

THE 360 DEGREES OF RAPPORT-BUILDING - A TÊTE-À-TÊTE WITH A SENIOR LEADER IN CORPORATE SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Rapport-building is an important element of personal and professional relationships. Corporate executives spend a lot of time at their workplaces. Every transaction with any stakeholder can impact the business to a great extent. There are financial implications attached to such transactions. That's why it becomes all the more important to be very careful about 'health' of such relationships. Given the fact that there are business implications of rapport, it must be remembered that human beings are first human beings and then professionals. Empathy helps strengthen rapport. In this research paper which is based on in-depth interview of a lady executive; it becomes evident that even at the top level of corporate ladder, one must keep the 'empathy' factor in mind. It takes one long way; specially in global economy. While preparing our business students for a better tomorrow, we must teach them significance of rapport and train them on 'how to build rapport'.

KEYWORDS: rapport, empathy, professional relationships

INTRODUCTION

People are just as wonderful as sunsets if you let them be. When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, "Soften the orange a bit on the right hand corner." I don't want to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds.

- Carl Rogers

People are important and so are relationships. Professional relationships are all the more important. In order to build and manage relationships, rapport-building is the key that works like a glue. It connects professionals all over the world. Professional relationships, like any other personal relationships, require nurturing. And the pinch of sugar (yes, we can't call it a pinch of salt) that gels people together is rapport.

Harmonious, empathetic (Brooks, 1989), comfortable (Dell, 1991), enjoyable (LaBahn, 1996) nature of rapport fosters a strong common bond (Shapiro, 1989) and involves mutual trust and genuine interpersonal sensitivity and concern (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Rapport-building requires empathetic communication and active listening skills. The father of active listening techniques, psychologist Carl Rogers, suggests three parameters that are needed for an effective advisor-client relationship: unconditional positive regard, accurate empathy, genuineness.

Active listening requires more than the verbal clues. It requires good empathy. It differentiates an attuned relationship from a superficial relationship.

In business scenario, the relationships built by the company with its customers and other stakeholders do impact the results (Levy, 1999; Weeden, 1999). These relationships are complex in nature and involve many factors.

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RESEARCH GAP

Rapport, as a construct, has gained momentum in past few years. Many researchers have defined rapport; many have given the factors that impact rapport. However, not much primary research (involving qualitative interviews) has been conducted on this concept. A senior leader from NCR region had been interviewed to understand the significance of rapport and its practical implications.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on primary research. It is a qualitative interview. The interview followed transcribing the content. The qualitative research interview seeks to describe the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main outcome expected in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say. (Kvale,1996). A qualitative interview seeks to cover both factual and meaning level, though it is relatively more difficult to interview on a meaning level. (Kvale,1996)

TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW

Researcher:How do you think rapport-building is important in the corporate world?

Senior Leader:Rapport building in the corporate world is extremely important. As much as we would like that the work in organization moves because of the processes and procedures laid out, one would assume that it is the job of the next person to accomplish micro- tasks associated to achieve the intended results . However that is not the case. Tasks just don't happen, things just don't move, only because there is a process for them to move. I wouldn't say that this is 100% applicable to all processes in an organization - that may be stretching it too far. There are many tasks that accomplish their own. They happen as they queue up in a workflow of an automated workflow. Things also happen in structured environments, like a factory. Steps are laid out. Procedures are signed off. And if one task is not completed, the process stops. It just doesn't move forward. For every process there is an associated manager of the process, hence pinpointing where exactly has the step failed is relatively easy and identifiable.

But organizations do not work like factories. Organizations even though may sometime have procedures laid out, not necessarily will have 100% rigorous adherence to them.

Researcher:So what does exactly work? How do things move forward?

Senior Leader: Like a factory has mechanics of the big machines that work as per laws of physics and engineering, in organizations, it is the people who are/make the machine. There has to be rapport between these people to work together **cohesively** and in a social structure that allows these people to achieve the larger good of the organization, and achieve results.

In my 15 years of experience in the corporate world, I have come to believe that, softer skills and building relationships with people, has made me achieve, more than just a documented process or procedure. I attribute 100% of my little success to relationships that I have built over the years. Don't get me wrong, these relationships are, not to be equated with the friendships, but mere business agreements between two parties, over the grease of rapport and friendly mutual camaraderie.

Researcher: So how does rapport in the organization work; especially when it is global company?

Senior Leader: Building these associations or rapport, is a 360 degree activity. Let me give you an example, I have been a training manager of a large global company, with very local roots in the country that it operates. I design capability programs of the highly functional nature. And let me say this upfront, when I started out I did not have any on-the-ground functional expertise, and here I was- a woman- in this large organization asked to lead the functional training agenda, for high achieving, testosterone charged best-in-class sales men, who had spent their entire career chasing numbers and targets, working with on ground with field force and distributors. Who the hell was I, to tell them how to do saleswell? Well, that's where one gets in wrong. I knew I wasn't going to fall in the trap of being that person, who is going to tell them how to do sale. So what did I do? I travelled across the country, met all the sales leaders, and visited their markets with them. Markets started at 7am in the morning, and would end at sometimes as late as 10pm, and that too in hotels and restaurants over dinner. Expecting me to sign off in the evenings was where these sales leaders got it wrong. I was with them, sitting along, sharing jokes and anecdotes of the glorious sales that they had done. And mind you, I was made to feel very comfortable in these evening stories. The men would go out of their way to ensure I was taken care of, and dropped off properly and safely back to my hotel. I was as surprised with this comfortable environment as these guys were with having a lady manager join them in these evenings. It was new to them as well. Guess they were as perplexed on seeing a lady work shoulder to shoulder with them on the streets. They got to know me, and I got to know them. I won their **trust**. I made them understand that **I wasn't there to challenge their business knowledge**, but to learn from them, and to transcribe all that experience into training manuals and material, all to be used to the benefit of their very own team. They were the ones who co-authored all this material. They were the ones who vetted and validated the concepts and the models. And they were the ones who delivered this content, on occasions that I created for them, and they were the ones basking in the glory of building talent and business knowledge for their team. **I was the one who they trusted.**

Researcher: So that's how important rapport is in the realm of training. How important is rapport-building for sales?

Senior Leader: Sales- it's not what one does only on the fields, in shops; it's what one does every day and at every moment of one's life. For one to sell an idea, a concept or an article, one has to sell it to one's superiors, win the trust of the colleagues who will take that idea to execution, and work closely with the teams to ensure that the idea is executed every day with success. It's 360 degrees of rapport building.

Researcher: Do you think you have mastered the skill by now?

Senior Leader: At times, I am amazed with people around me who have mastered the skill so well that literally every success that they have had is attributed to people around them. One of the things that I have learnt over the years is that spending time in knowing people around you and allowing them to know you- who you are, makes you believable and relatable. In organizations, like ours, we have a hierarchy of people working together, like a seamless engine. Everyone is busy, there is just too much to do, and deliver. There are deadlines, and results that need to be made. People just do not have the time to stop, and take a breath and pause, to get to know each other. There are times that I have sat closely with some colleagues for year all together and worked closely with them on projects, and at times not even known about their spouses, or family, or where they live...I have not yet mastered the art, but I truly believe that taking that pause , is oh so important. Having that coffee with a colleague away from the work desk, is as important as that presentation that might need to make over the nth coffee on my desk. Spending time with colleagues, bosses, team members, is a very important way to getting to know them, for who they are and genuinely investing time in them and understanding what success and failure means to them. It's like, humanizing your colleagues away from the designations and organization hierarchies and roles. In the human process of seeing them as fathers, husbands, sons, wives, sisters, daughters and mothers, understanding what makes them tick, one will be surprised to know that it's not much different from one's own self..... Once we humanize these professional arrangements, can we genuinely see, and know the other person sitting right next to us on his work station, trying to finish off a document that has a never ending end.

CONCLUSION

From the details of the above interview, it is concluded that it is important to spend time with colleagues, seniors and juniors so that we can understand them as human beings. Once we understand them genuinely, we will get to know what makes them take certain organizational/institutional decisions. Let's keep empathy and active listening in mind, when we communicate. There is ample research evidence that supports that a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent and certainly one of the most potent factors in bringing about change and learning. The ability to be accurately empathetic is something which can be developed by training. Therapists, parents and teachers can help become empathic.

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