

A Newton's cradle with five silver spheres hanging from a metal frame. The spheres are in motion, with one sphere on the right having just struck the others, causing a chain reaction. The background is dark and reflective.

Focus



THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF ACCA SINGAPORE
QUARTER 3 - 2009

FRS for SMEs

**Two Steps
Forward,
One Step Back?**

The ACCA logo consists of a red square with the word 'ACCA' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

ACCA

Communicating to

■ If I learnt one thing during my nine years at Grant Thornton in the UK, it was this: the higher you rise in any organisation, the greater the importance of soft skills over technical skills.

So, whether you are a manager, trying to win over your staff, or an auditor, trying to win over your client, great communications skills are a vital ingredient in your arsenal. That said, have you ever stopped to assess how good your communications skills currently are?

FROM GO, TO FLOW ...

If pressed, most of us would admit that at some stage, we have feared talking to strangers, or people with whom we have had infrequent relationships. For professionals who have fleeting client contact, this can be a challenge. We often don't know how to start, and can feel awkward when trying to extend the conversation for any length of time.

Benjamin Disraeli, a former Prime Minister of England, shared some insights when he said that if you 'talk to a man about himself, he will listen for hours'. Thus the trick is to focus less on yourself, and more on the other person. Take this approach, and you'll find that it makes your conversations flow that much better.

When interacting with staff or clients then, always choose to take a genuine interest in what they say. Listen to them, I mean *really* listen to them. Show your interest actively

in your body language, by maintaining relaxed eye contact, smiling, nodding your head, and responding from time to time.

This is all easy to say, once the conversation flows into full flight. However, we've still to overcome that first hurdle; getting people to talk from the beginning ...

Great conversations are a little like pushing a humongous, heavy, round rock along the road. Once you get going and build tremendous momentum, you can keep moving with seemingly minimal effort. However, overcoming the initial inertia to get things rolling, that often takes a mammoth effort.

So what's the trick to get going?

GETTING TO GO ...

To get a conversation going requires simultaneous effort across a number of dimensions. It means keeping tabs on your conversation, as follows ...

Take Responsibility ... Remind yourself that if you find starting a conversation difficult, so too will the other party.

Therefore, choose to take responsibility for the success of the conversation, rather than to rely on the other party to make it succeed. Instead, do everything in your power to make the conversation you are striking up with them the success you wish it to be.



Win People Over

Attitude ... Though attitude is your internal state of mind, it shows externally through your body language. Everyone can read it, and everyone does read it albeit subconsciously. Yet, it materially affects how their interactions with you then take place.

Therefore, choose to adopt a positive *attitude* beforehand; changing part way through is usually too late. Be positive right from the get-go, your attitude will shine through, and people will engage with you positively as a result.

Body Language ... At the start of any interaction, body language is the dominant channel through which people come to perceive how they feel about you. Whether they like or dislike you, they determine that through the message your body conveys at first glance.

Therefore, choose to always dress yourself with postures that portray positive body language aspects. Remove those negative non-verbal cues, and replace them with open postures: a warm, friendly, smiling face, eyes that connect, and gestures that are both alive yet appropriate for the setting.

Status ... I'm sure that you've noticed what happens when a member of the senior management team walks in to greet a junior staff member? The senior invariably drives the conversation, and the junior splutters along, almost

dumbstruck. Status creates inequalities which oftentimes can severely impair the conversational dynamics.

Therefore, choose to take hierarchy out of your conversations. Certainly you can accept that there may be differences between the parties. However, in the cold combat of conversation, see the other person neither in lessor nor greater status than yourself. Instead, see them as an equal partner in the co-creation of a conversation of real meaning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RAPPORT ...

So, you now know how to keep tabs on the conversation to get things moving, and, how to keep things flowing. There is one additional element that is central to any great conversation: the presence of **rapport**.

In great conversations, rapport is always present, and it creates harmony between the parties. That said, rapport is a bit like electricity; it is very hard to put your finger on it!

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

That commonality provides a basis for establishing instant trust, and

conversations always happen 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 quickly trust you, so that they can relax their way into the conversation, with minimal fear.

To exemplify, remember my reference to 'Grant Thornton' in the opening line to this article? That signalled an accounting connection that most of us reading this article hold in common, thus establishing one early basis for trust.

In closing, remember that as you progress in business and in life, it is the development and presence of your soft skills that will rise to become the differentiators of career progress. Though the foundations of your earlier successes may have been built on the results of your technical actions, as you go forward, your future successes will increasingly be driven by the confident interactions of your soft skills.

Choose to acquire and apply the right soft skills, and surely you will be able to communicate in ways that win people over on a more consistent, productive, and, enjoyable basis. ■

Patrick O'Brien
Managing Director
The Amanuenses Network Pte Ltd