



When two or more people seem in sync with one another, we say they have “rapport.” By definition, rapport is a close and harmonious relationship characterized by mutual understanding, engagement and respect.

Think of two people on a dance floor. When their steps are in harmony and their respective movements integrate into a single flowing motion, that’s analogous to interpersonal rapport. Which is why psychotherapists often talk about relationships as a kind of “dance.” Inversely, when people dance like I did in the 60’s and 70’s, each doing their own thing, often in an asynchronous manner, that’s analogous to the absence of interpersonal rapport.

We’ve known for some time that people in a state of rapport often display gestures, movements, facial expressions and even vocal qualities (tone, tempo, volume of speech) that are harmonious. Think of a happily married couple who’ve been together for decades. Even if they are very different in terms of body shape, size, facial characteristics and the like, their “body language” is often highly similar. When together, they frequently use equivalent gestures, facial expressions, postures, etc. Why? Because they’ve shared rapport together for many years, so their interpersonal “dance” is synchronized.

Well, recently, neuroscientists have demonstrated that rapport also shows up in our brains. Using a technique called “hyper-scanning,” they monitor brain activity in two individuals, or even groups of individuals, who are interacting in ways suggesting rapport is present. What they see is that, when people have rapport, they exhibit “brain-to-brain synchrony.”

This type of synchrony occurs most often when people make frequent eye contact, fully engage in discussing a particular topic of common interest, exhibit mutual respect, and share anecdotes or other relevant stories. It’s also observed in large groups of folks observing a shared and highly engaging movie, play or concert. Their respective neuronal activity aligns, creating brain-to-brain synchrony.

When this interpersonal and neurological synchrony becomes intense, two or more people (such as a team) may feel as if they are functioning as a single unit. Like a couple accomplished at ballroom dancing, their behaviors and mindsets flow together effortlessly, and they experience a deep sense of mental and emotional connectivity.

Two people can intentionally increase their brain-to-brain synchrony by deliberately harmonizing their non-verbal and acoustic behaviors. Try it out. First, observe the other person's posture, gestures, facial expressions and vocal qualities (volume, tone and rate of speech). Then, approximate that person's behaviors by adopting them as your own, exhibiting similar (not identical) gestures, movements, postures, vocalizations, etc. Using the dance analogy once more, let the other person lead. You follow.

Creating rapport and underlying brain-to-brain synchrony is a learnable skill, one that enhances interpersonal engagement, effectiveness and satisfaction.

It may not be the same as Spock's "mind meld," but it's a close second.

Out of My Mind Melds: Read more of them on my website: philipchard.com