

Leading Ways: RETURNING TO THE BASICS

As we move into the multiplicity of hybrid work environments, it strikes me as an ideal time to review the good practices we want to take forward when leadership involves a virtual setting.

Here are some things I've learned over the past years that I want to bring with me into whatever comes next. (Many of these have virtual and analog applicability.)

THE BASICS:

1. You cannot get any more fundamental in building a safe environment than getting **eye contact** correct. Too much, too intense or too cold and it comes across as an effort to intimidate. Totally absent, "shifty" or timid and it comes across as trying to hide from engagement. Try a little give and take with who is the dominant partner (this means looking away a bit when they are speaking), let your face be positive (that means smile, softly) and build the time that you are looking directly at the person when you are speaking to at least half of the time when words are coming from you. Take a day and monitor your eye contact while taking note of how much you did the above then set a simple goal for the next day to improve one dimension. Practice it until you are better and then take another dimension and work on it.
2. Eye contact is **open, comfortable and appropriate body language**. For most situations this means sitting up straight, facing the individual, open arms with some hand movement, comfortable legs placement, occasionally leaning in toward them and doing all of this with the right eye contact, while speaking in a way that you do not appear to be an automaton or threatening to your partner. The best way to get an idea or two about improvement is to get a recording of how you participate in a group or ask someone to record you without you being aware. There will be more than enough to improve. Just ask yourself when viewing it, what could I do to look more comfortable and engaging to the other person. Less impactful is to have someone observe and give you feedback.
3. I've already mentioned connecting your eye contact with a **smile**, but independently this sends a message to others that you are safe, and this is a safe place. Sometimes smiles can look a little perfunctory or forced, as if someone had read a leadership blog telling them to smile. To avoid this, I try to make eye contact and then take a deeper breath than usual, adding a little pause, only a fraction of a second, before I smile. I think this sends the subtle message that I see them as an individual and that I'm glad to be there talking with them. If I want this little drama to take on more depth, I might make a statement like, "I hope your day has been sunny" or even better, "what is something you learned today?" I have never received anything but nicer smiles and some very interesting comments.

4. Last in the basics is something that has become a bit sensitive these days: **touching**. If nothing else we are a branch of the higher primates, and as a genius, touching rituals are a part of what we have done for a while. But no one wants to be a creepy uncle, so it needs some thought and consideration. As an older male I now think I have incorporated waiting a bit longer until the relationship has developed, only reaching out if others have and at times checking to make sure I'm not upsetting someone, either by asking or observing. If you think you touch as a part of connecting, ask a person you are close to if it seems to be too much.

STAGE SETTING:

1. If I want to send the message that this is a safe place to an individual or a group, one of the things I want to project from the outset is a **positive and constructive climate**. This does not mean being overly sentimental, wildly optimistic or blind to real problems that are present. It does mean putting issues and concerns in perspective, calling attention to the power we have when we collectively face things, drawing our memories to past success and being appropriately upbeat and energetic. If we begin interactions lamenting the situation, pointing to the dismal prospects of success, and raising fear, we might as well ask our colleagues to turn on their cortisol pumps, hunker down, withdraw effort and be silent. The spiral down to distrust and despair will have begun. Keep to the high road.
2. I trust those I know or identify with, so **common ground** is a powerful way to start and build safety which leads to higher levels of trust. Sometimes the common ground should be obvious, same team, same organization, same profession, etc. While it should be obvious, you will need to be the constant cheerleader for this, because the last thing you want to be doing is reminding them of the common ground ten minutes before you ask for a heroic sacrifice from them. But common ground works with new acquiesces and strangers as well. It is amazing how trust goes up when you are in the same profession, went to the same school, had similar childhoods, and both follow that team, like that jewelry, think this current development is interesting, or both love a rainy day. Some of it seems silly or mundane, but I have seen otherwise deeply rational and suspicious humans come together to play a team game making sacrifices for each other for no more commonality than I called them "Team A" or gave them all yellow caps to wear. It is all around us, use it.
3. When it becomes clear the relationship is not going to be simply passing and I want to quickly establish a **connection with the person on a deeper level**, I find the following question to be pretty magical: "Hey, before we start (whatever work we are about to do) tell me some more about yourself." I let them decide if it's professional or personal and how deep to go, it's never more than a few minutes. If they start with personal, then it is easy to go up to professional and fill that in as well. If they start with professional and you feel that would go deeper into personal, ask them. I've never had anyone refuse this request (it always is asked with real curiosity and a smile). Just about everyone is happy to be known by others, even if they may not think so. Invariably I hear something that lets me connect to them and build that common ground.
4. One thing that I have discovered about most humans is that they relate best to other humans. Openness, smiling and being positive helps with all of this. But another thing I like to establish early in the relationship is my personal fallibility. The person that projects perfection and unerring skill is a person that I will be suspicious of. I love competence, hard work and great results. But I trust people that can offer what I call a "weak reed confession."

First of all, that lets me know they are self-aware, we all have weaknesses. Second, it lets me know they are human, building that common ground and a deeper trust.

LISTENING:

1. The key to great listening is remembering that its definition is not “waiting to talk” but **active engagement**. I find the question above in Stage Setting #3, not only primes them to be more open but helps me set my focus on them in a powerful way. I am much keener to hear about them, then I am to hear the answer to the first business question. It creates a virtuous spiral of listening connection that works as we go back and forth. Maintain your curiosity in them and what they say.
2. It is important to **let them know you are listening** by moving your head in a positive way, giving little affirmations and keeping a few things in your head or in your notes to follow up with once they have finished a thought. I think note taking is a great way to indicate you are engaged, but don't let your notes become more important than what they are saying.
3. **Don't interrupt**. And when you do, make it about them not about you. Ask them questions that let them enlarge, explore and go deeper with what they are saying.
4. **Ask good questions**. Some of my favorites are: “Can you say some more about that?” “What does that mean to you?” and from above, “What did you learn from that?”