

Don't be a stranger

Make conversation flow with building rapport as your guide

IF SURVEYED, most people would say that conversations with a stranger are difficult to get going, and are usually sticky and short.

In contrast, conversations with a friend are more likely to be easy to keep going, smooth and long.

The magical ingredient that makes conversations flow is the presence of rapport.

Finding the spark

Rapport is a bit like electricity – it is hard to put your finger on it.

It is like when you go home after a long day and turn on the fan to cool down, boil a kettle to make some tea, or turn on the TV to be entertained.

You don't "see" the electricity, but as you enjoy the benefits it brings, you know it is present.

Great conversations have a kind of harmony. Rapport, then, is about connecting, finding that sometimes-difficult initial spark between two people.

It is about relationships, and you know the importance of building these in business and social circles.

Building trust

Rapport is also about trust, as you are likely to invest more of yourself and your time in connecting to people whom you trust.

Delving deeper, rapport is de-



Pay attention to the other person's actions, words and expressions to see what both of you have in common.

rived from the old French word *rapporter*, which literally means "to bring back". This suggests that rapport fades and needs to be brought back afresh each time.

This need for renewal suggests a focus that reconnects the parties, re-ignites their relationship and refreshes the levels of trust between them.

They say it takes two to tango, yet one person can make a conversation

a success, even when talking to a total stranger.

You can do this by choosing to be responsible for its successful outcome, as you perform the following four steps in rapport building:

1 Lag When I first meet a stranger, I assume that no rapport exists, so I choose to take responsibility to establish it.

I always believe that the person I am about to interact with wants to talk and is relaxed about talking to me.

I consider him to be in a "good" state, and all I need do is get myself into a similar state, then things should flow just fine.

During this first step, I knowingly position myself behind the curve and accept that I am "lagging" in some way. This places the onus on me to

act, removing any barriers to connecting. It also removes fears I might have, allowing me to think about the next step.

All I need to do is quickly catch up. But first, I need to know those areas in which I lag.

2 Learn To catch up, I need to understand a little more about my partner, to learn about him.

My aim is to pay attention to his actions, words and expressions. I look to see what we have in common, and see what interests him.

I look at his body language and listen to his tone and pace of speech, as well as the words that he uses.

From this, I determine in what ways I need to adapt my own expressions, words and behaviours to strike greater common ground.

3 Level Once I have this better understanding, I can enter the conversation in a more harmonious way by building on the things we have in common.

I achieve this by making small adjustments to my demeanour. It may be that I vary the pace of speech to match my partner's, mirror an aspect of his body language or build on his topics of conversation.

In levelling, I signal that we have things in common, and my partner will then be that much more receptive.

By this step, I would have established a good level of rapport.

4 Lead Rapport is something that you need to keep "bringing back", as it fades.

Once you have achieved a good rapport, it makes sense to check back from time to time that it still exists.

I do this by changing one aspect and observing the reaction.

My aim is to see whether my partner follows my lead. It might be that I change my body posture or pace of speech.

I look to see whether there is any corresponding reaction. When there is, this reaffirms that good rapport remains, and I can remain confident.

Connect with anyone

Relationships built on trust are at the heart of strong business outcomes, and conversations and connections are central in nurturing these great relationships.

Rapport is both the magnet that attracts and the glue that binds strong connections into great relationships.

Whether you are a salesman connecting with potential customers with a view to a sale, a manager engaging with employees to delegate work or a service person emotionally absorbed in the delivery of fantastic service, you need great connections.

To carry out warm and friendly conversations, rapport is an important skill for you to master. With a little practice, anyone can embrace rapport as his friend.

Article by Patrick O'Brien. He will be delivering a two-day seminar organised by SIM Professional Development from Aug 25 to 26 at the SIM Management House. For registration details, e-mail: exec@sim.edu.sg or call 6248-9422.

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