

Rapport

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

We all know that the first few minutes when meeting a new person or client are critical to the relationship. Malcolm Gladwell referred to the "thin slices" of meaning we interpret subconsciously when meeting someone new. His contention is that a relationship is basically established after just a few seconds, so it is important to know what to do and what to avoid doing in this critical period.

While we know the vital importance of body language and tone of voice, few of us have received any formal training on what things to do and to avoid to maximize the potential for good rapport and trust. The overarching objective is to let your natural personality and essence shine through as well as be sincerely interested in learning the qualities of the other person. This means making sure all the signals you send are congruent with your true nature and being alert for the full range of signals being sent by the other person.

While there are entire books on this topic, I wanted to share six things to do and six things to avoid from my own experience and background. Note these items are somewhat mechanical in nature. They are not intended to replace the good judgment in any instance but are offered as tips that can help in most cases.

Things to do:

1. **Be yourself.** Trying to force yourself into a mold that is not your natural state will not translate well. Regardless of your effort, you will unwittingly send ambiguous signals that will subconsciously be perceived as you trying too hard to establish rapport.
2. **Shake hands.** In most cultures, the hand shake is the touch ritual that conveys major content about both individuals. Each person is sending and receiving signals on several different levels in the few moments it takes to shake hands. Learn how to do it right, and do it with the right attitude. The handshake should project what is in your heart. Note, there are many myths about handshakes. For

example, a "firm" handshake has historically been thought to send a signal of competence and power. If the firmness is amplified to a bone-crushing clamp, it actually sends a signal that the crusher is insecure, because why else would someone crush a hand unless he thought it was necessary to appear powerful.

3. **Make good eye contact.** We communicate at many levels with our eyes. It is important to really see the other person in a natural and pleasing way. Here is a tip about eye contact while shaking hands. Try to see through the eyes into the soul of the person you are meeting. Inside the other person's head is a wonderland of possibilities, and the window to that information is first through the eyes.
4. **Smile** - Make sure it is appropriate to smile (although sometimes a somber expression is more appropriate - like at a funeral). The caveat here is that the smile must be genuine, not phony. Learn to smile from the eyes by picturing an oval from your eyebrows to your lips. Show your teeth, if they are in good shape. This really helps the warmth of a smile. Be sure to maintain eye contact while you are smiling. The peripheral vision of the other person will allow him or her to appreciate the smile. Consider the duration of the smile, because too short or too long of a smile can send mixed signals.
5. **Give a genuine greeting** - Most people say "how are you" or "nice to meet you." Those greetings are not bad, but they do pass over an opportunity to show real enthusiasm for meeting the other person. Reason: these greetings are perfunctory and overused. They accomplish the greeting mechanically, but they do not establish a high emotional engagement. You might try a variant like "I am excited to meet you" or "how wonderful to meet you." Be careful to not get sappy: see caveat number five below.
6. **Ask the other person a question** - The typical and easiest thing to do is say "tell me about yourself," but you only would use that if there was adequate time for the individual to take you from grade school to the rest home. A better approach is to consider the environment around the person. There will be a clue as to what the other person might be experiencing at that moment. If you link in to the emotion with a question that draws out the other person, you have established dialog that is constructive. For example, if you meet a person in a hotel lobby who is dragging two suitcases with his left hand, you might say while shaking the right hand, "have you been travelling all day?" or "can I help you with one of your bags?"

Doing these six things will set you up for a good first impression provided they are consistent with the situation and your persona, but there are extensions of these same six things that should be avoided or you may blow the opportunity.

Things to avoid:

1. **Do not work too hard** - other people will instantly recognize at a gut level if you are putting on an act to impress them. If your natural tendency is to be a slap happy kind of salesman when meeting people, try to turn down the volume on that part while maintaining a cheerful nature.
2. **One handed shakes only** - the two handed shake, known as the "politician's handshake," is too invasive for a first meeting. It will cause the other person to emotionally retreat as a defense mechanism. It gives the impression that you are trying to reel in a big fish. Speaking of fish, also avoid the dead fish handshake. A firmly-flexed vertical hand with medium modulation is the best approach. Be sensitive to the fact that some people avoid handshakes due to physical reasons and do not force the issue or embarrass the person. Other than the handshake, there should be absolutely *no touching* of any other part of the body. This means, do not grab the elbow as you walk toward the elevator, do not put your hand on or playfully punch the shoulder of the other person, even if he is a "good guy." Obviously, stay away from touching the legs or knees of any other person when sitting.
3. **Avoid too much eye contact** - Anything over 70% of eye contact during the first few minutes will cause great anxiety in the other person. A fixed gaze will send signals that are ambiguous at best and threatening at worst. The best approach is to lock eyes for a few seconds, then move your gaze on something else, perhaps a lapel pin or name tag, then return eye contact for a few seconds more. If you are a male meeting a female, avoid giving the up and down "checking her out" pattern, as many women find that highly offensive. Another caveat with eye contact is to avoid looking around the room during the first moments of meeting another person. Make sure the person recognizes you are focused 100% on him or her, even if the timing is fleeting. For example, Bill Clinton is said to have a gift of focusing genuine attention on each person, even when he is going down a long line of people he will never see again. With the intense eye contact, he makes each person feel valued in just a split second.
4. **Do not smile as if you are holding back gas.** If you try to force a smile, it will look as phony as a bad toupee. If you have a problem warming up to a new person with a genuine smile, try envisioning the person as having a check for a million dollars in her purse that she is about to give you. In reality she may have things inside her head that could be worth much more than a million dollars to you. Consider that possibility and be genuinely happy to meet the person. It will show on your face.
5. **Do not go over the top with enthusiasm in your greeting** - The greeting must come straight from the heart to send the signal you want. Your greeting should not gush or be drawn out like an Academy Award performance like, "Oh darling,

how simply marvelous to meet you" - kissy kissy. You could make the other person want to vomit.

6. **Avoid talking about yourself** - Hold up on discussing your interests until cued by the other person. The natural tendency is to think in terms of this new person's relationship to your world. Try to reverse this logic and think about wanting to know more about his or her world so you can link in emotionally to the other person's thoughts. If you ask two or three questions of the other person, he or she will eventually ask a question about you. Try to keep the ratio of listening versus talking to roughly 70-30% with the weight of your attention on listening. The best conversationalists are the ones who do the least amount of talking.

By doing the six steps I have outlined while avoiding the extremes on the second list, you will have a good start to a new relationship. You will have planted the seeds of trust well. After that, you need to nurture the relationship continually to allow the seeds to grow to maturity.

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