

# Connecting plight

**Are you one of those people who never hits it off when you first make contact with a new work-mate or fellow conference delegate? Is the art of connection pure chemistry, or is it of the applied sort? Patrick O'Brien walks you through those first, nervous moments**

**W**hen meeting for the first time, some people seem to have that knack of hitting it off don't they, whereas others don't seem to get past first base? Have you ever wondered why that might be?

Some people put this down to 'personal chemistry', a compound and catalytic reaction, flowing from a chance meeting between two unknown elements.

Picture yourself in this scene: you arrived at an industry meeting 20 minutes ago, you were greeted by your host, registered, and picked up the statutory 'goody bag'. You have now made your way to the buffet, filled your plate, and are standing around the room, slowly devouring the culinary delights on offer.

You look around, you survey the scene: who can you talk to?

You notice a few groups chatting away, some seemingly getting along like a house on fire. "They must all know each other", you tell yourself. You quietly munch away. Your steely, if slightly reticent, gaze slowly surveys the room. You are increasingly aware that you stand alone.

You notice another unattached person nearby. Isolated and desolate though he is, you take the risk. You go over, and attempt to open up a conversation. Disaster strikes: whatever you do, whatever you say, you just cannot get the conversation

going. After about 10 minutes' stop-start effort, you are saved by the bell. Your phone rings, you politely make your excuses and exit left.

Under your breath, you curse yourself; you knew this would happen. You knew that you should have gone across to join those happy, smiley faces in the far corner; they all seem to be having such a wonderfully good time. However, what's done is done.

Does this all sound familiar?

Is success in striking up a conversation purely down to 'chemistry', is it about plain luck, or is it just about being in the right place at the right time?

Though chemistry may be one factor in the overall equation, can we put success down to alchemy alone? No, we cannot: when two people first interact, there are many, many other things going on that contribute to a successful outcome.

The key question to consider is this: 'are there things that you can do to make that initial connection a success?'

We believe that there are. Success is based on not only the nascent interaction between two people, but also on how that interaction is managed, how the two minds are aligned, and how communication skills are applied. In our view, 'chemistry' is better when 'applied' than it is in its 'pure state'.

Connection is built upon 'application', and we see three things that are critical to your success:

- self-awareness
- technique
- planning

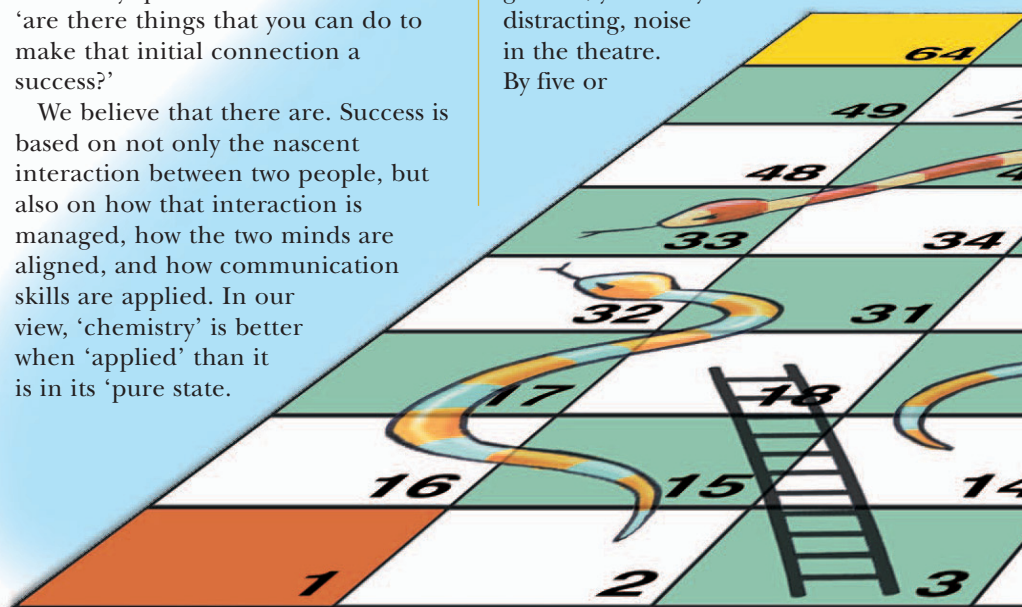
## Self-awareness

In life, we often seem more aware of others and their actions than we are of our own. This is counter-intuitive, as we would expect to know ourselves more than we do others.

For instance, I recently attended a business presentation. You know the sort of thing, you rush away late from the office, congregate, grab food, then engage in polite chit-chat before settling down for the main event, to listen to the wise words of the invited speaker.

On this occasion, all kicked off well, but three or four minutes into the talk, I became aware of a somewhat general, yet mildly distracting, noise in the theatre. By five or

*.. is success in striking up a conversation purely down to 'chemistry'?*



six minutes into proceedings, the noise had risen in my mind to such a level that I could no longer concentrate on the speaker.

To my right hand was a businesswoman. There she sat, hanging on the speaker's every word, yet clutching in her left hand an expensive blue pen. Like a triumphant conductor, she sat transfixed, as her metronomic and continuous clicking beat out a rhythmical tune in three-four time, as if to a Viennese Waltz.

I reached across, placed my hand gently on her shoulder, and spoke softly and quietly. "Excuse me" I said, "but I find your pen a real distraction". As if suddenly awoken from a dream, she instantly shook her head and said: "I am sorry, I was so engrossed, and completely unaware!"

Being aware of others is so important during any conversation, as it helps you manage interactions. It is of even greater importance to be aware of one's own self, too. When

you are aware of yourself and your own impact, you can better manage interactions, and develop conversations positively.

When you are not, as exemplified above, you leave it to others to manage those interactions on your behalf. If you really want to build value into your interactions, can you afford to do that?

### Technique

As children, we loved the board game 'Snakes & ladders'. Remember, the game where you start at the bottom square of the board and, by the simple spin of a dice, first person to the top wins?

Along the way, you reach for ladders that lift you higher so that you get to your goal quicker. You also attempt to avoid those slippery snakes that send you down, deep down, and hurtle you away from your target.

It is a simple game of chance: no skill is required, just a simple dance of the dice and 'Lady Luck' does the

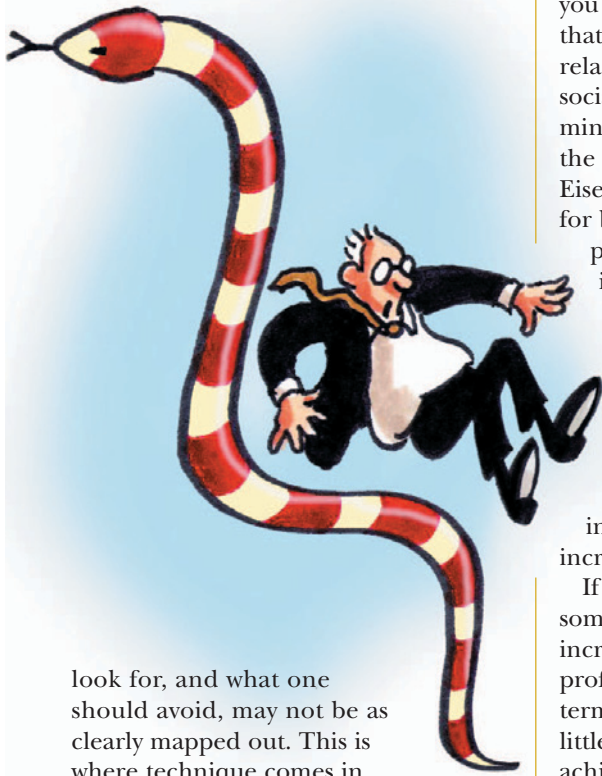
*.. your plan is a roadmap  
you require to ... build  
successful relationships*

rest. The beauty of the game is its simplicity, coupled with its visual fascination: we can see the delight and expectancy on people's eyes as they approach each ladder, we can see the utter despair when the head of the snake strikes out to snatch their counter.

Meetings sometimes can feel like this, if we leave success down to a game of chance. However, unlike simple board games, in meetings the visual clues as to what one should







look for, and what one should avoid, may not be as clearly mapped out. This is where technique comes in.

Technique is about applying skills that allow you to positively develop a conversation. Technique is also about awareness of areas to avoid, to side-step aspects that have a detrimental effect and block-off communications. It is all about technique, and good technique involves communication skills that you learn, practices that you apply, and choices that you make.

So, when connecting, what is it to be: the ladder of hope, or the helter-skelter of despair?

### Planning

Last but not least, we come to that four-letter 'P' word: the 'plan'. In life, there are two kinds of four-letter word. The one sort, you might think of, but never say. The other sort, you might say, but never do. In my experience, the 'plan' word often falls into the latter category.

Once again, this is a counter-intuitive conundrum. We all know the value of planning, what planning is supposed to achieve, and why we need plans. We also know the limitations of plans, the rigidities they can impose, and the need for flexibility during execution. In the final analysis, though, we all know only too well, the consequences of poor planning, and the variability in outcomes that can result.

Is this kind of variability, this risk, something that you are looking for in your interactions?

To make connections possible, you need to plan. Your plan is a roadmap

you require to begin your journey, so that you can build successful relationships, whether for business or social ends. That said, one needs to be mindful how planning can best help in the connecting process. As Dwight Eisenhower once said: "In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable".

Planning helps you think through what you wish to accomplish, the steps you need to take, and the issues that may arise along the way. The bottom line is this: planning allows you take ownership of your interactions. In doing so, you increase your chances of success. If striking up connections is something that you wish to do, to increase your likelihood of building profitable relationships in the longer term, isn't it worth while spending a little time planning out how you might achieve that goal?

### In closing . . .

Connecting should not be a game of chance, as there are things that we can be aware of to increase the likelihood of success. There are things that we can do to take responsibility for our interactions, there are things that we can do to be aware of what others are doing, there are things that we can do to be aware of what we ourselves are doing, too.

All it takes is for us to open our

minds to the facts, to let in the lessons that our hearts have been aware of all along. In his excellent book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell captures this concept best, when he talks about "moments when we 'know' something without really knowing why". Positively connecting with another person ultimately hinges upon the 'knowing why', and taking personal ownership of that newly-discovered knowledge.

So, are you happy to remain in your old 'knowing' state, aware that something happened, but completely oblivious to what it was? Or, would



you prefer to move to a new state, a more aware state that allows you to not only know 'why' something happened, but also gives you the ability to apply your skills to make things truly connect?

The choice is yours.



**Patrick O'Brien** is managing director of The Amanuenses Network Pte Ltd, a company that views training as an enabler of organisational change. Learning is directed to develop staff skills and competences, to deliver improved business performance, and to help people align to the goals of their organisation.