

CHAPTER THREE Rapport building

The Seven Steps of Effective Executive Coaching

THREE Rapport building

Introduction

Have you ever noticed how some people are so much easier to talk to than others? Maybe you are one of those people yourself and that is what sparked your interest in developing your executive coaching capabilities. But is this something which is just innate or can it be developed?

The good news is that this is the fundamental building block of all human interactions and a skill which we all naturally have to some extent. True, some people are better at it than others but as a skill it is something which we can build upon and practise. So, would it be useful to an executive coach to be able to easily and confidently talk to others and to give others the ease and confidence to talk to them? Absolutely, without this ability the coaching relationship will flounder at the first hurdle. In fact, it may not go beyond the initial 'get to know' each other meeting.

Experienced executive coaches are typically warm, attentive, and easy to talk and relate to. These executive coaches have honed their skills so that they can work with their clients to develop a good rapport.

In developing their rapport skills, executive coaches need to be able to understand:

- What is rapport?
- How is rapport created?
- How to achieve greater rapport

What is rapport?

Rapport is the essence of close cooperation in communication between people. It is often described as a feeling of warmth and trust leading to a sense of relatedness and connection. Rapport is an interactive phenomenon that cannot be created by one person alone. It requires the cooperation of both parties and forms the foundation of any coaching conversation.

THREE Rapport building

In seeking to understand what rapport is, it is useful to think about a situation where rapport was missing. As you reflect upon that now, what was it about that interaction that led you to know that there was no rapport? Perhaps the other person was using words that were unfamiliar, technical language or acronyms specific to a particular workplace or perhaps they were wearing very different clothes. Maybe they were talking very quickly and loudly, and you prefer to speak slowly and quietly. You might even have felt a chill on meeting them. These elements and others, which we will explore next, all impact on rapport.

How is rapport created?

It is a basic human characteristic to like people who are like us. We tend to show our affiliations with others by becoming similar to them. This can be on a highly visible and conscious level such as the shared clothing styles of a gang or an organization or on a more unconscious level of the shared gestures of a couple in love. In fact scientists found that some intense dislikes such as, for example, a spider phobia may be caused because the object of fear is so different in appearance from us.

The key elements in building rapport are:

- physical appearance
- body language and gestures
- voice qualities
- language/words

Physical appearance

The closer we resemble each other the greater the feeling of comfort that is generated. Actual physical resemblance is often cited as an important factor in choosing a life partner. Obviously, in an executive coaching relationship we are not seeking such a close connection but we do want to lessen any barriers to effective communication. This means that the executive coach needs to consider such elements as, for example, style of dress.

It seems that observation of external superficial similarities generates a subconscious tendency to conclude that the other person is indeed 'like us'. This, in turn, leads to an increase of trust and hence a more solid foundation for conversation.

For an executive coach working in the business world it is therefore important to pay attention to the styles and symbols adopted by poten-

The Seven Steps of Effective Executive Coaching

tial clients. What is the dress code? Will your disposable pen be appropriate? On one level these considerations may seem frivolous but the executive's decision about whether or not to use your service will depend on the signals you send about your ability to operate at his level.

Body language

One of the key indicators of good rapport between people is their use of shared posture and gestures. Just watch any couple in love. Their gestures and movements match each other. It is almost like a dance: one leans forward, then the other; one brushes back hair, so does the other.

These are very obvious signs, but rapport can be built more subtly as well through such things as breathing or even blinking at the same pace. For executive coaches it is useful to build observational skills so that they notice not only the more obvious elements of body language but also the subtleties.

A note of caution – be wary of attributing meaning to movements and gestures. We cannot be certain of the meaning – all sorts of factors including cultural differences will influence meaning – but we can notice changes and hence the impact we are having on our clients. Successful executive coaches will deliberately seek to enhance rapport by matching some elements of body language. For example, by adopting a more relaxed posture than normal if the client is relaxing back into the chair.

Voice qualities

Matching of the tone, speed and timbre of a voice are also indicators of a greater rapport between executive coach and client. This has even greater importance when talking on the telephone where other key elements of rapport such as body posture cannot be observed.

As an example of how an executive coach can use a combination of voice and body language matching, consider this recent session with one of our clients:

.....

CASE STUDY: 'ROAD RAGE'

Sam came to the session following a rather lengthy and frustrating board meeting. To reach our offices he had had to drive through rush hour traffic in a thunderstorm. When he arrived he was out of breath, speaking quickly and loudly and venting his anger about fellow board members, traffic and a taxi driver who had pulled out in

THREE Rapport building

front of him. He did not sit down and was pacing around the room. Sabine also remained standing and kept a high energy level in her voice by speaking a little more quickly and loudly than normal when she greeted him. Although she was not sharing his anger she was matching him and created rapport by starting the session at the same energy level as Sam, whilst standing.

.....

In the above example rapport was achieved quickly. An alternative approach where a coach could try to calm the client down by speaking slowly and softly whilst already sitting in a chair would be likely to cause dissonance and create unnecessary barriers for the start of the session.

Language/words

Although words account for only 7% of any human communication, matching the use of language and key words are important elements in deepening rapport. We probably notice this most when we get it wrong. In a work context this might result in feelings of isolation and lack of rapport when first joining a company where everyone else is using acronyms which seem like a stream of gibberish to you.

For an executive coach it is important to listen to the words that your client uses and also the way in which they use language. For example, if they say they are feeling low make sure you use the same phrase with them. If you ask them why they are sad (when low means lacking in energy to them) then you are not likely to create the optimum level of rapport.

A client's use of key words and phrases can also indicate their preferences for learning and storing information – visual, auditory or kinaesthetic (feelings – physical and emotional), olfactory and gustatory. By understanding the preferred way of making sense of the world you can then shape your communication style so that it has maximum impact. If the client tends to say things that indicate a visual preference (e.g. “I can picture that” or “I am a bit hazy about this”) then you can use visual language with them. You may, if you are a person with a preference for a visual representation system, use the phrase “Is that clear?” when checking for understanding. Whereas for a client with a kinaesthetic preference you may ask “Have you got a handle on that?”

It is also important to think about the appropriateness of the language in which the coaching is delivered. For example, in international businesses it is common to use English as the main working language and

The Seven Steps of Effective Executive Coaching

clients would be used to this. However, in smaller national German companies this would not be the case and the use of English words and phrases interspersed with the native language would not be welcomed and may even be regarded as bad manners.

How to achieve greater rapport

Rapport can be increased or more easily developed by matching any of the elements described above. In the beginning this may be challenging for a new executive coach as trying to adapt to another's style can seem awkward and requires flexibility. Begin by noticing where the client differs from you. Does he have a different speed of speaking? A different body posture? A frequently used sweeping gesture?

Once you have identified these differences you can shift your behaviour towards his style. However, it is important to do this subtly. To be too overt may be seen as alienating and offensive, and many people are aware of the technique which is commonly part of communication training, especially for those with a sales background.

The key is to be similar rather than identical: you are not trying to be an exact mimic. For example, a male executive coach and a female client are likely to have different vocal ranges. The aim is for the male executive coach to raise the tone slightly not to speak in falsetto!

As an executive coach with an understanding of rapport you also bear a professional and ethical responsibility in your use of techniques to increase rapport and to determine the appropriate level. Too cosy and comfortable a relationship can lead to misunderstandings and a breakdown of the working relationship.

Before increasing rapport with the client it is important to consider why you are doing this. What is your intended outcome? For example, it is important to deepen rapport at the first meeting with a new client so that the relationship begins to be established. It is also important to achieve good rapport at the start of each session. However, it is equally important to notice when to decrease rapport. Typically this will be towards the end of a session when you are preparing to take your leave of the client. It may also be important if the client appears to be getting too emotionally close to you.

THREE Rapport building

Within an executive coaching relationship it is important that there is a good working level of rapport. To illustrate this we have represented the rapport framework for executive coaching in the Figure below and provide an explanation of the five stages that may overlap.

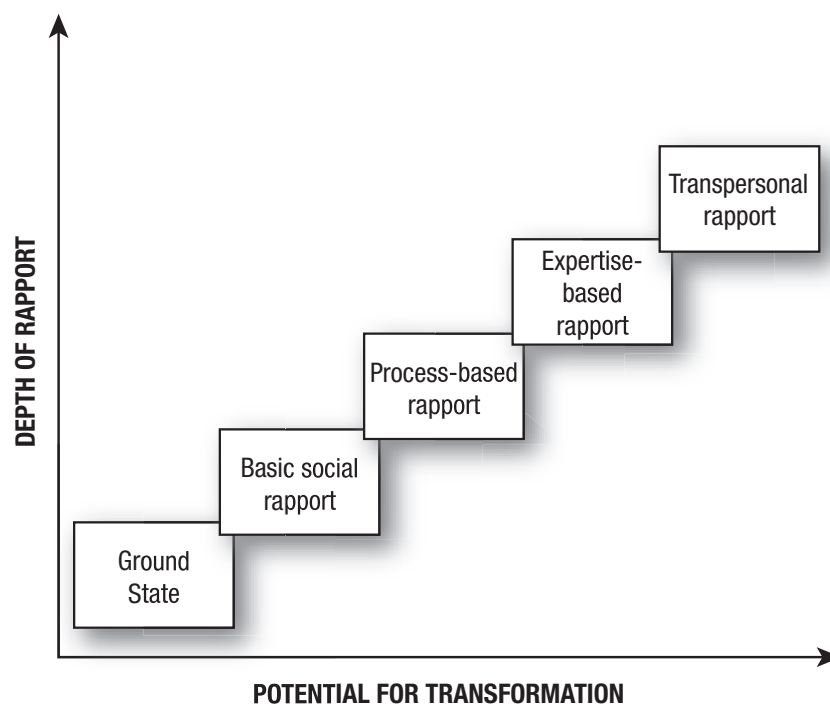
The five rapport stages in executive coaching

Figure 3: Rapport stages in executive coaching

Source: Adapted from M.Schmidt-Tanger (1999), Veränderungscoaching Kompetent verändern, Junfermann

1. Ground state

This describes the position where no rapport exists between the executive coach and his client. This is typically the state when there is no relationship between the two individuals or where there has been a breakdown of the relationship. It is a state which does not provide a foundation for entering or continuing a working relationship between an executive coach and a client.

The Seven Steps of Effective Executive Coaching

2. Basic social rapport

This type of rapport is marked by the conventions and rules of basic social politeness. Observing an executive coach and client interacting in this way it looks like a cultivated conversation where the client politely answers the questions of the executive coach. Typically this type of rapport is found in the early stages of a 'get-to-know-each-other' meeting where the executive and the executive coach meet for the first time or at the beginning of a coaching session. If the executive does not feel secure he is not likely to wish to leave this state which acts as a 'safe house'. In addition, executive coaches who are risk averse may also have no desire to leave this state. However, the ability to leave this stage distinguishes an experienced executive coach from a new executive coach.

3. Process-based rapport

This level of rapport is marked by an agreement to the general principles of the coaching process. The executive coach is viewed by the client as an expert in coaching methods. Rapport is gained via respect for the methods and techniques of executive coaching rather than the individual coach.

4. Expertise-based rapport

At this stage the client completely trusts his executive coach. Deep rapport exists between them as the client not only trusts the process but he also trusts and respects the executive coach as an individual. In this position the executive takes himself to a state where change can take place.

5. Transpersonal rapport

Achieving this type of rapport is an advanced skill. It can best be described as a situation where $1+1 = 3$. In other words, the two partners in the coaching relationship act as one – akin to the way in which a champion dancing pair create a winning performance when together but are merely technical experts when dancing with alternative partners.

Something outside of the relationship carries it forward and enables the coaching experience to become transformational. The stronger the presence of this third element the more likely the coaching is to have a sustainable impact. Experienced coaches can offer this, however, it is ultimately the responsibility of the client to determine how much they are prepared to trust in the process.

THREE Rapport building

The greater the depth of rapport the greater the potential for transformation and results.

SUMMARY: RAPPORT BUILDING

The ability to develop rapport with the coaching client is fundamental to the success of an executive coaching relationship.

Rapport is developed through a combination of matching:

- physical appearance
- body language and gestures
- voice qualities
- language

It is also enhanced by mutual trust and respect, and shared aims and outcomes for the executive coaching programme.

Coaches need to be able to vary the level of rapport appropriate to the needs of the client and the stage of the coaching process. There are five rapport stages in executive coaching:

1. Ground state
2. Basic social rapport
3. Process based-rapport
4. Expertise-based rapport
5. Transpersonal rapport

The greater the depth of rapport the greater the potential for transformation and real results.

At all times rapport building skills should be used with integrity. Research demonstrates that people can intuitively clearly distinguish between honest rapport and an artificial 'act'.