

In their second article on coaching with impact, **Nick Austin** and **Richard Churches** explore what we mean by rapport, and how to develop effective relationships while coaching

# Rapport: the essential ingredient



**T**hink of a time when you felt in complete harmony with someone. Perhaps you had just seen a film, or met up for a drink. You talk easily, nod, smile and feel completely comfortable. The next time you experience this feeling of 'getting on well', notice your body language, language patterns, vocabulary and breathing. In all likelihood, you will find that there will be a remarkable similarity between the two of you.

Recent neuroscientific research into the role of mirror neurons supports the idea that this kind of rapport is deeply embedded within us, allowing people to understand and interpret feelings, behaviours and intentions. It holds great significance in coaching, where training in rapport and listening skills has incorporated thinking from a range of areas including psychology, neuroscience and neurolinguistic programming (NLP).

Traditionally, coaching training places great emphasis on the structure of coaching sessions and the use of questioning skills. Both these areas are, of course, very important. But the quality of the coaching relationship is seen as increasingly significant, which is where the building of trust and rapport comes in, together with the interpersonal skills of non-verbal communication.

At the start of a coaching session, we need to find out about the person we are working with, how they perceive the world, and what is important to them. Establishing rapport removes barriers and ensures that our dialogue can go deep and be more challenging. To build rapport at this early stage we need to communicate acceptance without critical judgment, both verbally and non-verbally.

As leaders and coaches we will all recognise times when communication becomes more difficult with people whose perception of the world is dissimilar to our own, and with whom we have little in common. In such

moments, we need strategies that help us to relate more effectively to others. Rapport building is the glue that holds the coaching relationship together. No coaching model, however well researched or practised, can work effectively without rapport, and it has to be continually nourished and supported. Rapport defines the quality of the relationship and the effectiveness of many of the outcomes.

We like people who like us, people who like what we like, behave as we do – ultimately, we ‘like like’. Research has suggested that in situations of uncertainty (or when communication is unclear), much of the meaning of communication takes place at a non-verbal level, with as much as 55 per cent of the meaning communicated through physiology and 38 per cent in voice tone – leaving as little as 7 per cent communicated by the actual words that are used.

We use the word ‘congruence’ in relation to body language and rapport. Communication is said to be congruent when the words we use, the body language we adopt, and the tone of voice all match to give a consistent message. Perhaps you have had the experience of listening to someone giving a speech, and you got the feeling that there was something not quite right. You may not have been able to pinpoint the exact inconsistency, but you *just knew*. It is likely that something in the body language or voice tone (tempo or pitch) may not have matched the intended message. Being aware of the detail of what you are doing when you are communicating and the areas that you can change and adapt to ensure congruence will help you to communicate more effectively and ensure that you make an impact when you’re engaged in coaching or other leadership activities.

### The loop of communication

When we communicate with another person, we form a communication loop with them. We listen to what they are saying, and observe their behaviours, which we process internally and then respond to by saying and doing something in return. It is important to realise that it is not just the words we listen to, but the way they are said, the gestures that accompany them, the facial expressions and how we then interpret them that matters most. Of course, we do this subconsciously most of the time, but when we need to build rapport, it is helpful to be aware of the things we pick up on, so that we can change our behaviours to better fit in with the person we want to develop a rapport with.

In relation to the coaching relationship, effective rapport develops in stages:

1. getting to know each other, talking about self with ‘safe’ information shared
2. having shared experiences, things in common and being prepared to share more information
3. sharing deeply held values, beliefs and things that are important

It is at the third stage that communication becomes open and honest and there is the greatest potential for coaching to change behaviour.

So how is it done? Building and maintaining rapport is a natural aspect of human behaviour for most people, most of the time. However, there are some behaviours and strategies that can be learned which, when elegantly mastered, are effective in building rapport. These include:

- simply sharing information about common experiences and likes
- having an awareness of the ‘loop of communication’
- matching body language
- matching word types (e.g. visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) and phrases
- voice tone, pitch, and speed
- listening skills

Two important terms that you should be aware of before we explore this area in more detail are ‘matching’ and ‘mirroring’. Matching is where you do the same thing as someone else, such as crossing the same leg as the other person. Mirroring is when you do the opposite with the same part of the body – so, crossing the opposite leg to the other person, for instance.

A more subtle form of matching, known as cross-over matching, is where you match a body rhythm, either in the same way or with a different part of your body, perhaps matching the breathing rate of a person, or noting the blink rate of someone and subtly matching this rhythm with a foot.

We should emphasise that body language matching or mirroring is not the same as mimicry. Mimicking someone will have the opposite effect to the one you are striving to achieve. If you attempt to use such skills without the best of intentions, and without respect, you will get caught out. We are all highly sensitive to the subtleties of communication and, as Paul Ekman’s research (2003) shows, can read micro-body language and facial expressions with ease, albeit at a mostly subconscious level. As a coach, when we match or mirror we are not trying to copy someone, but seeking to gain a greater understanding of our coachee’s map of the world and show genuine interest and empathy.

We can create rapport by matching and mirroring someone’s body language, gestures, their language and voice tone. In terms of body language, notice how someone is standing, sitting or carrying themselves. How is their weight distributed? What is their posture like? How is their head angled? What tiny movements are their hands making, head or eyes doing?

You don’t have to adopt exactly the same position as them: being similar will do. What you are trying to do is show the other person’s unconscious mind (their mirror neuron network) that you are someone like them who is empathetic to their position. With practice you will begin to pick up subtle indications as to how the person is feeling and what they are thinking. For example, you might notice a change in muscle tension when the person is talking about something that they are unhappy about. Noticing this sign again when they are thinking but not speaking can give you an indication as to where they are coming from.

In the same way, the language a 'coachee' uses can be very revealing in terms of giving you an insight into their world as they perceive it. Some people have a preference for using visual language to describe things: "Do you see what I'm saying? I've got a clear picture of this." Others prefer auditory language: "I hear where you're coming from. I like the sound of that." Others use the more action-orientated language of the kinaesthetic: "I've got a grasp of the basics here. I need to strike at the heart of this problem." Listening to the language and then using the same language type in response will give the 'coachee' that feeling that you are really connecting with them and that you understand how their mind is working, that you think in the same way as them.

Another helpful tip for building rapport is to use the exact same words as the 'coachee' where you detect that they associate a specific meaning or connotation with those words, which would be lost (and your rapport weakened) were you to use different words instead. If a coachee uses a word like 'fun', for example, this will be the word that accurately describes it for them. The coach may want to use other words such as 'enjoyment', 'pleasure' or 'playfulness' instead, but only the coachee really knows what they mean by their use of the word. In the same way, if they use key phrases as part of their language, try to reflect them back. To show them that you are like them, use their vocabulary and it will resonate and enhance their feeling of joint understanding with you.

## Active listening

Listening is, of course, a key skill in coaching, and it is an effective rapport builder – or breaker if done badly. In order to understand someone fully, the coach has to listen at a more profound level than simply hearing someone explain something. Listening happens at different levels. At a superficial level, the listener may be showing outward signs of listening, but internally they may tune in and out from what is being said. The mind can easily wander to other things if we don't make a conscious decision to listen and pay attention. In many ways, really, listening becomes harder as what people say becomes more interesting – because the interesting things they say can lead you to go 'inside yourself' to think about your own perspective on them.

When this happens you need to 'take yourself out of the loop', ensuring that you continue to listen to what the coachee is saying and not to your internal voice or mental imagery. If you do reflect on yourself while coaching then you may find yourself slipping into a 'telling mode' rather than keeping an effective questioning approach.

At the deepest level, the aim of the listening coach is to gain a more complete understanding of the world of the coachee. Here the coach remains non-judgmental about what is said, so the coach's own values remain outside of the conversation.

The listener is showing empathy at this level of listening – which is a great rapport builder. Empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathy is about connecting the speaker's experiences with the listener's, so that the listener can get into the same boat as the speaker. They get that

feeling of being in it together, side by side – which may or may not be helpful. Empathy, on the other hand, shows understanding in a way of learning about the speaker's predicament without joining in. One can show warmth and understanding without going through the same emotions, and this is a more helpful stance in the coaching arena.

It is also essential for the coach to avoid jumping to conclusions about what a coachee means when certain things are said. Pausing and clarifying by asking questions such as "What does that mean to you?", "Tell me more about that", "What do you mean by...?" and "How do you feel about that?" is an essential skill which will help to ensure that you maintain rapport by demonstrating genuine interest in what is being said. Clarifying also prevents you from making assumptions about what is going on inside your coachee's head. At certain points in the conversation you will also want to pause to summarise the conversation so far, thus demonstrating again that you have really listened and understand where your coachee is coming from.

We all know that the emotional climate that we create as school leaders has a profound effect on the teachers we lead and in turn on the children in our schools. Interpersonal effectiveness is without doubt of far greater importance than was realised a decade ago. Rapport, listening skills and the ability to question effectively are essential tools for the 21st-century school leader. Interpersonal effectiveness is critical whenever leaders are required to communicate effectively, in both a one-to-one and a group situation.

In schools, this is almost all the time. Whether you are working alongside a teacher, support teacher, talking to a difficult parent, or conducting a performance review, you need rapport for your collaboration to be successful. Paying attention to the interpersonal dimensions of life and practising the skills of rapport can pay dividends, enhance the quality of relationships in the workplace and help to maintain a positive environment for the children and teachers we lead.

**Richard Churches is principal consultant for national programmes at CfBT Education Trust and doctoral researcher in leadership at Surrey University, who has worked on initiatives for the DCSF and National College for School Leadership, and co-authored *NLP for Teachers* and *The NLP Toolkit*. Nick Austin is a professional development consultant at CfBT Education Trust and a former headteacher, who co-authored the NCSL coaching training for school leaders.**

## Further reading

Ekman, P (2003), *Emotions Revealed*, Phoenix  
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