

## TALKING IN THE DARK



Technology helps us plug in, but are we really connecting? Rather than a machine, rapport requires listening that respects each person's thinking.

The lights went out just as Alex was leaving a meeting in his Manhattan office. Telephones and cell phones went down; e-mail went down. Unable to connect to technological toys and unable to get home to Connecticut, Alex hooked up with a friend. "We went bar-hopping," he reports. "We went to an impromptu concert in Washington Square; we laughed, we talked. Everyone was friendly. It was a great night."

Alex was not alone during the blackout of August 14. Pundits called the calm cooperation that prevailed in the affected areas "inspiring." Indeed, on CBS's "Face the Nation" the following Sunday, Jennifer Granholm, governor of Michigan, observed: "We had so many volunteers and donations, so many people coming together and really realizing, I think, for 50 hours, what's more important than what is plugged into a wall is that we connect with one another."

Technology facilitates certain kinds of connection. Let's say you are giving an important proposal to a customer. Before 1973, you mailed it and waited about two days for the customer to get it; then FedEx came on the scene, and your customer got the proposal the next day. A decade later, the fax revolution hit; the lag time between transmission and reception was reduced to minutes. Now, of course, communication is instantaneous via e-mail or shared files using Internet technology.

Sure, we're "plugging in." But are we connecting? Or are we so caught up in the flood of information that we're missing something simple, but essential?

One area in which technology fails miserably is rapport. The basic currency of human connection, rapport is a routine part of Sales Theory 101: before conducting any business - phone call, meeting, presentation, performance review - establish rapport. Whether we're selling a product or service, or an idea, or even ourselves, we were taught to spend perhaps 20% of the time building rapport, 70% giving our pitch, and then about 10% getting feedback. Better models suggest that the first 30-40% of a conversation be devoted to rapport, then 30-40% giving the pitch, and the last 20% in feedback.

Best of all, however, is a conversation that isn't a straight line, but a sphere with three levels. On the outer ring, "pitch" and feedback run in a continuous give-and-take. Supporting that ring is another: rapport. And at the center of it all is something we call: confident listening.

Traditional rapport-building techniques fall short because the emphasis is on the wrong pronoun. It's all about making sure that you are comfortable with *me*. So I ask

about the family; talk about last night's sports event, tell a joke to demonstrate that I'm "just one of the guys."

Far more powerful is a mode of listening that allows the other person to feel comfortable and confident in him. How do we practice "confident listening"?

First, remember that each person brings to every conversation his or her set of expectations, perceptions, perspectives. Too often we assume that if someone disagrees with us, they must be stupid, uninformed or insulting - or any of a number of uncomfortable adjectives. We take disagreements personally. Since what we think is "real" to us, surely the other person must see it our way. Why are they being so stubborn? There we are in the middle of a conversation, distracted by confusion, frustration, resentment.

The simple fact is that the other person is just operating from a different viewpoint, a different way of looking at things, a different set of thoughts that look absolutely real to her. Even if her words sound like a personal attack, the root of the problem is an ordinary fact of life: we are all doing the best that we can to communicate from perspective shaped by what looks real to us, and uniquely to us.

Consider Matt, the nephew of a colleague. During his freshman year, a woman in Matt's dorm suffered a panic attack. No one could calm her but Matt. How did he do it? "First, I agreed with her," he explains. In other words, Matt acknowledged the fears that looked real to her. He resisted the temptation to try to make the other person see things more rationally. Thus, he didn't make her feel strange or judged. He wasn't being fake; he respected the fact that her thoughts were real to her at that moment, limiting her possible behaviors. Furthermore, unlike a mother who unintentionally escalates a tantrum by matching the frustration of a truculent child, Matt stepped back from upset thoughts. He chose to connect from compassion. Matt established rapport.

Conversely, Shirley dealt with a breakdown in rapport. Shaken after a difficult conversation with her largest customer, she told us she was angry because he had complained about her team. They were all working so hard; how could he be so unfair? We talked about what was going on for that customer. What pressure was his boss putting on him; what were his customers demanding; what was making him feel insecure? Shirley stepped into her customer's shoes and looked at the possible influences on his mood - on the factors shaping his "reality." Without knowing the specifics of whatever was going on for him, merely by staying calm and curious, she felt compassion for his insecurity. And she realized that she could re-establish connection just by letting the customer sense that she was listening with a desire to understand.

To develop this kind of listening skill, adapt the "Left-Column Conversation" exercise described in Peter Senge's *Fifth Discipline*.

- Draw a vertical line down the center of a piece of paper.
- Recall a recent difficult conversation. On the right side of the paper, write down everything that was said -- by you, and by the other person.
- Next, on the left side, write down all the things you thought but didn't say. Notice how busy your brain was while the other person was talking. Were your thoughts so loud that they interfered with your ability to listen to what was actually being said?

- Finally, review what you wrote in the left-hand column. How much of your mental dialogue reflected assumptions - about what the other person was thinking, about her motives, intentions, expectations? How much evidence did you really have to support your assumptions?

The road to hell in communications is paved not with good intentions, but with assumptions that set up us/them, right/wrong interactions. When you catch yourself making an assumption, switch to a stance of curiosity. "How interesting that she would say that. I wonder what she sees or feels that I don't?"

Graceful managers know that the key to powerful connections is to attend to one's own mental well-being. Focus on feelings of kindness and compassion. See the other person not as an adversary, nor as an obstacle; not as a problem, nor as the person giving orders. But as a human being, trying to do the best she can, trying to overcome insecurities - just as we all are. Based on how reality looks to us, we see no other choice than the one we make. Abraham Lincoln was once accused of being two-faced. "If I had two faces," he drolly asked, "would I be wearing this one?" Reflect on your most recent mistake. If you could have seen a better choice, wouldn't you have acted differently?

When we presume evil intent, we easily succumb to our negative reactions. That narrows our view of possible solutions and resolutions. We expand our options as we become curious about why someone took certain actions, or made certain statements.

Acknowledging that everyone is doing the best he can does not mean we condone bad behavior. Nor do we become a doormat. But seeing how thought leads to behavior helps us keep our own balance. And that gives us responsiveness in the moment - the key to "confident listening."

Warm feelings are contagious; it's hard to remain upset very long when someone else is calm. Our mental resilience helps the other person feel secure. The more secure he is, the more his own insight is accessible, and the easier it becomes to resolve even the thorniest issue. Whatever is going on with the other person, we must find even the tiniest spot in ourselves that respects his thinking. That commits us to true rapport, and gives others the space they need to have a new thought.

For better relationships, remember these three steps to "confident listening:"

1. Recognize that we're all doing the best we can, based on different realities.
2. Instead of assuming expectations or intent, be curious in the face of defensive or offensive behavior. By asking the most obvious questions that get to the heart of what the person is communicating, clarity will emerge and, occasionally, new insight.
3. Be patient, kind and compassionate *to yourself*. The calmer you are, the easier it is to hear what the other person really means. Because your own head is not cluttered with old answers.

With rapport grounded in well-being, listening becomes a dance of confidence. Even in the dark.

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