

Good Mentors Must Kindle Kinship Early

Marshall Goldsmith - 3/25/14

What does rapport building entail for a mentor? How does the mentor establish early kinship, trust and comfort?



“Rapport” comes from an old French word that means “a bringing back” or “harmony renewed.”

This definition reminds us that rapport is fundamentally about actions aimed at restoring the security of the bond with which we begin life. Life, for most of us, does not start with anxiety or fear. Life begins with security and trust. As the person who is usually in the driver’s seat at the outset of the relationship, the mentor must ensure a good start — the renewal of the original bond.

What does rapport building entail for a mentor? How does the mentor establish early kinship, trust and comfort? What follows is a discussion of the four components of rapport: leveling communications, gifting gestures, receptivity for feelings and reflective responses.

Leveling communications: Rapport begins with the sights and sounds of openness and positive regard. Anyone approaching a potentially anxious encounter will raise his or her antennae high in search of clues about the road ahead: Will this situation embarrass me? Will this person take advantage of me? Will I be effective in this encounter? Is there harm awaiting me?

Given the protege’s search for early warning signs, the mentor must be quick to transmit signals of welcome. An open posture (for example, no crossed arms), warm and enthusiastic gestures, eye contact, removing physical barriers and personalized greetings all communicate a desire for a level playing field.

Gifting gestures: The opening communication can signal only that the path ahead may be safe for travel; it does not ensure rapport. The “Actions speak louder than words” adage is uniquely fitting at this juncture. Proteges need a gesture or action that they can take as a token of affinity.

The best mentors are especially creative with these signals. The perfunctory “How about a cup of coffee?” is certainly a well-worn gifting gesture. However, think about how much more powerful a statement like, “I had my assistant locate this article I thought you might find useful” could be as early evidence that the relationship will be a friendly one.

Receptivity for feelings: The great psychologist Carl Rogers wrote extensively on unconditional positive regard and its effect on relationships. His research repeatedly affirmed the role such a generous attitude has on psychological healing and wellness. A good mentor establishes rapport through careful attentiveness to the protege’s feelings early in the encounter. When people believe they are heard and understood, they feel secure and comfortable. Establishing rapport is not about asking, “How are you

feeling?" It is about listening intently to ascertain the feelings behind the words and making responses that acknowledge these feelings.

As a mentor, continually ask yourself: "What must he or she be feeling right now? How might I feel if our roles were reversed?"

Reflective responses: Receptivity to the protege's feelings enables you to provide a tailor-made reflective response that says, "I've been there as well." This gesture, another way of saying, "I am similar to you," promotes the kinship and closeness that are vital to trust. The goal is empathetic identification.

Reflective responses can be as simple as a short personal story that lets the protege know that you appreciate his or her feelings. Mildly self-deprecating anecdotes can work well, too. Above all, rapport is best served by humility and sensitivity. If you feel awkward, say you do. If you feel excited, say so. The sooner you speak your feelings, the faster the protege will match your vulnerability.

These ideas are meant to spark your thinking seriously about how to begin this important getting-started phase of mentoring. However, you should also keep in mind that the main ingredient in the recipe for rapport is authenticity. The more you surrender to who you are in front of the protege, the more at home he or she will feel.

Compatibility is as vital in mentoring as in any other important relationship. How quickly and effectively that compatibility is established can make a major difference in how competent the protege becomes.

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