

Clean Language for Leading Change



Questions that surface how your team actually feels about change before resistance hardens into something harder to shift.

Most change initiatives don't fail because the plan is wrong. They fail because people are quietly working through the change in their own private metaphors and models, and leaders never find out what those are before rolling out the next town hall or FAQ. Clean Language, developed by David Grove, is a set of deliberate non-leading questions that let people describe change in their own words and metaphors, without a leader's assumptions shaping the answer. Used well, it surfaces real resistance early and often reveals that people are more ready for the change than the loudest objections suggest.

Why Change Conversations Go Sideways

- Leaders reassure before they understand ("It'll be fine, trust me"), which shuts down the real concern instead of surfacing it.
- Leaders argue logic against a feeling ("But the data shows...") when the resistance was never about the data.
- Leaders ask leading questions ("Are you worried about job security?") that hand people an answer instead of letting them find their own.

The result? Surface-level compliance and resistance that resurfaces later, usually at the worst possible time.

Clean Questions for Conversations about Change

1. "And when you think about [the change], that's like what?"

Start with this question. Why? Because Clean Language questions invite a metaphor or image rather than a straight opinion. It is the metaphor that surfaces what is really driving a person's reaction.

2. "And is there anything else about that?"

This is the single most useful follow-up question in Clean Language. Keep asking it until they say "no, that's it." Most of the real information shows up on the second or third answer, not the first.

3. "And what kind of [their word] is that [their word]?"

This question reflects their own word back to them so that they can develop it further, without adding your interpretation of what it means.

4. "And whereabouts do you notice that?"

This question helps someone locate a vague feeling ("uneasy," "stuck") in something more specific like a project, a relationship, a part of their role.

5. "And what would you like to have happen?"

This question shifts from describing the problem to naming what they actually want. Oftentimes, they've never been asked this question directly.

6. "And what needs to happen for [current state] to become [what they want]?"

And finally, this question moves toward action without you supplying the plan. It often surfaces a much smaller first step than expected.

A Sample Conversation Flow with Clean Questions

A sample scenario of a leader checking in with a team member ahead of a restructure:

- Leader:** "And when you think about the team restructure, that's like what?"
- Team member:** "Honestly? Like walking into a room and the furniture's been rearranged in the dark."
- Leader:** "And is there anything else about that?"
- Team member:** "Yeah. I keep bumping into things I used to just know were there."
- Leader:** "And whereabouts do you notice that most?"
- Team member:** "Probably in who I'm supposed to go to for decisions now."
- Leader:** "And what would you like to have happen?"
- Team member:** "I guess... a map. Just something that tells me where the furniture actually is now."
- Leader:** "And what needs to happen for you to get that map?"
- Team member:** "Maybe just 15 minutes with you to walk through the new reporting lines."

Notice that the leader never explained the org chart, defended the decision, or reassured. The employee moved from vague unease to a concrete, small ask in five questions.

Traps to Avoid

- Don't finish a person's sentence, even when you think you know what they mean.
- Don't ask questions that begin with "why?" It invites justification, not exploration. Instead, ask "And what kind of" or "And is there anything else".
- Don't rush to fix. These questions are for understanding, not problem-solving.
- Don't skip "And is there anything else about that?" It's tempting to move on after the first answer; the real information is usually one or two layers deeper.

When to Use These Clean Questions (and When to Not)

- Use it when...** At the start of any change conversation, in 1:1s ahead of an announcement, when someone seems resistant but won't say why, or when you need to understand the real objection before addressing it.
- Use something else...** For straightforward logistics questions with a factual answer, or when someone has explicitly asked for direct advice rather than exploration.

Want to practice Clean Questions with me before your next change conversation?

I can help you rehearse these questions for a specific conversation you're facing. Schedule a complimentary consultation at www.admelioracoaching.com.

