

## *Building Rapport & Listening Skills*

### **Defining Rapport**

Rapport occurs in a relationship where the people or groups involved understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well. Building rapport doesn't mean you have to like or agree with the other person's opinion or point of view. It means you have to show interest in them, listen to them, and respect their differences of opinion and understand where they are coming from. Rapport leads to trust, but trust doesn't have to mean agreement.

Having rapport is not about getting people to like us. It means having faith someone has been and will be honest and truthful, even when they disagree. Rapport can occur when people agree to disagree.

Rapport is important because it can foster cooperation, understanding, honesty, respect, and trust. Without these things, little of what you say will have an influence. From a personal safety standpoint, people are less likely to attack you physically when they have rapport.

Among the ways we can develop rapport with others is through communication.

### **Defining Communication**

Communication is a system by which we share with others what we are thinking and feeling. Unfortunately, it is a system that can fail us because it relies on words and language to send the message. The problem with words and language is that they are subject to interpretation. The quality of one's communication is not how well it is said—it is if and how well the message is *received*.

We communicate through body language and facial expression, the tone of voice we speak with, and the specific words we choose. Each emotion has a set of physical expressions that correspond with that particular emotion. Effective listening involves observing body language and noticing inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages. For example, if someone tells you they are happy with their life but through gritted teeth or with tears filling their eyes, you should consider that the verbal and non-verbal messages are in conflict and they maybe don't mean what they say. This is when we are communicating face-to-face. We lose some of these sources when communicating by phone or by email, text, or other graphic communication.

In other words, the words one chooses to say, how he or she says it, and everything one does with one's body while saying it sends a message which is available to be read.

### **The Skill of Listening**

Listening is not merely about hearing the words people are using. The purpose of listening is to gain understanding of what another person is thinking or feeling. People communicate to obtain goals and get their needs met. Look for the other person's intention—what it is they are trying to achieve in the larger scheme of things. Paying attention to not just what people say—their words, but how they say it—their tone of voice and body language, allows us to gain greater understanding which can lead to rapport. A good listener will listen not only to what is being said, but also to what is left unsaid or only partially said.

### **Ten Principles of Listening and Building Rapport**

#### **1. Mentally Prepare Yourself to Listen**

Relax. Focus on the speaker. The human mind is easily distracted by other thoughts—what's for lunch, tasks I need to complete, other things I'm working on. Put other thoughts out of mind and concentrate on the messages that are being communicated.

#### **2. Remove Distractions**

Don't shuffle papers, look out the window, check your phone, tablet, or similar device. If you must doodle, do so discretely. Avoid unnecessary interruptions. These behaviors disrupt the listening process and send messages to the speaker that you are bored or something else is more important than they are.

## Cooperative Communication

### 3. Listen to Hear, Not to Solve

When somebody is talking, do not interrupt, talk over, or finish their sentences for them. Just listen. There's a tendency to only listen long enough to come up with a possible solution and offer it immediately. Let them finish their story before offering solutions.

### 4. Put the Speaker at Ease

Help the speaker to feel free to speak. Remember their needs and concerns. Nod or use gestures or words to encourage them to continue. Maintain eye contact that indicates you are listening and understanding what is being said.

### 5. Empathize

Try to understand the other person's point of view. Look at issues from their perspective. Let go of preconceived ideas. By having an open mind we can more fully empathize with the speaker. If the speaker says something that you disagree with then wait and construct an argument to counter what is said but keep an open mind to the views and opinions of others.

### 6. Be Patient

A pause, even a long pause, does not necessarily mean that the speaker has finished. Be patient and let the speaker continue in their own time, sometimes it takes time to formulate what to say and how to say it.

### 7. Avoid Personal Bias

Try to be impartial. Don't let the person's habits or mannerisms distract you from what they are really saying. Everybody has a different way of speaking—some people are more nervous or shy than others, some have regional accents or make excessive arm movements, some people like to pace while talking—others like to sit still. Focus on what is being said and try to ignore styles of delivery.

### 8. Listen to Qualities of the Voice

How a person speaks adds to what they are saying. Pitch, tone, inflection, cadence, and volume of voice convey meaning.

### 9. Watch for Non-Verbal Communication

Gestures, facial expressions, and eye-movements can all be important. We don't just listen with our ears but also with our eyes. Watch and pick up the additional information being transmitted via non-verbal communication.

### 10. Listen for Ideas, Not Just the Words

Maybe one of the most challenging aspects of listening is the ability to link together pieces of information to reveal the ideas of others. When someone is sharing with us, they are telling us their story. Getting the whole picture, not just isolated bits and pieces, leads to greater understanding and what the real issue is.

## Other Ways to Build Rapport and Be a Good Listener

Pay attention to key words, favorite phrases and ways of speaking that someone uses and build these subtly into your own conversation to create rapport. For example, if someone uses the word "kids" when talking about their children, it is best if you also use the word "kids" instead of the word "children".

Notice how someone likes to handle information. Some people like lots of details, others just the big picture. It is best not to overwhelm or underwhelm people.

We physically dance with people we are conversing with. We tend to match body motions with people we are in sync with. If they are leaning in, we tend to lean in. If they have their hands in their lap, we tend to match it. Notice if you are matching your body language with theirs during your conversation. You don't have to match exactly, just similarly to build rapport.