

BUILDING RAPPORT

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Published in Rapport Magazine Spring 1998



What's in a name

'Rapport' is one of the most commonly used words in the NLP World. And it's a fairly commonly used word out there in the rest of the World too. When we're talking about getting on with and communicating with other people, people we like and people we would like to influence, then we know from experience that it's rapport that counts; a feeling of 'being in rapport' that oils the wheels.

We all know what it feels like to be communicating with someone we get on with, someone we can influence easily and comfortably. We feel as if we are on the same wavelength, as if we are being listened to empathically, as if there is a flow of communication going on between us, as if we are really being heard. And, of course, part of this process is that we are invariably listening to and hearing things ourselves.

Yet most of us have times when we feel blocked in our communications, times when we seem unable somehow to get our points of view across, times when what people are saying to us just doesn't seem to make any sense, times when we seem to be at cross purposes with others, when we feel that no matter what we say or do, it cannot make any difference.

It's at those times we need to think first about rapport, and go about finding it quickly, so that we can change the tenor of the situation, and set about getting great results

Let's start at the beginning . . .

Have you ever been curious about that rare breed of people who somehow seem to be able to speak easily and comfortably with, and influence, everyone they meet: the office bore; the twisted cynic who's been there so long, seen and done everything at least once, knows that it won't work this time either; the impossible customer; the boss whose only passion is tracing his own family tree?

Have you ever watched them and wondered how they are doing it? Have you ever wanted to be able to borrow some of their skills?

Well you can. You can learn how to 'model' them. And in doing that you will be retracing the steps of Richard Bandler and John Grinder in the early days, when they modelled the communication skills of the master communicators, master psychotherapists, Fritz Perls, Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir among others.

In their first researches into how each of these acclaimed therapists worked to effect real and lasting changes in their clients, the clearest and most obvious thing that stood out was that the key to what they were doing lay in the rapport they were able to build.

How did they do it? Very simply: by 'matching' and 'mirroring' what their clients were doing; their body posture and gestures; their language patterns; specific words and phrases; the pitch, tone, speed and rhythm of what they were saying; and their breathing.

Pace, pace, pace, . . . Lead! . . .

And they stayed there. They 'paced' or followed what the client was doing until they felt comfortable and easy enough to 'lead'. And they'd continue to lead until they felt they were losing the connection, at which point they would simply revert to pacing again. And so the thing would continue, like a dance, both moving together, the therapist first pacing, then leading, then maybe pacing again

What happens when people are in real rapport with each other is that all sorts of crazy things start to occur. They start to see, hear and feel the World differently, they gain a different perspective, the perspective of the other. Influencing becomes simple, really simple. Communicating starts to feel like fun.

Milton Erickson's therapy often involved his clients doing crazy physical things, like climbing one of the mountains outside Phoenix, where he lived. An observer once said of him that he was only an average hypnotist but that he built rapport at such a deep level that she - and other people who came into contact with him - would do anything and everything he asked of them!

These days Richard Bandler teaches people to go into what he calls 'instant' rapport with others. It is quite easy to achieve once you've done a little experimenting and understood that this is a built-in human skill that is inherently yours.

Matching and Mirroring . . .

We 'match' other people when we exactly 'copy' what they are doing, raising our left hand when they have raised their left hand, for instance, or matching their language by using the very same words and phrases that they use.

We 'mirror' other people when we behave as if we were their mirror image. So, we might choose to lift our right arm when they lift their left, and so on. Either will work very effectively when we want to build rapport. It is very much a matter of choice and style and somewhat dependent upon the final outcome you want to achieve.



Modelling or therapy . . . ?

If you want to 'model' someone else's skills, then matching their body language, their physiology will be an important part of that process.

If you are in a therapeutic situation you need to maintain a sense of yourself as separate from the client, so, in general terms, it is probably wiser to 'mirror' her/him.

A word of warning: on average therapists die seven years earlier than the norm, possibly because they have become so familiar with their client's 'maps of the world' and built so much rapport with them, that they take on their ailments too!

Mirroring will help prevent this, as will another technique, 'cross matching', where you match some part of another's behaviour with a completely different part of your body. For instance, you may tap your fingers lightly on the arm of your chair in time with your client's breathing.

Using mirroring and cross matching will allow you to build excellent rapport and keep yourselves – you and the client - both safe.

Learning what you already know . . . !

It's very simple to learn these skills. In fact, 'learn' is probably the wrong word.

You do already know how to build rapport. It is an integral part of your skill set. You use it every time you communicate with someone you like, someone who you feel is on your wavelength. All you need to learn now is how to transfer what you already do well with these people to those other people, the ones with whom you used to feel you didn't get it together, the ones who used to seem to process things differently from the way you do.

Think about times when you have felt you were really 'in tune' with someone. If you could imagine yourself standing outside a typical interaction of that sort and observing it from a distance, becoming a fly on the wall if you like, what can you see yourself doing? What can you hear yourself saying?

I think it would be a pretty safe bet for me to assume that what you will observe here is yourself matching and mirroring the other person, and doing it exceptionally well. What we would both be observing is you using rapport skilfully and adeptly, a confirmation if you like that you can already use these skills.



Making a choice . . .

At this point you have a choice. Do you want to extend these skills that you are already using or would you rather continue as you are, connecting with those people whom you like and disconnecting from others about whom you may not care too deeply.

In my own dim, distant past I made the choice to transfer the skills I knew I already had. I am somewhat ashamed to admit making that choice as its motivation was pure self-interest. But the eventual outcome astounded even me!

I was studying for a post-graduate diploma in my discipline. I counted myself unlucky to have as a tutor a woman who, in my jaundiced eyes, was completely useless. Tutorials seemed a total waste of time. We frequently went over ground that had already been covered; ran over into lunch breaks; the pace was turgid in the extreme; and we generally seemed to get nowhere in the ground that we covered.

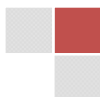
We were now two thirds of the way through the year and my behaviour in these sessions had deteriorated into thinly veiled aggression. By now the tutor ignored every comment I made.

I knew things were really bad when I noticed one day that she had jumped into a doorway to avoid greeting me! That pulled me up somewhat sharply. What could I do to change things? She was, after all, marking my dissertation and I wanted to pass! And, besides, I had always prided myself on my ability to get on with people, no matter who they were and what they were like.

I had just learned about rapport and in particular about how to match breathing. It all sounded a bit over the top to me, but I thought I'd experiment anyway. There didn't seem much to lose and everything to gain. And quite frankly, at the time, I didn't even consider whether this would count as manipulation or not. I saw it as an experiment. So I sat at the back and quietly breathed along with her.

Imagine my surprise, then, when she addressed the first question to me directly! I nearly fell off my chair in astonishment.

The truly fascinating thing was that almost instantly I started to feel differently about her. Strangely I started to see her point of view. I listened a little more carefully to what she was saying and it seemed to make sense. Even more extraordinary was that I started to like her. So much so, in fact, that now I am a regular guest speaker on the courses she runs and we work together, co-train brilliantly and have a lot of fun doing so.



Knowing your outcome . . .

Now, had my outcome in that interaction been clear, I could have taken some of the kudos for it. But I have to say in truth that it was all a complete accident. I sometimes think the Universe takes delight in knocking down our egotistical ravings - thank goodness. It certainly brought me down to earth with a bang.

And I sometimes think about what would have happened had I been clearer about what I wanted earlier in that course. Had I been clearer about my outcomes, had I set my sights more resolutely on a future positive outcome, I now know that I would have gained immeasurably.

Why? Because by being clearer, I would have understood the importance of making great relationships with everyone I met; the importance of recognizing that everyone has something to teach us, no matter how different they are from us, nor how differently they organize themselves or behave; because I would have been more open to the gifts that are out there in the World for each one of us.

In those days I simply believed in 'going with the flow'. And that was fine, except that if you don't know which direction the flow is taking you it is possible that you will end up somewhere other than where you really would like to be.

In conclusion . . .

It will help that your relationships have become even better and that you can now build a relationship with anyone you choose. It will be even more useful though to be clear about where you're going, so that you can really plan to take advantage of the hand the Universe deals you.

In the next article we will examine ways in which you can create compelling futures for yourself by being clear about your outcomes, 'dovetailing' them with others' when it's appropriate and then moving rapidly towards them. . . .

