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Mutual understanding

[Communication skills are just as important as the technical ones if you want to succeed in the accountancy profession. **Patrick O'Brien** reveals the importance of striking up a rapport

Working at Grant Thornton in the UK for nine years reshaped my thinking about the accountancy profession. I came to realise that good performance was not only about financial and technical competences, but also increasingly about people skills.

The recent ACCA and Robert Half study, *Singapore Talent and Skills in Finance & Accounting Survey 2010: Uncovering the Challenges*, reinforced this point. It concluded that the top three skills lacking in the finance and accounting sector are:

* Leadership (65%).
* Interpersonal (63%).
* Communication (60%).

Good communication skills underpin all three. In contrast, technical and accounting skills were lower down, at 37% and 23% respectively.

As the world moves towards a more talented and mobile workforce, most people now sense a growing trend; the need for those softer, people skills over those harder, technical skills.

Central role

Though many of us are beginning to acknowledge the importance of communication skills, many of us still feel uncomfortable when making or sustaining connections. It seems that the fear of speaking in public, and of talking to strangers, remains up there, well ahead of death and taxes.

Talking with strangers requires a solid first connection, and for that, you first need to have good intentions. Great conversations are sustained only in the presence of rapport. It is a must, as it creates harmony.

That said, rapport is a bit like electricity, as it is very hard to put your finger on.

Without rapport, conversations feel uncomfortable; they misfire, are sticky,

and are short. In contrast, we quickly recognise rapport when we are chatting with a friend; conversations are easy to have, pleasurably smooth, and often quite long.

Commonality and trust

Rapport is built on a long understood principle; we feel more comfortable when we are around people who we have something in common with. For example, we naturally feel more relaxed when around members of the same alumni, religion, company, club, or association.

That commonality provides a basis for establishing instant trust, and conversations are always that much smoother when inside a relationship based on trust.

So early on in any conversation, aim to find something that you have in common with the other party. This allows them to trust you quickly, so that they can relax their way into the conversation, with minimal fear.

Delving deeper, rapport hails from the old French word rapporter, which literally means 'to bring back'. This suggests that during and between conversations, rapport fades; you need to bring it back afresh each time.

This need for commonality and renewal suggests that good communicators focus on continually reconnecting the parties, reigniting the relationships, and refreshing the levels of trust.

Steps to refresh rapport

It takes two to tango, and you can easily make conversations a success, even when talking to a total stranger. Rapport is the key, that hunt for common ground which is achieved when you choose to own responsibility for finding and continually bringing it

back into your conversation.

To improve your rapport building skills, do the things that great conversationalists do. When connecting, they focus on the following four areas; lagging, learning, levelling and leading.

Step one: Lagging. When great conversationalists first meet a stranger, they assume that rapport does not yet exist. Step one requires them to take responsibility to begin a journey to establish it.

They believe that the person they are about to interact with wants to chat, and is relaxed about talking with them; this is a powerful belief to hold. They consider their partner to be in a good state. All they need do is get into a similar state, and things will flow well.
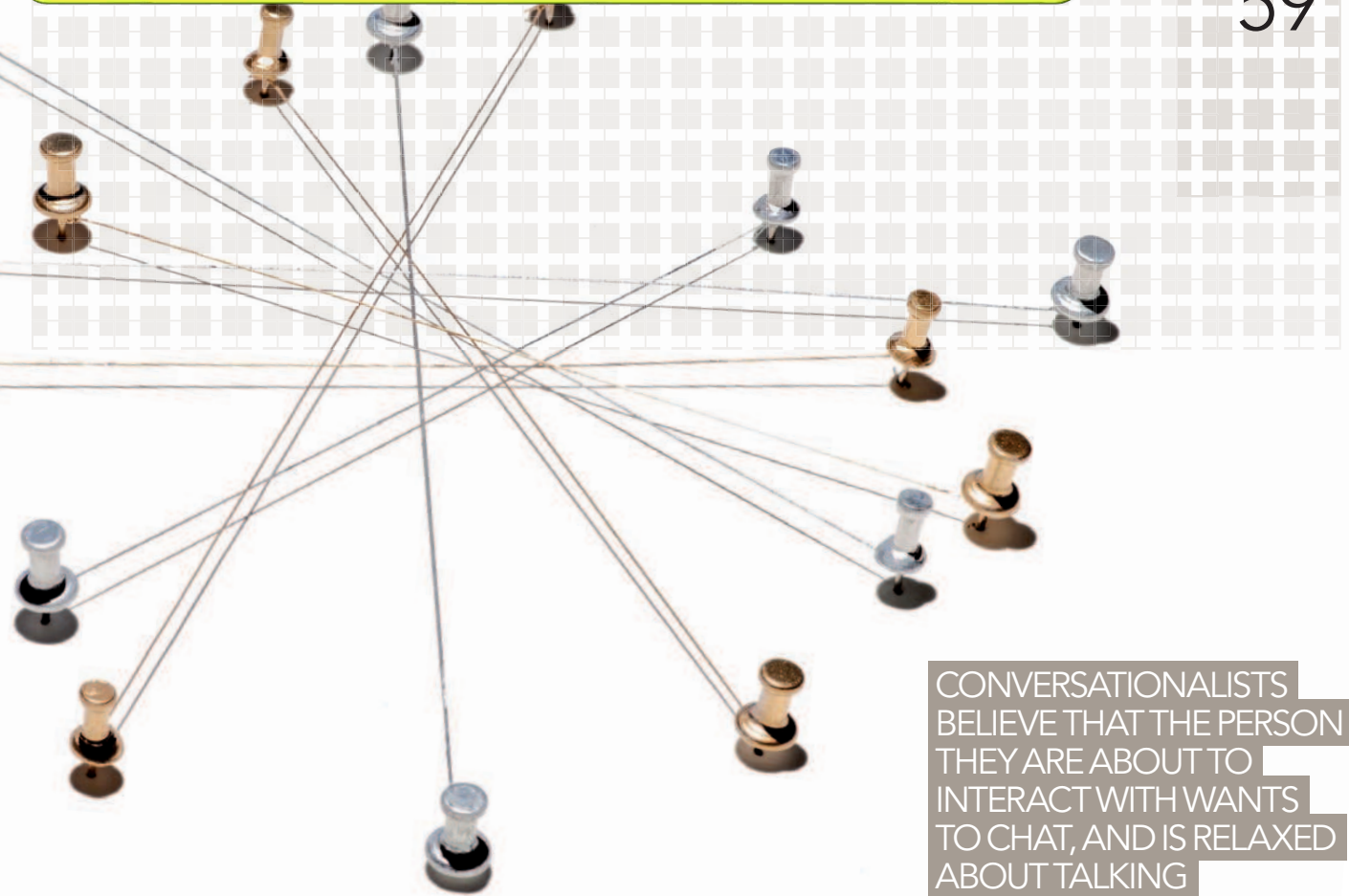
During these opening exchanges, they knowingly position themselves behind the curve, accepting that it is they who are 'lagging' in some way. This removes any barriers to connecting, as it rightly places the onus on them to take action for a successful outcome.

This staged approach focuses them on the things they can do, rather than the fears they might hold. This allows them to think about their next step – identifying those areas in which they lag.

Step two: Learning. Once an initial connection has been made, conversation commences. To catch up, they need to learn a little more about their partner.

They start by taking time to observe them, paying attention to their actions, words, and expressions. They notice what they have in common, and discover what interests their partner.

Good conversationalists take close interest in the body language, the tone of speech, even the pace of speech of

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their partner. They listen to all the words used.

All this vital data is grist to the mill, in helping them decipher what they have in common. This informs them of the ways they need to adapt their own expressions, words, and behaviours in order to strike greater common ground.

Step three: Levelling. Armed with this better understanding, they can continue the conversation in deeper and more harmonious ways, by building on the things held in common.

They make small adjustments to their demeanour; they may build on a topic of conversation, vary the pace of speech to match, or, mirror some aspect of the body language.

Conversations by this time are beginning to flow; both parties are relaxed, things are comfortably easy. Questions are asked, and answers given without feelings of inquisition, or cross-examination. Conversations take their time, and run their course, naturally.

In levelling, great conversationalists signal they have things in common. That common ground enables their

partner to be that much more receptive. By this stage, good levels of rapport have already been established.

Step four: Leading. Once two people have achieved this good state of rapport, it is visibly evident in their positive and open body language, and, easily observable by onlookers.

However, rapport can quickly fade. For the conversation to keep flowing, conversationalists know they need to keep 'bringing it back'.

They therefore check from time to time to ensure that rapport still exists. They do this by changing one small aspect, and observing their partner's reaction. For instance, they might choose to change their body posture, or the pace of their speech.

In doing so, they observe to see whether there is any corresponding reaction. When their partner follows the lead, this reaffirms that good rapport remains, and the conversation continues confidently.

Conclusion

Back at Grant Thornton, I first saw rapport used by successful partners who were great at practice

development; meeting and mingling with existing clients, as well as new prospects.

I knew then that boosting one's ability to connect and communicate with strangers was the way for budding accounting practitioners to get ahead.

Yet, even today, do we all fully recognise and accept that:

* Good communication skills are core competences in leadership and management?
* Interpersonal skills build team relationships, leveraging on communications capability?
* Effective networking requires connections, built on a solid platform of communication?

Rapport then, is a fundamental component of good communications. It is a vital skill that we can all develop, with just a little application and practice.

So, choose to adopt and adapt the ideas here, and see how you can make them work for you.

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