Handout 3
Building Rapport

The foundation for all coaching conversations is the feeling of warmth and trust felt between the coach and coachee. Great coaches will be warm, attentive and easy to talk to. This is because of the coachee’s ability to build rapport. For a coach, it is important to understand how rapport happens and to recognise that that everyone you encounter is different, and that your rapport with them will vary.

What does rapport mean?

Rapport is about warmth and making a connection with someone. With some people you are able to build an instant rapport, but there are others you don’t warm to and they don’t warm to you. If you have good rapport with someone, you will feel comfortable and relaxed in their company. Think of a friend, or colleague, with whom you believe you have great rapport. As you think about them, ask yourself:

- How do I feel when I’m talking to them?
- What does it feel like to be with them?
- What similarities are there between me and this person?

You also probably know of someone you can’t seem to relate to, even when you try. There is a sense of difference and distance when you’re conversing. Relaxed conversations are more difficult. It would be easy to think that you don’t have any rapport with them at all. However, rapport is about the quality of the relationship in the conversation that’s developing. There is still an element of relatedness, albeit minimal, that is present. In other words, if you have a relationship with someone, there will always be some level of rapport with them.

The diagram below (inspired by Genie Z Laborde) illustrates how a scale of rapport might look:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Support, trust, sense of being positively 'connected' in some way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Strong sense of knowing, the familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Genuine warmth, kinship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Comfortable, familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Some warmth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.</td>
<td>NEUTRAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Hesitation, trepidation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Some discomfort, detachment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Awareness of dislike, disassociation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Genuine aversion, antipathy, real dislike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Stronger, hostile feelings, even loathing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When to Increase and decrease rapport

Maintaining rapport is an on-going process throughout the coaching relationship. One crucial point at which the coach must work at increasing rapport, comes during
the initial stages of the coaching process. The coachee may need to feel more comfortable with them before they can trust them and open up. But rapport also needs to be built at the start of each coaching session. No matter how warm or open the previous conversation has been, time and distance can create the need to reaffirm the coaching relationship.

There are times when it is appropriate to decrease rapport. For example when you want to close a conversation down and begin to summarise key points and agree actions. Also be aware of appropriate and inappropriate levels of rapport for a coaching relationship. Too much familiarity and warmth can result in the coaching becoming more like a friendship rather than a professional and purposeful relationship.

How to build rapport

Integrity, openness and trust

Integrity, openness and trust are key aspects of establishing and maintaining rapport. They are a reflection of your professionalism as a practicing coach. Integrity means that we must be as good as our word. We must match what we do with what we say. If you say you’ll send your coachee some exercises to do on Friday, make sure you do it on Friday. The congruence of words and actions is very powerful in coaching. The coachee is more likely to trust you and be committed to the process if you demonstrate your commitment to them. You also need to deal with commitments you haven’t kept with integrity which means apologising and rectifying the situation as soon as you can. If you have doubts about making a commitment don't make it!

Successful coaching relationships involve openness and trust. That means you should declare your own thoughts and feelings sometimes. If you are feeling stuck in the conversation, admit that: ‘I’m sorry, I’m feeling a little stuck at the moment. I’m not sure where we go from here…’. The coachee must feel able to trust you. Setting high standards of personal behaviour, keeping confidences and being consistent will help to build trust.

The importance of intention

Intention is your sense of purpose, your aim for the conversation. Focussing on your intention is useful when you’ve tried matching, but the rapport is not as good as you’d like. To use intention to increase rapport, look for common ground between yourself and the other person. It’s always possible to find a way that you are related to the other person. For example:

• How is this person the same as you?
• What common beliefs do you share?
• You might have several shared goals – you both want conversation to be productive and effective, useful and worthwhile.
• You both want to learn from the coaching process.
Try to have an intention to build great rapport with the person during the coaching conversation. Use words like ‘connection’ or ‘warmth and openness’ to remind yourself of this. During the conversation, remember this word or phrase - but don’t let it distract you from the conversation.

What else creates rapport?

Rapport builds on features of sameness. Where there is a higher degree of ‘sameness’ between two individuals, we build rapport more easily. We instinctively feel less threatened by someone like us and more willing to open up. Categories of sameness can include many aspects, for example:

Physical appearance/clothes
If we generally have similar physical characteristics and appearance, such as ethnicity, age, height, style and dress etc, we tend to be more comfortable with each other and have an almost subconscious tendency to feel we are alike.

Body language/physical gestures
If you have similar co-ordinating body language you are likely to have good rapport. If seated, you might adopt a similar pose; if one leans forward so might the other. It is easy to observe this by watching people around you and how they interact with each other.

Qualities of voice – tone, accent
Voice sound can also give real indication of rapport within conversation. Tone, speed, speech and timbre can convey tremendous amounts of meaning. When people don’t have good rapport qualities of voices don’t tend to match.

Language/words used
Using similar language and words will create rapport. Matching the words used by the coachee helps to build rapport in coaching because the coachee will feel more understood and able to open up.

Beliefs and values
It is easier to build rapport with people who share your values and beliefs. We have a tendency to gel with people who are like minded, and whom we believe are like us.

We can use the idea of sameness to increase rapport, using a technique called matching.

Increasing rapport through matching

This is a well known method for increasing rapport in coaching. It involves matching verbal and non-verbal/physical aspects: posture, voice quality, speed of speech, physical gestures etc.

First of all look for mismatches or differences between you and coachee – e.g. physical posture, voice qualities, amounts of energy, you're both displaying – what are you doing that’s different? For example, if your gestures are more animated than the other person’s calm yourself down a little. If you are speaking in much more
quickly than they are, slow down your pace. This needs to be done gradually so that the other person doesn’t notice.

Begin by subtly matching physical posture, as this has multiple benefits:

- Helps you focus on other person and not on yourself
- Tends to improve rapport naturally
- Your concentration will increase so that you begin to notice other behaviours demonstrated by the coachee for example: subtle facial expressions, eye movements, changes in tone etc. You’ll pick up on other signals you may have previously missed.

If you overdo do matching, you will alienate the person instead of building rapport. You must not mirror every single move. You need to be very subtle.

**Eye contact**

Most people don’t like to be stared at or gazed at for long periods. When judging how much eye contact to give someone, we should work at matching them. If the other person appears to give you lots of eye contact, then they’ll be comfortable for you to do the same. If they look at you less frequently, they are likely to respond to a similar level of eye contact.

**Decreasing rapport with matching**

Same principles apply as when you are increasing rapport but pretty much in reverse. Again subtly gradually begin to mismatch. Change posture. If their voice is steady and warm, put a little bit of energy into yours.