



Building Rapport

I've recently subscribed to a great blog I found through Twitter. The Farnam Street blog describes itself as being "about the pursuit of worldly wisdom by trying to master the best of what other people have already figured out." Sensible idea – why reinvent the wheel?

I was struck by a recent article by Shane Parrish called *Ten Techniques for Building Quick Rapport With Anyone*¹. He was reviewing a book by Robin Dreeke called *It's Not All About Me*². As a person who struggles with listening skills and has a natural tendency to think that I have the best ideas (I am working hard on overcoming these flaws, as discussed in previous columns!), the title immediately resonated with me.

Robin Drake is the lead instructor at the FBI's 'Counterintelligence Training Center' in behavioural and interpersonal skills training. His book is about how to master the skills of communication, and draws on research into social and evolutionary psychology, overlaid with wisdom gained from his years of field work.

The book outlines 10 techniques for building rapport with another person:

1. Establishing Artificial Time Constraints
2. Accommodating Non-verbals
3. Slower Rate of Speech
4. Sympathy or Assistance Theme
5. Ego Suspension
6. Validate Others
7. Ask ... How? When? Why?
8. Connect with Quid Pro Quo
9. Gift Giving
10. Manage Expectations

Whilst all of the tips are valuable, I want to focus on just two of these that really ring true for me.

EGO SUSPENSION

The blog says:

"This may be the most rewarding and most difficult of all of Robin's techniques.

Suspending your ego is nothing more complex than putting other individuals' wants, needs, and perceptions of reality ahead of your own. Most times, when two individuals engage in a conversation, each patiently waits for the other person to be done with whatever story he or she is telling. Then, the other person tells his or her own story, usually on a related topic and often times in an attempt to have a better and more interesting story. Individuals practising good ego suspension would continue to encourage the other individual to talk about his or her story, neglecting their own need to share what they think is a great story."

I don't know about you, but I have definitely been guilty of this one. My natural comfort zone is talking about myself. (And we all know how boring those people are who only talk about themselves!)

Behaving that way (thinking only about what I want to say or chomping at the bit to put across my point of view) meant that I



was having shallow and unsatisfying conversations. I have to remind myself to actively listen and concentrate on what the other person is saying, and ensure I ask lots of open questions. I thought that this was something I was doing for the other person. I didn't expect that it would also mean that I enjoy the interaction more. But guess what happens when I remember to do this? I have much better, more rewarding, deeper level conversations.

VALIDATE OTHERS

The blog says:

There are many types of validation. Robin identifies three of them.

- **Listening**
This is the simplest and one of the most effective. Just listening to someone can produce amazing results. Where we run into problems is keeping our own thoughts, ideas, and stories out of the conversation. True validation coupled with ego suspension means that you have no story to offer, that you are there simply to hear theirs. And there is another benefit. When the focus is on the other person and we're not anxious to tell our own story, we also tend to remember the details. We're mindful.
- **Thoughtfulness**
... few people naturally use this to its fullest potential, and, most of the time, we don't realise when it is being used; all we know is we really like the person who gives it. Demonstrating thoughtfulness in words and actions with everyone in our lives is a simple and effective way to improve our relationships.
- **Validate Thoughts and Opinions**
This technique is quite difficult because of "our innate need to correct others and the difficulty we have suppressing our own egos." But if you remember that we like people who are like us, you'll immediately grasp the power of validating thoughts and opinions of others. The best way to get someone to do what you want them to do is to have them come up with the idea. The best way to have them come up with your idea is, no surprise, to honestly understand the other person's point of view and then build upon that base with your ideas.

The best sales people and customer service people I have worked with have these skills. They listen, provide thoughtful input and respect their client's opinions. Then they design a solution that is tailored to the client and meets their needs – and guess what? The client loves it and picks them out of the 'beauty parade', or they

retain that disgruntled customer that had been getting really poor service and was about to leave.

I've seen many business professionals who have difficulty in suppressing their own egos. In my observation, the smarter the person, the harder it is for them to do this as they KNOW that they are the smartest and have the best ideas. However we need to suspend our egos and listen. Then we need to act on what we've heard.

In my opinion, mastering this technique is a necessary prerequisite to the actuary

being seen as a valued business adviser, rather than a compliance person who puts roadblocks in the way of the business.

You can read about all 10 tips on the blog, or better still, buy the book if you want a detailed explanation. If these tips are good enough for the US secret service, they're good enough for actuaries I reckon!

As always I'd love to hear your views on this or any of the other columns I've written. What has your experience been with ego suspension and active listening? Does it work?

Thanks to those who have taken the time to email me – we do appreciate your feedback. **A**

¹ <http://www.farnamstreetblog.com/2013/07/ten-techniques-for-building-quick-rapport-with-anyone/>

² You can buy Robin Dreeke's *It's Not All About Me* for \$5-8 here: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/057809665X/farnamstreet-20>

Student Column

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Developing the Next Generation of Actuaries

To be honest, I came to study actuarial science with very little idea of what this profession actually entails.

Well, apart from those stereotypical descriptions of an actuary that were often passed around in high school.

After one and a half years of studies, my image of what an actuary will do on a day-to-day basis is still very sketchy and I daresay that many of my peers are none the wiser. To me, this lack of information is a barrier restricting the young talents that could potentially flow into our industry. I believe that the development of the next generation of actuaries should start not in their first year of university, but even before that – during their high school years.

Firstly, I want to give you a bit of background on how I chose to be an actuary. Nearing my university application deadlines, I still had no idea what exactly I wanted to pursue, career-wise. Up until then, my interaction with actuarial science was almost non-existent. The first time I even heard the word 'actuary' was three years ago, when my high school mathematics teacher mentioned it as her daughter's job at PricewaterhouseCoopers.

All of her actuarial assignments eventually ended up as my teacher's scrap paper, which were used by kids like me. I still remember us trying to decipher all the symbols and equations for fun, but we never considered it as a career path seriously. Truth is, very few high school students, or even university students for that matter, realise the story behind the math.

In the end it was pretty much a leap of faith on my behalf, but it was one that I do not regret (yet!). I would say I am lucky that, given how little I knew about my own course, I came to enjoy what I have learnt under the guidance of incredibly dedicated lecturers. In a recent course on financial mathematics, I gained a newfound respect for Excel, seeing as all I thought it could do before was making shopping lists. Not to sound too childish to the experienced actuaries out there, who have long learnt the power of Excel, but it was very fun for me to discover all the cool commands that went into modelling a mortgage plan. I'm sure I'm just scratching the surface. With Excel. And all modelling.

However, I have also met many people who wanted to be an actuary but didn't know much about it and hated it. I believe that the stereotypical image of an actuary that permeates the playgrounds these days deters many potential newcomers that have the right talent. I think we have all heard these, whether they are jokes or not, that actuaries "sit at a desk and do boring math all day" or that it is "so hard that you'll have no social life".

Actuarial courses themselves have long had a reputation for a high dropout rate; it is easy to attribute this to its difficulty, but in reality many people simply leave because they came in not knowing much, found out a bit and realised it's just not for them.

Don't get me wrong, the course itself is indeed very challenging, but that can be said about many other professions, such as law. Yet, unlike law, the general population's understanding of what a lawyer does is far better than their understanding of what an actuary does. I once had a conversation with my local bank manager who was confident that actuaries are a type of accountant. This goes to show how little people understand our profession as a whole.

I believe that if we, as an industry, can be more vocal and educate people – from boardroom to bassinet – on what an actuary actually is and does, we can attract more of the right talent and less of those who are better suited elsewhere. This is why I really appreciate the talks that the Institute conducts in high schools and I believe we should have more presence among high school students. I think it is also great that many firms have programs that give new students a taste of what it is like working in the actuarial industry.

I have recently attended a development program in the workplace and it really opened my eyes on what an actuary does (luckily it wasn't number crunching all day)!

Many of my friends never considered becoming an actuary purely due to some of the negative connotations surrounding it, all of which I have realised could not have been more wrong. Actuaries are far, far from the people who stare at your feet when talking to you.

The world needs to know that. **A**