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Mirroring: Nature's Way to Nurture Rapport

From trees in the forest to fishes in the sea to bees in a hive, survival and success depends on collaboration. Within the natural order of our own living and work spaces, collaboration generally boosts efficiency, fosters empowerment and innovation, encourages partnerships and improves happiness.

Essential to rewarding collaboration is rapport—the sense of moving together in the same direction at the same time. This "same page" achievement relies on basic communication tools of clarity, active listening and openness to others points of view, positivity, empathy and emotional intelligence.

Another technique for building rapport is "mirroring." Sometimes referred to as "the chameleon effect," this behavior involves one person subconsciously imitating the gesture, speech pattern, or attitude of another. More specifically, we begin life by innately mirroring others to form social bonds, with the mother-child bond serving as a prime example.

Mirroring is an automatic, neural response. Italian neurophysiologist, Professor Giacomo Rizzolatti first identified mirror neurons in the 1990s and determined they fire when both doing and observing a single act. Later, multi-modality research in humans confirmed mirroring to be a hard-wired feature of the brain. Kuhn et al. further found those same activated brain areas also process rewards and "feel good" impacts.

"We might not be able to see subtle mirroring," says behavioral investigator Vanessa Van Edwards, "but the brain still registers it…So not only is mirroring hardwired in your brain, it is also rewarded!"

Conscious mirroring (imitation) is a valuable boost to innate mirroring based on the breadth of professions that include it in their routine work skillsets as a way to quickly build rapport, especially with diverse populations. Job recruiters, therapists, counselors, negotiators, salespeople, politicians, and public relations professionals top the list.

Grounded in a sense of similarity and shared experience, this subtle nurturing of a natural inclination has been likened to a "superpower" that can instantly make another person feel at ease, improve personal communications and strengthen cooperation.

"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."
- Henry Ford

Tips for Conscious Mirroring

- Be subtle to avoid mimicry.
- Match body posture with similar gestures, positions.
- Reflect similar vocal tone, pace and volume.
- Use their words, language.
- Apply active listening skills by paraphrasing, clarifying and summarizing.
- Be authentic, show respect and emphasize positivity.