

CALIBRATION AND REFRAMING AS RAPPORT BUILDING TOOLS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: *The paper approaches business communication as an instance of social intercourse built around multiple levels of negotiation that go deeper than the obvious economic aspect. In this context, concepts such as calibration and reframing are analysed as tools meant to adapt verbal and non-verbal interactions to a variety of interlocutors in order to establish a favourable context for communication, generically called ‘rapport’. Finally, the paper relies on the findings of research displayed in recent literature in order to approach the achievement, importance and benefits of building rapport on all business levels.*

KEY-WORDS: *business communication, framing, calibration, reframing, rapport, verbal cues, non-verbal cues.*

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1. CONCEPT CLARIFICATION: RAPPORT, REFRAMING, CALIBRATION

The dictionary definitions of ‘**rapport**’ vary from “a close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other’s feelings or ideas and communicate well” (*Oxford Languages*) or “a good understanding of someone and an ability to communicate well with them” (*Cambridge Dictionary*) to “a relationship characterize by agreement, mutual understanding, or empathy that makes communication possible or easy” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

In terms of synonymy, dictionaries include the word in the same semantic area with such concepts as *bond*, *affinity*, *empathy*, and *harmony*. It becomes obvious, therefore, that building rapport in any social context goes beyond establishing a common verbal language and enters the realm of what we call ‘emotional intelligence’, an individual’s capacity to create a favourable communication context from an emotional point of view.

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In other words, effective communication entails the establishment of common ground not only on the level of facts and ideas, but also on the basic and more subtle level of human emotions. As it known that every social interaction is a negotiation of culturally and socially determined identities, the common ground is achieved by harmonizing personal experiences (the mutual understanding the interlocutors' background, sharing meaningful aspects of their personal history, and empathizing with each other's responses to different events). In turn, this common ground will accommodate a genuine and effective interaction, both on personal, and professional level.

In the field of business, where relationships are operated by the mechanisms of trust and persuasion generically named 'rapport', being able to cultivate relations on a human level, whether with co-workers or with clients/customers, is considered the key of long-term success.

The concept of '**reframing**' should be discussed in relation with that of 'frame', introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman in his *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, published in 1974 and attempting to explain the complex way in which the individual's perception of the world and society is structured. To this purpose, the author resorts to a suggestive comparison, basically stating that the individual's interactions with reality and the significance attributed to them is structured by frames, which are culturally inherited forms of organization of experience and operate in a way similar to the frame of a painting that delineates an artistic representation of reality as a distinct, unique world.

Framing, therefore, is an experience – based, structuring perception, that sets the individuals on a position of maximum awareness of their own behavior and the others' reactions, confronting them with such concepts as standards, rules, and etiquette, all of crucial importance for social integration and assertion.

The field of business communication, as a specific instance of social interaction, is subjected to higher pressure in terms of framing, since such stakes as professional prestige, position in company hierarchy and financial incentive are involved.

Moreover, "in the age of globalization, where geographic borders have gradually lost their traditional separating rigidity, gaining an integrative rather than a separating meaning, cross – cultural communication abilities have become crucial for the survival and development of any company" (Dumbravă, 2010, p. 84).

In this context, the concept of 'reframing' relies on the assumption that "...all meaning is context dependent, and if you change the context or content, then you will change the meaning" (McPheat, 2017, p. 47). At this point, it becomes clear that the content and, implicitly, the outcome of business interactions depends on the interlocutors' capacity to adapt to a variety of social and cultural contexts to the benefit of mutual understanding and empathy by harmonizing behaviours, beliefs, perceptions, reactions and experiences.

Finally, 'calibration' is the mechanism that drives the feedback loop of communication, ensuring a continuous adjustment of discourses and body language based on the responses of the interlocutors. Basically, as business communication specialists point out, "calibration means learning to notice how the other person is

reacting to your attempts to build rapport” (McPheat, 2017, p. 43). To be more precise, calibration requires the ability to notice and interpret verbal and non-verbal communication cues, as well as to use them in a constructive way, in order to obtain the desired outcome in a specific business encounter.

2. BUILDING RAPPORT IN BUSINESS: IMPORTANCE, ACHIEVEMENT AND EFFECTS

2.1. Importance

As we have already shown, building rapport is a crucial stage in business communication, since it creates a positive context, in which the interlocutors relate on a level that goes deeper than facts and figures. Business communication expert Tony Robbins is of the opinion that such a context is beneficial for all the sides involved, in terms of:

- building mutual trust and understanding between two or more people;
- deep listening, meaningful conversations and fulfilling relationships;
- gaining leverage and influencing others, two tactics that are vital for sales and leadership. (<https://www.tonyrobbins.com/business/building-rapport-in-business>)

In the same context, Sean McPheat, leading management development specialist, states that rapport is a form of ‘unconscious sameness’, by virtue of which we instinctively take to people with whom we share certain characteristics, from posture and voice tone to beliefs and values. This is the reason why “rapport is the ultimate tool for producing results with other people and thus it is so vital for effective communication.” (<https://www.tonyrobbins.com/business/building-rapport-in-business>)

2.2. Achievement

In order to understand the complexity of the concept of sameness we should discuss it in connection with the process of framing. As we have shown in the previous section, each individual perceives reality by placing it within the frame of personal history and culturally inherited patterns of thought. Under these circumstances, framing is the equivalent of internal representation, a process in which people filter reality through personal experience, building unique models of the world.

When individual representations of the world are expressed in words, we are dealing with a second-degree representation, since language is just a reflection of our experience. Therefore, just as we endow our perceptions of reality with meaning based on our personal history, we use words in unique ways to translate that meaning into language. The immediate consequence of this twofold process is that each verbal discourse belongs to a unique, individual model of the world. A secondary, but crucial consequence is that this association is the source of what we generally call ‘misunderstanding’, which occurs when we project our model of the world onto someone else, since “we wrongly think that because we share the same language, we share the same experience” (McPheat, 2017, p.28).

2.2.1. Verbal and non-verbal clues in creating the ‘space of sameness’

In the context outlined above, building rapport as a space of sameness entails the capacity to detect the interlocutor’s model of the world by interpreting the verbal and non-verbal clues provided by the latter during the exchange. Communication experts are of the opinion that these clues are connected so deeply with the individual way of framing experience, that they are indicative of people’s predominant sensory channels (visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic) involved in building internal representation.

A. Interpretation of verbal clues

In terms of verbal clues, people that are predominantly **visual** will prefer using verbs such as see, look, view, show, appear, focus, reveal, imagine, as well as a series of associated phrases: it appears to me, catch a glimpse, clear cut, in light of, in view of, looks like, well defined.

On the other hand, people with an **auditory** representation system will use verbs such as hear, listen, sound, resonate, and phrases from the same semantic area: clearly expressed, describe in detail, loud and clear, manner of speaking, word for word, well informed.

Finally, individuals who favor the **kinaesthetic** channel in framing their experience of reality prefer to use such verbs as feel, touch, grasp, accompanied by associated phrases: hold on, get hold of, make contact, catch on, firm foundations, get in touch with, get the drift, start from scratch (McPheat, pp.31-33).

B. Interpretation of non-verbal clues

As far as non-verbal clues are concerned, they differentiate three classes of interlocutors as clearly as the verbal ones.

Thus, **visual** individuals are the ones who:

- stand or sit erect, paying attention to posture and appearance;
- often sit forward in their chairs;
- are fast talkers and use quick gestures;
- understand and explain better by means of pictures;
- have trouble remembering verbal instructions, unless accompanied by visual material;
- prefer visual feed-back.

People with an **auditory** representational system, apart from expressing themselves by means of vocabulary in the semantic area of sound, display the following non-verbal communication behaviour:

- learn by listening and memorize by sequences;
- are interested in hearing what the interlocutors have to say about a topic (auditory feedback);
- are easily distracted by sound;
- respond to certain sets of words and tone of voice;
- are very good at repeating back instructions.

Finally, the representatives of the kinaesthetic representational system can be easily recognized by the following features of their communication behaviour:

- slow moves and talk, as well as elaborate gestures;

- position closer to the interlocutor and preference for physical touching;
- memorizing based on doing and understand a certain process by ‘walking through’ it (cf. McPheat, pp. 34-36).

Given the above, the ability to achieve a high level of rapport in business is determined by two major factors:

1. Self-knowledge

In order to handle communication tools effectively and manage communication contexts to our advantage, we have to be aware of our own representational system(s) and our culturally inherited ways of framing experience. As a matter of fact, this awareness is the determining factor in any social interaction, since only by having full understanding and control of our own responses can we adjust them so as to harmonize with the interlocutors and gain their benevolence.

2. Good command of advanced communication tools

This refers to the ability to detect, understand and match the interlocutor’s non-verbal and verbal behaviour in order to elicit their positive response. This step largely relies on an **empathetic approach**, which basically means that “you take the time to really understand someone, you’re able to see the world from the other person’s perspective” (Tony Robbins).

2.2.2. The stages of building rapport through empathy. Matching and mirroring

In business communication, the empathetic approach is translated into a harmonization process generically called ‘matching’ or ‘mirroring’. In his book *Advanced Communication Skills*, business communication expert Sean McPheat explores the concept of matching the interlocutor’s behaviour during the verbal exchange in the following directions: representational system, body language, voice, the way in which they deal with information, and common experience (McPheat, 2017, pp. 40-43).

A. The interlocutor’s representational system

This type of harmonization involves detecting the type of interlocutor we are dealing with in a particular instance of business communication and adapting our non-verbal and verbal interactions to their representational systems (visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic).

Since representational systems are culturally determined, the capacity to match them calls for solid previous documentation about the interlocutors’ cultural background (the way in which their specific patterns of thought form particular representational systems). Every effort in this sense is worth making, since well-prepared negotiations or presentations can be seriously undermined by the wrong approach in terms of representation modes.

For instance, the kinaesthetic mode is successful with business partners coming from such cultural spaces as South-Eastern Europe, South America and the Middle East, where close physical contact and open display of emotions are generally accepted.

On the other hand, people from Western and Northern Europe, the US, and Asia prefer larger interpersonal space and a limited display of emotion. Consequently, the latter should be approached accordingly, as they may consider closeness as an invasion of personal space and touching as a sign of assault. The spoken discourse should also be based on knowledge of the way in which the interlocutors or the audience decode certain verbal clues, especially the sensitive ones related with race, gender, age or nationality.

B. The interlocutor's body language

By mirroring the interlocutor's body language (posture, facial expressions and gestures) we send positive signals on a subconscious level meant to create a climate of confidence and enhance the persuasive effect of our verbal discourse. The ability of mirroring relies on the advanced knowledge and command of our own body language, as well as on the awareness of its importance in establishing rapport. It is well known that the outcome of a business encounter, as well as of any social interaction, largely depends on the so-called 'first impression', the initial impact we make on the audience. This means that our interlocutors' opinion about us is formed in the first seconds of the encounter, long before the spoken discourse starts, based on such visual clues as clothing, posture and body language.

Therefore, communication specialists agree that the first step towards getting through to the audience is to notice our own body language and adjust it according to each context and desired outcome.

For instance, to improve connection with the visual type of interlocutor, it is important to maintain **eye contact** as a sign of confidence and honesty from the position of speaker, and of engagement and interest from the position of the listener. Alternatively, brief or fragmented eye contact can suggest insecurity or distraction, whereas prolonged gazes may be unsettling or even intimidating.

Although some specialists claim that the right proportion of eye contact and looking away is 80/20 rule (Tony Robbins), this aspect of non-verbal communication should also be approached from the cultural perspective, since there are major differences in the degree of acceptance. Thus, if in Western Europe and the US sustained eye contact is accepted as a sign of engagement, in Asia and Africa it is considered impolite and even offensive (Morrison & Conway; Meyer, Neil Kokemuller).

C. Gestures are another important aspect to consider when delivering a presentation, participating in a negotiation or making a speech, since the way in which we use our hands can seriously undermine the spoken discourse either by distracting attention, or by suggesting insecurity and superficial knowledge or treatment of the topic.

Therefore, specialists in public speaking and negotiation recommend to avoid arm crossing, since it conveys a defensive attitude, as well as finger twiddling, which suggests nervousness and lack of confidence, eliciting lack of trust on the part of the audience/interlocutors.

Consequently, the most efficient way to get a discourse through and inspire self-confidence and elicit trust is to deliver it with the arms relaxed sideways of the body and a limited amount of small gestures, whereas dramatic hand and arm

movement, as well as mannerisms, are definitely to be kept under strict control. (Tony Robbins, Niel Kokemuller)

D. Posture

Alongside with gestures, posture is relevant in terms of the emotional state and self-confidence of the speaker. Thus, people who tend to slouch and look downwards while speaking are perceived as insecure, unconfident, and even questionably competent on the topic of their discourse.

Therefore, in order to look professional and inspire trust, a speaker should stand straight and hold their head high, which facilitates sustained eye contact with the interlocutors. Moreover, public speaking experts claim that an improved posture enhances self-confidence, which considerably increases the chances for the favourable reception of the verbal message to.

E. The interlocutor's voice

Matching a person's tone of voice and pace of speech is another effective way of subconsciously inspiring trust and smoothing the path towards mutual acceptance, even in situations with high disagreement potential. Actually, a calm, smooth tone, and a moderate pace of speech are the paralinguistic elements that enhance the persuasive power of the speech, as they determine the audience to embrace the verbal message more easily and to respond to it in a favourable manner.

F. The way in which someone deals with information

If people's responses to external stimuli are highly individual, so is their capacity to assimilate and process information, depending on such variables as education, professional and cultural background, and expertise in a specific area. Consequently, efficient communication involves detailed knowledge of these variables and the tailoring of the discourse structure according to the type of audience it is addressed to.

G. Common experiences

Sharing personal experiences with the interlocutor during a business encounter is not only a good start for conversation, but also a valuable communication tool meant to establish a safe, comfortable common ground, adequate for fostering trust-based collaboration.

2.3. Benefits of reframing and calibration in building rapport

As shown in the previous sections, building rapport in business involves advanced communication skills, a high level of emotional intelligence and an empathetic approach to human relations. Building rapport is, therefore, a complex and time-consuming process, but with remarkable long-term benefits, such as:

- a balanced, conflict free, and proactive working environment that stimulates the collaboration among co-workers and facilitates the interaction between management and employees towards the achievement of common goals;
- long lasting relations with customers and clients, based on trust and loyalty, and openness to the company's products or services (Tony Robbins).

3. CONCLUSIONS

As a specific instance of human interaction, business communication largely relies on a complex mechanism of coding and decoding verbal and non-verbal cues within the 'frame' of individual cultural background and experience. Consequently, building rapport in business is built at the intersection of cultural backgrounds, based on the capacity to resonate with the interlocutors' experiences on every level of interaction and to react accordingly, by 'calibrating' verbal and non-verbal responses.

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