Clean Language Principles

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Four principles for 'being clean'

Authors
Leaders in Clean
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History and process

In November 2024 forty Leaders in Clean from around the world met in Portugal.
Our aim for this gathering was:

> A celebration of what the community has achieved; taking stock of where we are now; and envisioning what we'd like to have happen for the future of Clean.

One outcome of this gathering was the decision to create a statement of the principles of 'clean'. A sub-group continued to meet online to develop the idea.

We knew David Grove had listed his Philosophy and Principles of Clean Language many years ago, and we wanted something shorter, simpler and more accessible. To make the task manageable, we limited the scope to observable principles for 'being clean'. After several discussions, we settled on the four principles below.

These principles were circulated to others in the Leaders in Clean group for feedback and further refinement.

The agreed version below was formally launched at an online meeting on 28 May 2025 under **a creative commons licence**. This license means the principles are freely available (with attribution); they can be translated into other languages; and they can be extended and developed as required.

Considerations

We regarded 'being clean' as on a continuum from 'completely clean' to 'strongly leading'.

STRONGLY
LEADING

PRISTINELY
CLEAN

The clean continuum

We can aspire to be 'perfectly clean' but in practice it is unattainable. Therefore the principles below are designed to apply close to the completely-clean end of the continuum.

Rather than defining Clean by beliefs or philosophy, we have specified a set of actionable and observable principles. These enable people to make conscious decisions about when and to what degree they aim to 'be clean' or to communicate in other-than-clean ways.

Being clean is not inherently beneficial. Clean is not 'good', just as leading is not 'bad'. The value of Clean Language depends on the context, the purpose for the interaction and viewpoint of those making the determination. It's a moment-by-moment choice.

With this in mind we crafted the principles using the following guidelines;

Guidelines

- Be written in English first.
- Be small in number, short and succinct (further context and explanation to be provided separately).
- Be generic and apply to all well-known Clean processes (e.g. Symbolic Modelling, Systemic Modelling, Clean Space, Emergent Knowledge, Clean Language Interviewing).
- Be able to be used to observe when a person is being clean and when they are interacting in another way.
- Do not need to apply to an entire process. Being clean may only be a part of a process.
- May be extended for specific applications (we would expect any additional principles to be compatible with the four generic principles).
- Be the basis for discussion and the development of people's appreciation of Clean.
- Be compatible with papers already published in academic journals.

Here is what we came up with:

Clean Language principles

A person is 'being clean' when they:

a. Preserve others' experience precisely as they express it (including metaphors and non-verbals)

and

b. Refrain from introducing concepts, metaphors, judgements, evaluations or assumptions

and

c. Invite others to attend to their experience without intending to change it

and

   d. Only introduce words that do not suggest new content.

Core contributors

John Barratt, Lynne Burney, Pascal Clarkson, Noémie Dehouck, Tania Korsak, James Lawley, Lena Sobel, Annemiek van Helsdingen.

With appreciation to David Grove and thanks to the wider *Leaders in Clean* community for their inspiration, discussion, and support.

Questions or comments about these principles?

Please **send them in via the contact form** and we will get back to you as soon as we can.

We may even create a section of 'frequently asked questions'.