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Mastering Rapport and Having Productive Conversations

By ROBIN K. DREEKE

Not too long ago, a task force typically would feature officers and agents readying themselves to conduct interviews, researching databases, and, ultimately, preparing to investigate their cases by talking to people. Following this usual morning routine, a supervisor might walk through and urge the remaining investigators out of the area with a simple statement of “Cases aren’t made in here. Get out and

find sources.” These agents then would leave and do just that.

With the ever-increasing availability of technology, including open-source databases, law enforcement officers have tended to stay in the office and research in an attempt to continually gather critical information. This developing habit, coupled with a modern workforce adept and comfortable in a computerized environment, creates a challenge to agencies,

which still require a staff of professional officers skilled as conversationalists and rapport developers.

Today’s professionals enter the workforce with critical and highly sought-after technological skills that tend to exceed those of prior generations. Seasoned generations in the workforce often have a skill set that enables them to develop effective rapport and have productive one-on-one conversations. Of

course, combining all of these skills maximizes capability.

Years ago when new agents first arrived on their squads, they joined many investigators who had extensive practical experience. Newer investigators usually teamed up with veterans to “learn the ropes,” which involved a simple but effective process of going out and observing how senior agents recruited confidential human sources, had productive conversations, and developed quick rapport. These unwritten skills represented an art form passed from one generation to the next.

With today’s threats to national security, quickly passing along this expertise has become a critical necessity. To this end, the author intends to help bridge the generational gap by breaking down the skill of rapport building into an actionable template that anyone can use.

GAINING IMPORTANT SKILLS

Clark, a senior agent on a cybercrime task force, was recruited years ago to the then-newly formed squad because of her expertise in developing confidential human sources while resolving terrorism cases. Prior to her current assignment, she worked with Smith, a senior agent who shared with her many of the proactive source-development skills that have

served Clark well throughout her career.¹ Likewise, over the years, Clark has gleaned a valuable skill set for developing quick rapport with individuals to assess their confidential human source potential. After all, most training academies continually echo “Assess everyone as a potential source.” How can somebody evaluate everyone as a potential source without knowing how to have a productive conversation with strangers?

Becker just joined the cyber task force because of his strong computer background. He received his undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science from a leading university. Becker always has had a fascination with people, as well as computers. He once

conducted research on using social media to develop personality models. Becker always has regretted never taking the time while in school to put his research and interest in people into practical application. He finds the thought of approaching a stranger and initiating a conversation daunting. Becker does not realize that most people feel the same way. Fortunately, he will have the opportunity to work with Clark, a master rapport builder.

After a few weeks, Becker has yet to leave the office and go out on his first interview, let alone proactively try to develop a confidential human source. He has become increasingly anxious about the prospect because he knows that his source-development skills

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constitute a critical element on his performance appraisal.

One Wednesday afternoon, Clark approached Becker, sitting in his chair facing his computer screen. He was surfing the Internet for social engineering Web sites that might have information regarding upcoming training and conferences concerning cybersecurity in the civilian world. Clark glanced around Becker's cubicle and noted prominently displayed photos of his children. One of them featured him, apparently, coaching his young son at a baseball game. She smiled after seeing the picture and said, "Hi Becker, how are your first few weeks going?" He swiveled around in his chair, looked up at the smiling Clark, and replied, "Fine, but I'm a little concerned. I don't feel like I'm really contributing anything yet." Clark continued her friendly smile and responded, "That's Okay. It takes a little time to figure things out." She humbly apologized, without offering an excuse, that it took her this long to have a chat with him.

Clark regarded the photo of Becker and his son, smiled while angling her head slightly to the side, and inquired, "Your son?" Becker immediately felt at ease and described how he coaches his son's baseball team. The two had a nice chat about what Becker does during

his free time with his children, while Clark pulled up a chair and sat attentively listening to Becker play the part of the proud father. About 15 minutes later when Becker seemingly exhausted his conversation, Clark leaned in and asked, "So, are you ready to go out and do something?" Becker responded, "Sure."

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Clark went on to explain how she developed a couple of valuable contacts in the cyber community by attending InfraGard meetings years ago.² She described how one of these contacts planned to attend a local cyber conference and that the individual wanted to introduce Clark to a friend, a former computer hacker who now works for a cybersecurity firm testing systems for a number of high-profile companies in an effort to increase security

protocols against foreign hackers. "Wow," said Becker, "That sounds like exactly the type of person who could help in our investigations."³ Clark went on to inform him that they later would meet her contact, as well as the new potential source, in a week at the cyber conference exposition venue.

Becker asked Clark what he could do to prepare for the meeting. She informed him that they always would devise a strategy anytime they went out on an interview together. Clark told him to go home and get a good night's sleep so they could begin their preparation first thing in the morning. "The most important aspect of what we will do next week is listening and building a friendship. Try to recollect those moments in your life when you had an enjoyable conversation and what made it so. Bring those skills and that awareness with you tomorrow as we prepare."

First Encounter

The following day, both investigators arrived in the office early. Clark approached Becker's cubicle and gave him the name of the individual they would meet the following week. She went on to explain that the person, Scott, would provide training on social-engineering skills at the symposium and that he looked forward to meeting

with them afterward. She asked Becker to find out as much open-source information as he could about Scott on the Internet. Clark told him to pay particular attention to his likes and interests, if possible, and that they would meet later to compare notes on what they found.

Becker diligently researched Scott on open-source Web pages, including his business site. Not much personal information was available, but both he and Clark compared notes on what they discovered. They identified Scott as a married father of two young children who has worked in Internet security for 15 years. Apparently, he has personal or general knowledge of many prominent persons in the cyberhacking realm and routinely attends many cybersecurity conferences around the world. Most interestingly, Scott's business focuses on helping individuals and companies protect themselves from malicious cyberattacks, as well as fraud. He also has published a book and has posted numerous blogs and podcasts on social engineering on his Web site.

Following the review of this information, Becker asked Clark, "So, what next?" She replied, "We will read his book." They both left later that day to purchase a copy. During the evening after work, Becker began reading it and immediately

became impressed with the content and thoroughness of Scott's research. An incredible amount of information bridged the gap between both the cyberworld and the realm of interpersonal skills.

As the week passed, both Clark and Becker continued reading Scott's book and following his blogs and podcasts. They felt that they had gained a thorough understanding of



him from these resources. Scott seemed knowledgeable and direct with a quick wit and a mind for observation. He also appeared genuine in his desire to help others avoid falling victim to malicious hacking attempts. Clark devised the meeting engagement plan with input from Becker, who was surprised about the simplicity of the strategy and disappointed that his role entailed mostly listening and observing. Clark assured Becker and explained

that she needed him to observe so they could have a productive after-action review. The most valuable advice that Clark gave Becker as they departed for the meeting was to "Be yourself. If you are anything else, people can see through it, and you will end up looking fake." She also told him to subdue his natural desire to chat too much and that she would prompt him at the appropriate times. Although Becker did not quite understand, he agreed.

Clark and Becker arrived at the symposium and quickly met up with her contact. After a friendly hug with the individual, Clark quickly introduced Becker to him as her friend and colleague who would teach her about technology. Becker felt a sense of pride as the contact gave him a friendly chuckle and said, "Good luck with that. I've tried for some time now." Clark quickly fished through her pocket and produced a few items for her contact, who asked, "What do we have here?" She explained that the last time they had gotten together, he expressed an interest in a souvenir from the FBI National Academy at Quantico, Virginia. Clark had called a friend of hers at the academy and had one sent. She presented her grateful friend with the item. Additionally, Clark said, "I know you have a young boy. I came across

Additional Resources

- Tony Alessandra and Michael O’Conner, *The Platinum Rule: Discover the Four Basic Business Personalities and How They Can Lead You to Success* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1996)
- Terry Burnham and Jay Phelan, *Mean Genes: From Sex to Money to Food: Taming Our Primal Instincts* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2000)
- Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1990)
- Robin Dreeke, *It’s Not All About Me: The Top Ten Techniques for Building Rapport with Anyone* (Virginia: People Formula, 2011)
- Robin Dreeke, “It’s All About Them: Tools and Techniques for Interviewing and Human Source Development,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, June 2008, 1-9
- Robin Dreeke and Joe Navarro, “Behavioral Mirroring in Interviewing,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, December 2009, 1-10
- Robin Dreeke and Kara Sidener, “Proactive Human Source Development,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, November 2010, 1-9
- Sam Gosling, *Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008)
- Christopher Hadnagy, *Social Engineering: The Art of Human Hacking* (Hoboken, NJ: 2011)
- Aye Jaye, *The Golden Rule of Schmoozing: The Authentic Practice of Treating Others Well* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 1997)
- Joe Navarro, *What Every Body Is Saying: An Ex-FBI Agent’s Guide to Speed-Reading People* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2008)
- John Nolan, *Confidential Business Secrets: Getting Theirs—Keeping Yours* (Medford Lakes, NJ: Yardley Chambers, 1996)

this coupon for buy one, get one free ice cream and thought of you guys. I hope you can enjoy it together.” Appreciative, he gave her another quick hug as he exclaimed to Becker, “She is always too good to me.”

The contact guided them through the symposium to some tables and chairs for attendees to sit and enjoy a snack or beverage. At one of the tables, Scott waited for them. Clark’s contact

made the introductions and let them all know how he valued their friendship and hoped for more great opportunities to collaborate together. Following the warm introductions, Clark’s contact informed the group that he had to get back to his responsibilities and that he would check in with them another time.

Clark, Becker, and Scott sat and began to chat. She started

by thanking Scott for taking time to chat with them and asking him how much time he had. Scott said that he had about 30 minutes before his next function. Clark replied, “Great, I think we’ll take less than that.” Scott seemed to relax, and Clark inquired, “So, Scott, we’ve heard some great things about you from our mutual friend, including the fact that you are an expert. We hope you might

use some of your expertise to help us. We're pretty new to the cybersecurity world and would like your thoughts and opinions on the biggest threats."

Becker immediately felt the need to interject his thoughts about the threats and had an urge to correct Clark regarding her statement about not knowing much. He knew that Clark had knowledge of and advanced education in the subject. Clark picked up on Becker's desire to speak, but simply looked at him, smiled, and put her finger to her lips as Scott began to talk.

Scott went on to explain his credentials in the area of Internet security, as well as how he created his own company. Becker was amazed at how Clark simply sat there and nodded her head in agreement. Every now and then, she would have a quizzical look on her face, and, in response, Scott would explain a particular topic in greater detail. At one point, Scott mentioned the phrase "social engineering," which Clark simply repeated back to him, and he went into greater depth and explained the subject. Following Scott's explanation, Clark repeated it and asked if she had gotten it correct. Scott's face lit up in excitement.

Clark followed up with a few statements on the importance of Scott's work, as well as favorable comments regarding

some topics that Becker recognized from his book. Scott again smiled broadly as he recognized that Clark had begun to understand what he described to her. Clark then quickly glanced at her watch, as if snapping out of a daze, and stated to Scott, "I think we have gone over our promised time with you, and I think Becker may have a baseball game with his son." A clearly energized Scott inquired, "You have a son in baseball?"

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Becker replied, smiling, that he did and then picked up on Clark's cue as she nodded at him and said, "Scott, we've probably kept you too long." Scott dismissed them with a wave and said, "Don't worry about it, I'm enjoying our chat." He went on to tell Becker that he also coached his own son's baseball team and then regaled them with his boy's latest exploits on the field.

The conversation lasted for another 30 minutes and ended with a promise to continue chatting about how Scott may be able to help Clark and Becker in their investigations. They all parted with an agreement to get together again the following week for lunch.

Guidance

Clark and Becker walked out of the conference center. It already was early evening, and she asked him if he would like to have dinner at a nearby restaurant so they could go over the day's events together. Ready to eat and excited about his first engagement, Becker readily agreed.

They walked a few blocks to a crowded restaurant. Deciding not to wait 30 minutes for a seat, the two hungry investigators opted to eat at the bar. A bartender, apparently in his mid-50s, brought them menus and took their drink orders. Clark offered, "You look busy. Take your time." He responded with "thanks" and a smile.

After the bartender served them their sodas, Clark turned to Becker and asked, "So, what did you think?" He smiled broadly and said that he thought the meeting with Scott went well. Clark agreed and probed further. "Why?" Becker took a minute and replied, "I guess because the conversation went

so well, and we built rapport.” Again, she agreed and pushed him for more specifics as to what rapport-building techniques he noticed. He replied that he thought it was just a natural conversation and did not realize Clark purposely used any techniques. She stared silently at Becker as he sat and thought. He began replaying the meeting in his head and finally filled the silence with, “I thought your bringing up my son’s baseball was intentional and an effective technique. Scott also had a son and was interested in coaching as well.” Clark commended Becker for his insight, but added, “There are a few conversational techniques that I also used. She went on to ask Becker what he remembered about the conversation on social engineering. Becker thought for a second and said that Clark seemed like she was curious about the topic. “How?” replied Clark. “Well, when Scott mentioned social engineering, you had a quizzical look and repeated the term back to him. Scott then explained the topic in greater detail.” “Excellent!” stated Clark. “I used what is called a reflective question.” She went on to say that the simple act of repeating the last phrase or statement by an individual is an excellent way to have them elaborate on that topic.

Clark went on to describe how she also used pauses in the conversation so that Scott felt compelled to fill the silence with more information that he deemed important. She also followed up Scott’s explanation of social engineering by paraphrasing the description to demonstrate that she indeed was listening. Becker nodded, indicating that he now saw what

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was in front of him the whole time. Clark asked him, “What are you doing right now?” Becker paused for a second and sheepishly replied, “Nodding?” “Yes, that is exactly right. That is a minimal encourager that demonstrates to individuals that you are listening and that they should continue. I used those throughout the dialogue with Scott.” Becker again nodded, showing his agreement and understanding, as Clark shared a few conversational techniques

that help build rapport during a conversation.

- Minimal encouragers
- Reflective questions
- Pauses
- Paraphrasing

Second Encounter

Excited about the highlighted techniques, Becker told Clark that he thought he had gained a better understanding of establishing rapport. She chuckled and informed him that although effective, these conversational techniques represented only a few that she used during the interaction. “Like what?” Becker inquired.

Just then, the bartender returned to take their orders. Before he departed, Clark stated to him, “I know you are busy, but my friend and I were hoping you would help us with a quick question.” Having remembered Clark and Becker’s patience, the bartender smiled and said, “Sure, what can I help with?” She thanked him and said, “I have a teenage niece. My sister and her husband have received numerous requests from their daughter to allow her to date. What do you think is an appropriate age for kids to start dating?” The bartender chuckled and said, “I have 20- and 22-year-old daughters.” Clark quickly replied, “Ahh, so we have an expert.” He laughed

again and said, “Well, I don’t know about that, but I have experience.” She went on to ask about how the bartender dealt with the issue, what ages the girls were when they began dating, and when he thought it was appropriate.

The bartender, Dave, enjoyed reminiscing about his tumultuous years with his teenage daughters. He also went on to talk about what they are doing now, where he and his family grew up, and how he serves as a part-time bartender in the evenings to make extra money while preparing for retirement from his full-time job. Dave also said that his eldest daughter had an interest in forensics and criminal justice because of her fondness for television police dramas. Clark recognized the opportunity, pulled a task force souvenir out of her purse, handed it to Dave, and said, “Here, maybe your daughter would enjoy this.” Dave regarded the item with great admiration and thanked Clark profusely for the gift and conversation. Dave quickly realized that he had been neglecting his other customers and began catching up with them.

Guidance

Clark asked Becker, “So, what did I do?” He thought for a moment, put on a playful grin, and said, “Besides have a

regular conversation?” “That’s the point,” said Clark. “Building rapport and having valuable conversations, simply, entails having the other individual enjoy your company. So, how did I accomplish that in this case?” Becker thought for another moment and said, “You first apologized for taking his time and asked if you could pose a quick question.” “Great!” said Clark. “That is known as



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establishing an artificial time constraint. When individuals do not think you will take much of their time, they more likely will engage in a conversation. I also asked for his help with dating ages.” She went on to say that asking for help or “sympathy” serves as another useful technique for eliciting a conversation. “What else?” asked Clark.

Becker then described how she facilitated in-depth dialogue by asking “how, why,

and when” types of questions. Clark commended him for picking up on the technique and added that along with asking how, why, and when, it is important to then validate the ideas of the individual. Persons truly enjoy being correct and having their opinions matter to someone. Becker quickly added that he noticed how Clark had given some form of gift to both Dave the bartender and to her contact earlier in the day. Clark explained that gift giving, or “reciprocal altruism,” was critical in building rapport. In general, individuals have a biological need to reciprocate a gift, no matter how small the item or, even, gesture. Often, the best method for allowing an individual to reciprocate a gift is through a conversation and, hence, rapport.

He was amazed at the simplicity of the techniques and also that he unwittingly has used them throughout his life. Clark offered that in regard to building rapport and interpersonal communication, most human beings have used these techniques. However, she explained that in law enforcement, officers generally cannot make mistakes because of their need for relationships and partnerships with individuals who can provide assistance.

Clark and Becker discussed the techniques that she used

Ten Techniques for Building Rapport

- 1) *Establish artificial time constraints.* Allow the potential source to feel that there is an end in sight.
- 2) *Remember nonverbals.* Ensure that both your body language and voice are nonthreatening.
- 3) *Speak slower.* Do not oversell and talk too fast. You lose credibility quickly and appear too strong and threatening.
- 4) *Have a sympathy or assistance theme.* Human beings want to provide assistance and help. It also appeals to their ego that they may know more than you.
- 5) *Suspend your ego.* This probably represents the hardest technique but, without a doubt, is the most effective. Do not build yourself up—build someone else up, and you will have strong rapport.
- 6) *Validate others.* Human beings crave feeling connected and accepted. Validation feeds this need, and few offer it. Be the great validator and have instant, valuable rapport.
- 7) *Ask “how, when, and why” questions.* When you want to dig deep and make a connection, asking these questions serves as the safest, most effective way. People will tell you what they are willing to talk about.
- 8) *Connect using quid pro quo.* Some people are more guarded than others. Allow them to feel comfortable by sharing a little about yourself if needed. Do not overdo it.
- 9) *Give gifts (reciprocal altruism).* Human beings reciprocate gifts given. Give a gift, either intangible or material, and seek a conversation and rapport in return.
- 10) *Manage expectations.* Avoid feeling and embodying disappointment by ensuring that your methods focus on benefiting the targeted individual, not you. Ultimately, you will win, but your mind-set needs to focus on the other person.

throughout the conversation with Scott. She initiated the conversation by establishing an artificial time constraint of less than 30 minutes. Clark illustrated how she used accommodating nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling and using a slight head tilt.

Becker pointed out that he noticed how she had spoken slower and that he thought she sounded more credible than usual. Both Becker and Clark identified how she used both sympathy and validation when asking for help with Scott’s area of expertise. Becker noted how

he spoke just a little about his son and baseball. Clark offered that this is known as “quid pro quo” so the other individual does not feel they are doing all the talking. Just a touch of this is needed.

Becker inquired if there was anything else important

that he might have missed that day. Clark said that there was not, but there were a few key things to keep in mind, as well, to help ensure success. She elaborated, “The most important is ego suspension. Allowing others to be right even though we know them to be wrong and withholding our desire to correct them is important, as well as difficult. During our earlier interview of Scott, you almost interrupted him, and I had to put my finger to my mouth as a quick sign to you to not correct him. Remember, what we think and know to be correct often is not nearly as important as what the other person may think. When building rapport, don’t build resentment by correcting someone. Suspend your ego.” Becker nodded, remembering how he felt the impulse to interject during the conversation and was amazed at how Clark just let Scott continue.

Clark also explained that managing expectations proves important. She went on to say that all of the techniques are highly effective when used proactively, but that if the other person is not in the mood to receive these “gifts,” Becker should not feel disappointed. “It’s them, not you. Simply smile and try again later.” Clark took a piece of paper out of her folder for Becker and

wrote 10 techniques with a brief explanation for each.

Conclusion

Building rapport, perhaps, is the most important technique that investigators use. Most law enforcement agencies strive to successfully resolve investigations by developing confidential human sources. Without the critical skill of developing rapport, the formula for success quickly breaks apart.

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Today’s law enforcement professionals face immense and ever-growing challenges. Possessing advanced computer skills proves critical in combating the growing cyberthreats facing nations and their citizens. Investigators must have the ability to use these computer systems and networks to help further investigations.

However, in addition to mastering these new critical technologies, law enforcement officials must remember that

few, if any, cases are resolved without confidential human sources. The art form known as interpersonal skills, illustrated by the author in an easy-to-use format, hopefully, will help keep these critical skills fresh and up-to-date as law enforcement continues to battle threats.

This step-by-step procedure, which reflects time-honored methods of building rapport, will benefit new officers, as well as senior mentors in law enforcement who have used these techniques for years and seek easy ways to describe and pass on these great skills to others. By mastering new technologies and maintaining their mastery of interpersonal skills, investigators will continue to provide the excellent service and protection their community and country have come to expect. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Robin K. Dreeke and Kara D. Sidener, “Proactive Human Source Development,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, November 2010, 1-9.

² InfraGard is an association of businesses, academic institutions, law enforcement agencies, and other participants dedicated to sharing information and intelligence to prevent hostile acts against the United States. Its Web site is <http://www.infragard.net>.

³ For more information on how to proactively develop these types of confidential human sources, see Dreeke and Sidener.