

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



Building Rapport ▶ 1/06/11

A grave mismatch of styles

Marlena, an experienced entertainment executive, was definitely not getting the results she wanted. She'd been put in charge of a talented group of animators, but, although she was personable and energetic, she couldn't seem to build relationships with them. They weren't merely avoiding her, they were going around her to her boss and complaining about her loudly.

The situation crystallized for me one day on our way to a conference room. Walking toward us was a bearded man wearing a beret and a scarf. He had the slightly awkward gait and downward gaze of the powerfully introverted.

Marlena stopped and introduced me to him. I watched as she tried to make small talk with the guy who was one of the animators she'd told me about. In response to her friendly, open-ended questions, he replied curtly. The exchange was uncomfortable at best.

When Marlena and I were finally behind closed doors, she said with exasperation, "See that! That's typical of how they freeze me out. How am I ever going to work with these guys?"

I felt the answer to her question would be found in the arena of style. The animator I'd met in the hallway was slow and thoughtful; Marlena was fast and action-oriented. The animator seemed to live in a world of ideas and thoughts; Marlena lived in a world of relationships and talk. They couldn't have been more different.

Matching styles means flexing yours

For the next several sessions, Marlena and I worked on a technique called "matching." Matching is a conscious flexing of your style in order to establish rapport with someone whose style is different from yours.

To illustrate the concept, I told Marlena that when I first worked with senior executives, I could see that many of them were more results-driven and less relationship-oriented than I. To be perceived as credible, I felt I had to curb my natural instinct to chat and instead move almost immediately to business.



But skipping chat felt contrary to every rule of relationship building I'd learned since I was young. Excluding the niceties that, to me, helped establish rapport, made my nerves scream. But I quickly learned that to establish rapport with certain people, I had to adopt their style. If chat wasn't their style, I engaged in it at my own risk.

Marlena understandably assumed that her well-developed people skills would triumph in the end. They always had so far. She had never thought of matching.

She asked where to start. A simple place to start, I told her, is pace. I asked her to begin to slow herself down in order to match her animators. Slow down what, she wanted to know. "Everything," I answered. "How fast you talk. How fast you walk. How fast you listen. If you share a meal, eat at their pace, not yours."

In short order she became aware that she was interrupting the animators, speaking for them, finishing their sentences and feeling impatient during her interchanges with them. She even noticed her voice was significantly louder than theirs. "Oh my gosh, Tom, these guys are beyond slow. I'm faster than they are when I'm asleep! There's no way I can ratchet down to where they live," she bemoaned.

When I asked why not, she told me the gap just felt too big to bridge. In response I offered her this story about matching.

Creating heart-deep rapport

As first-year drama students at The Juilliard School, we began each day with a movement class. One day, our teacher asked us to pick partners for a mirror exercise to be done in complete silence. She told us to decide who would be the leader and who would be the mirrorer. The point was for the leader to move in space and have the mirrorer follow as seamlessly as possible. After ten minutes, she had us switch roles.

Inevitably, each leader at some point did some jerky, unpredictable movement that couldn't be mirrored. It was an irresistible little power play. I was aware that when I was the follower, I felt slightly anxious, waiting for my leader to pull some trick on me. I much preferred being the leader.

Ten minutes after that, our teacher told us to do the exercise one more time, but this time there would be no leader. "When I watch you and your partner, I shouldn't be able to tell who's initiating the movement," she told us.



Several minutes into that round, my eyes began watering because I wasn't even blinking. I experienced a calming loss of self as my partner and I wordlessly moved our bodies in absolute synchronicity. There was no trickery this time, only working together.

After ten minutes or so, our teacher quietly said, "Take your partner's wrist and feel each other's pulses." To my wonder, my heart and my partner's were beating in exactly the same rhythm even though we were different heights and weight and gender. Every other pair in the room had the same experience.

Don't judge styles that are foreign to you

The lessons I've always carried from that exercise are about possibility and surrender. First, I fervently believe it's possible to match anyone, no matter how different they are. Second, to achieve that matching, I have stop trying to be the leader, thinking the other person ought to adapt to my style. Rather, I need to surrender any sense that my style is "right" and be willing to blend with the other person. I have to trust that I'm not losing myself but that I'm building rapport.

I also need to surrender any judgment I have about the other person's style. I can't label the other person's style as "difficult" or "bad" or "tough," no matter how foreign it feels to me.

Marlena struggled to accept her animators' introverted style. She felt she'd succeeded in her career largely because of her outgoing, engaging personality. Understandably, she was reluctant to surrender her style.

But, over time, she began to match more effectively. And relationships began to thaw. One suggestion she found particularly helpful was to simply try to observe the other person's breath and match it.

If someone in your life feels like a mismatch, don't try to be "right;" try to match them. Appearing more like the other person increases the odds that what she'll see in you is *The Look & Sound of Leadership*[™].

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