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Building better businesses with Clean

"Clean is a powerful and inspiring business tool which could become more attractive than some of today's best-known models."

That was the message from the world's first Clean Business Exchange: two days of conversations and activities involving more than 20 individuals who use Clean in businesses and organisations in various ways.

As they exchanged their stories of using and teaching Clean in a business context, the Hammersmith riverside venue buzzed with new possibilities.

"People out there are wanting this stuff and it's up to us to deliver," one participant said. "From the first experience, Clean changed my world. It has an extra piece, an extra ingredient, that other approaches don't have."

Lynne Cooper (www.amicas.co.uk) told how she ran a leadership development programme for a group of radiography managers within the NHS, with threads of Clean and metaphor running through the programme. "It was a resounding success," she said. "We set the success criteria beforehand and because it was practical, they were getting measurable results."

"Somebody saved over six man weeks of time. A number of them reported huge reductions of personal stress, such as 50 per cent. A number of them got promoted, and someone won a national award!"

Dutch trainers Wendy Niewland and Annemiek van Helsdingen (www.gewoonaandeslag.nl) described how they recently trained managers from a police department's logistics team to use the Clean Language questions.

Wendy said: "The employees had very little trust in the management, and the management were struggling over what to do about it."

"We decided to use Clean because it's simple and real and comes across as balanced and respectful. We taught them the Clean Language questions and gave them a framework to use them in conversations with employees."

"The employees noticed the changes straight away - within a month - and were asking what had happened."

James Lawley (www.cleanlanguage.co.uk) described five kinds of Clean consultancy projects he had been involved in, including a week-long exercise to help a community to develop its vision, an exercise to develop creativity among engineers at NASA and an analysis of the metaphors and presuppositions being used in a research survey by Yale University.

Several participants put forward their own models of Clean in business, as a basis for future discussion.

Before the event, some of those invited had felt like second-class citizens in a Clean community apparently dominated by therapy. One said: "As I'm a business user and not overly interested in the therapeutic applications I find that I just don't register on the Clean Language general consciousness." But these two days changed that mood: participants left the event on a high, determined to make an even bigger impact in future, both individually and as a group.

And Clean in business is like what?

So exactly what is it that makes Clean in business special? Participants agreed that Clean could be particularly useful in a business when:

- An external model or trick doesn't work any more
- The potential of a person or team isn't being fulfilled
- A person or team are stuck, and can only come up with information about things that don't work, or problems that seem too complex to solve.

And Penny Tompkins (www.cleanlanguage.co.uk) mentioned that a Clean consultant could often help organisations to understand the binds that kept the same problems recurring - and thus to resolve them

An awareness of Clean gave businesspeople a wider range of options to deal with difficult situations, it seemed. The only place it might not be useful was when giving orders was essential. As James commented: "As a general in the army I would be mad to be Clean! The point is, do you have the choice, and can you make it consciously?"

For Marian Way (www.apricotisland.com), a Clean consultant in a business could often be like the court jester, the person who challenges leaders' assumptions and, in the process, could make them look good - while placing responsibility where it belonged.

And, as coach and consultant Terri McNerney put it, the jester could 'name the elephant in the room'.

"When I'm asked what I do, I often say, 'I ask awkward questions'. And then I ask some - Clean ones of course!" said Diana Gibbs (www.kdpartnership.co.uk).

Consultant Will Izzard said: "Metaphor is fast and efficient at describing complexity and cutting to the chase. It can appeal to people who are overwhelmed by complexity by extracting simplicity from a complex situation."

And what happens next?

This event was a beginning: there's lots more to do to develop Clean applications and models, and to promote Clean in business. Similar events are planned in future, and smaller, informal groupings have formed to take particular ideas forward.

Wendy Sullivan (www.cleanchange.co.uk), who organised the event with Judy Rees and Annemiek van Helsdingen, said: "I am sure this is the start of a vibrant Clean business community.

"They say great oaks grow from little acorns - we're already beyond that and we've started growing, attracting resources through our roots and doing good things for the environment through our leaves.

"This will be one of those events where the people who were there will look back on it to remember how many exciting things have stemmed from it, how many bigger and better projects, how much innovation."

- If you would like to find out more about Clean in business, or to be kept informed of similar events in future, please email judy@cleanchange.co.uk

