

What is rapport and does it matter?

Some say that rapport is essential to business networking! Others go further to insist that you must build rapport before building any kind of relationship. Whether in business or in social interactions, it seems rapport is a vital ingredient. But what is rapport?

The term 'Rapport' is used to describe a feeling of connection between people or a group of people. Where it exists, people will say that they are 'on the same page', 'in sync', 'on the same wavelength' or something similar. It is often a subconscious feeling of 'clicking' with some one.

Is it important?

To put it simply: If you relate poorly with others, you are more likely to have a problem-filled career, and success will be hard to find, if at all. If you relate well to others, you are more likely to have a pleasant life, and success will come easier. People will find it a pleasure to work with you.

The ability to create rapport is the ability to create a harmonious relationship based on mutual trust or emotional ties. It is the art of making someone feel comfortable and accepted. It is friendship and camaraderie; it is a special bond or connection.

It all starts when you first meet someone. First impressions do last! If you cannot communicate effectively, then you won't be able to sell yourself to others or build rapport.

And YES, a book is judged by its cover! Like it or not, but judgments are made about you by the way you look, your clothes, hair, facial expressions, and your posture. And unfortunately, decisions are made by others based within seconds of meeting you. Before you even open your mouth, people are sizing you up. At first people will listen to what they see, not what they hear.

What can I do to improve?

So how comes some people seem to click more easily with people than others? Is it something one can learn or does one have to be born with it? Do I have to be a people person to build rapport with people?

Fortunately, for me at least, rapport is a skill that one can learn! Rapport involves being able to get connected with other people and being on their wavelength. As much as 93% of the perception of your sincerity comes not from WHAT you say but HOW you say it and how you show an appreciation for the other person's thoughts and feelings.

When you first meet someone, you should always try to learn something about that person that you can relate to an experience in your own past. It's fun to talk to someone with whom you have something in common, an event, a mutual acquaintance, or some other shared history. You can always find something common with anyone if you try. This builds confidence. Confidence breeds respect, and respect builds trust.

Casual conversation, small talk or beating about the bush, does have its place so you shouldn't be too eager to jump directly into business or some other agenda. Of course, this should not be overdone.

It's important that you don't come to a meeting or negotiation with one agenda - your own! Rather, come with an open mind. You miss a valuable opportunity to build rapport if you are inflexible or don't listen. Being an active listener is often more important in building rapport than being an active speaker.

The wikipedia lists a number of techniques that are supposed to be beneficial in building rapport such as: matching your body language (i.e., posture, gesture, and so forth); maintaining eye contact; and matching breathing rhythm. Many of these techniques are also found in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).

Next time you are in a bar or restaurant, take notice of how two people look when there's rapport between them. Even without hearing the details of their conversation you can tell whether they are in sync or not. People will naturally move in step with each other - its like a dance. There's a sense of unison in their body language and the way they talk - NLP calls this matching and mirroring.

NLP suggests that you can deliberately match and mirror someone to build rapport until it becomes natural. To do this, you will need to match:

- Voice tonality (how you sound) or speed
- Breathing rates
- Rhythm of movement and energy levels
- Body postures and gestures

However, beware the fine line between mimicry and mirroring. People will instinctively know if you are making fun of them or being insincere. When you are in rapport with someone, you can disagree with what they say and still relate respectfully with them. The important point to remember is to acknowledge other people for the unique individuals that they are.

Pace before you lead

Becoming great at networking requires that you 'pace' other people. Pacing people can be compared to boarding a moving train or bus. If you tried to jump straight on to a moving train, it's highly likely you will fall off. In order to jump onto the moving train you need to gather speed by racing alongside it until you are moving at the same speed before you can jump on.

Similarly, in order to lead others or to influence them with your point of view, you need to pace them first. This means genuinely listening to them, fully acknowledging them, truly understanding where they are coming from - and this requires plenty of patience.

In business, leaders that succeed in introducing major change programmes do so in measured steps. This allows changes to gradually become accepted by employees. People are unwilling to be led to new ways of working until they have first been listened to and acknowledged - i.e. paced. The most effective leaders are those who pace their people's reality first.

Top 10 Tips

So, what can I do to begin building rapport? Here are our Top 10 tips to building rapport effectively:

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Take a genuine interest in people by getting to know what's important to others. Seek to understand rather than to be understood.

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Pick up on the key words, favourite phrases and ways of speaking that someone uses and build these subtly into your own conversation.

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Listen for the style of language and match your language style to theirs. Notice how someone likes to handle information. Do they like lots of details or just the big picture? Do they prefer telling stories or just the bare facts and figures? As you speak, feed back information in this same manner.

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Look out for the other person's intention - their underlying aim - rather than what they do or say. They may not always get it right, but expect their heart to lie in the right place.

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Adopt a similar stance to them in terms of your body language, gestures, voice tone and speed.

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Respect the other person's time, energy, favourite people and money. They will be important resources for them.

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Get attention before making your point (otherwise the first part of the message gets lost). Begin with phrases like: 'I have something I'd like to mention here...it's about...'

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Use people's names, especially when not in face-to-face meetings. Address questions to people by name and thank them for their contribution by name.

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Continually summarise and check understanding of points and decisions.

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And to ensure you create that all-important first impression:

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- Be the first to smile when you first see the other person.

- Establish and maintain eye contact - but don't stare

- Be the first to say hello and extend your hand. Deliver a sincere and warm greeting.

- Use the person's name as often as you can
- Do more listening and questioning than talking

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