a little different to how I began teaching Symbolic Modeling. I'm curious how you come up with that particular three-day format, the Symbolic Modeling Lite?

**Penny:** Well we spent years teaching the process and we put the emphasis on various pieces of Symbolic Modeling and what we discovered was that people needed a framework, what we call a scaffolding in order to, when they're just starting out, have a model that they could be thinking about when they are asking Clean Language questions of their clients and working in metaphor, because metaphor is a different way of working with most individuals, when you stay in that experience the client is having and the metaphor can go in any direction.

Of course, Clean Language questions direct attention. And we discovered that this framework, the Symbolic Modeling Lite, could be a framework that would, in a way, help direct the facilitator's attention on what to pay attention to in the clients

landscape. So that we found a lot of them really appreciated that rather than trying to select what was important without having something to guide them.

**Sharon:** Some kind of larger frame to know where they were / are in the process.

**Penny:** Yes, and we like the metaphor of scaffolding, because scaffolding is something you use and then you eventually take down.

So, people once they know how to do a session with Symbolic Modeling Lite, then they can start to look at other ways that they may find useful themselves in relation to the type of information the client is giving.

**Sharon:** Oh, nice, OK, So, giving them a framework that lets them have a bit more creativity and lateral with their client once they're working with them.

**Penny:** Yes, yes, but I would say that to become proficient at Symbolic Modeling Lite is the place to start, because the whole Symbolic Modeling Lite ... it's a practical overview of the whole process.

So that in three days people can see either what they are facilitating or what others are facilitating, how the whole process can go through the client's information, and learn that in a three day period. There is a whole-ness to it.

**Sharon:** Ya, for me I think of a map. When I was teaching my introductory classes a little differently, concentrating on going deep on early skills, I experienced the participants having a bit of lost-ness. They had the knowledge of what was next, but didn't have the experience of it.

And this particular format, the Symbolic Modeling Lite format, these three days, seems to really give the participants a nice experience of what they are aiming towards [as facilitators].

**James:** Ya, it's very hard when you start if you don't know where you're going.

While every session is unique, this Symbolic Modeling Lite gives the facilitator an idea of the kind of journey they are going to go on, so they know, generally speaking, the kind of, where they are in the journey, not just the end point. Where they are, the key four or five stages that there are in a traditional coaching session for example.

**Sharon:** And I'm wondering how have you found this format fitting in with continued learning for people who really want to become proficient at Symbolic Modeling?

**James:** Well, it's like a lot of things ... you can look at the Symbolic Modeling Lite process and it looks fairly simple, and it is. And then you look at it again and you

realize there's a little bit more to it, and you look at it again ... and you realize there's a bit more to it.

And you know we have been revisiting this process over and over and we still discover these interesting depths to it.

And it is the way we start all of our sessions more or less. Surely all of our coaching sessions, we start with this process, we stick to it, and then as the session unfolds, so then the experience we have comes in.

It provides, to use a different metaphor, a foundation on which to add all the other skills, so you have a solid base on which to add other skills. And there are plenty of other advanced skills to get.

There are plenty wonderful subtle ways to notice what's happening with the client, and model their landscape, and drop in those questions that really give them something to think about, but, it really helps to have that basics.

And the other time it's really useful is when it ... you know everybody now and then gets lost. We've been doing this 25-years, but still occasionally we kind of go "I don't know what's happening". Whenever that happens we go right back to the basics. Right back to the absolute rock basics and we start again from that.

**Sharon:** It kind of relieves the need for clever. I sometimes tease that Symbolic Modeling is the cure for being clever.

And I agree with that iteration from 'Oh, this is simple' ... like I remember when I first started, I thought,.. I watched the video, I read the book and I was like "Oh, I can do that!" And then I got about four questions in with a real human being and I'm just like grateful that my mind was clear enough to say "Oh this is really more, this is more than what I just watched."

**Penny:** One thing that I really like about the three-day Symbolic Modeling Lite workshop is for a lot of people new learning the process, is it helps them see what happens when you have a process that is desired outcome focused.

It isn't that we avoid problems, we simple don't address them until we use the Symbolic Modeling Lite framework to facilitate the client to have a fully embodied desired outcome landscape, a desired outcome metaphor. And by putting their attention on that and the embodiment of that through the metaphor, changes their relationship to their original problems and issues.

And to see learners, new learners, discover that ... the difference that can make is quite delightful. And how to work with problems from that state of "This is really what I want" and it's like [the problem becomes] whatever.

**Sharon:** It's a whole different animal, isn't it?

**Penny:** Yes, to use a metaphor.

**Sharon:** Another metaphor, right? This is so funny, because we're talking about a metaphorical process and in order to describe it, it's, we've, been popping up - oh wait, another one! - popping up metaphors left and right.

**James:** David Grove once said that Clean Language questions are simple, because people are complex enough. And I think when we were designing the Symbolic Modeling Lite process, that was really present in the back of our minds. How could we make a process that's as simple as possible that allows the person we're working with to be as complex as they what, but we don't have to get lost in their complexity?

And, that doesn't mean we direct the process, because at the same time one of the challenges we had when designing this was how do we design a process to work with a complex adaptive system called a human being, that does all sorts of stuff, that all do their own, their unique, their metaphors are unique. In 25 years we've never heard two metaphor landscapes the same.

All sorts of wonderful things happen, surprising and unexpected things happen - how do you design a process that allows you to work in that emergent way? And it's got to be simple in its structure, but flexible enough to respond to all those things that happen. Because those things happening are not the problem, those things happening is the process working!

**Sharon:** What comes to mind too, is there's a lot of talk about flexibility. When you said flexibility what happened in my mind is I thought about that there are a lot of innovations happening with the use of clean questions - all sorts of, I call them mini-models, easy to apply, kind of mini-models. But a lot of these, almost every one that I'm aware, of has come from someone who has the grounding and the training in Symbolic Modeling.

This is like the 'ground Zero' of using this kind of methodology and thinking process to do something different.

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**Penny:** I think that is absolutely accurate. And not only have those innovators got the Clean Language questions, they know them in every cell in their body and they

have had experience of working with metaphor but also they have learned more about modeling, and modeling is a key piece.

Once you are experienced modeling a client's landscape, that modeling can generalize and you can take it to other areas. And I think that's where a lot of the new processes are being taken into business, education, everything else. I think that is where a lot of that emerges from.

**Sharon:** Yes, modeling, the skill of modeling itself and the principles of Clean and then having the questions and the thinking behind it to navigate what you come across/up to.

...So awesome.

**James:** And to respond to what's happening in the moment, because, you know, it's all happening right now. And one of the principles behind a Clean Approach which is, whatever the client presents and in whatever way they present it, that's enough. We don't need anything else. There's plenty of material to work with. You just need to work with what you are given.

And that's an interesting kind of discipline for the facilitator to simply stay with what's presented by the client and stay within the framework and the logic of that. And what the Clean Language questions combined with Symbolic Modeling Lite does is it disciplines the facilitator to do that. And that is a skill in itself. Because we all want to put in our advice and our suggestions and our metaphors and you have to learn to step aside for a while

**Sharon:** There is one other aspect of the Symbolic Modeling Lite, this particular three day training, that I think is really valuable for people ... it is that if someone doesn't want to continue - I have noticed I have professional coaches come in and its given them just enough to begin to apply clean in their practices, work with their clients - and some have gone on to train more - and some have found that it's just enough that they have that framework to continue to learn from and iterate with, rather than leaving [a partial training] half baked, lets say.

**Penny:** Having trained it for years and seen many participants, many people learn that, the process, particularly in a coaching environment, if you become proficient in Symbolic Modeling Lite, then especially in coaching, then probably, I'm guessing, perhaps 70% of clients, 80% of clients, that will be all they need and you need.

But as we know, there are clients that have binds, complex problems we call binds and you learn to model them out in metaphor. But here's the interesting thing, in

order to identify a specific bind a client is experiencing, we start with the Symbolic Modeling Lite framework. And it is out of that the specific problem, the specific binding nature of that landscape emerges. So how you get to that is through those three days.

And then there are things that you can work with those more complex things. But for a lot of coaches that's all they need for their client base.

**Sharon:** Well I've been really thrilled that you shared your Symbolic Modeling Lite with me and that I've been able to begin to use it with participants.

**Penny:** Well, it's lovely to see you teaching it as well.

**James:** And I think the kind things people appreciate on this three-day workshop, in addition to the framework, the overview, is the demonstrations of real sessions using the process - live in the moment where you don't know what the clients going to bring up, you don't what the topic is going to be, you just use the process and its real.

And I think that people learn a lot from real demonstrations that are not kind of pre-planned or anything.

**Sharon:** Ya, no made up scenarios, no pretend and "put this other persons hat on".

**James:** And people get a lot of their own personal development when they're in the client role on those three days as well.

It's amazing how much you can get from someone asking you those questions. And how much those metaphors, the metaphors do so much work, but you've got to experience it to believe it!

**Sharon:** It's a bit like a presenting dream in Jungian Analysis. I have a metaphor that came up in my first training in early 2006 and it's still alive for me. It's changes a little and it is still really present and profoundly useful to me even now, years and years later, and that was in one of my first trainings.

**P&J:** Right, great.

**Sharon:** Well, it's going to be great to have you guys here in January. This will be our third year, and my third year doing this Symbolic Modeling Lite. I am looking forward to having you here for your advanced programs and the retreat, and James, for Clean Interviewing.

(Note: this was recorded in 2017. We are on our fourth year of Clean Convergence)

**Penny & James:** Yes.

**Sharon:** And, you know, when I first began teaching it [Symbolic Modeling Lite 3-Day program] I wasn't sure if it was going to be enough - and I am just so glad I went ahead and did it, because what I found is just what you are saying ... this scaffolding, this framework, this broader view, this map, so participants know where they are and really give people the opportunity to choose whether they want to go further and deeper into the process or if this is just enough for what they want to have happen.

**Penny:** Well, great. California here we come!

Penny Tompkins and James Lawley will be in California with me for Clean Convergence 2019 from January 7<sup>th</sup> through January 20, 2019. Find out more using the links below.

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