

Interacting with Others: Make It Safe

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When leading a discussion on how to influence without authority, one thing I stress is the acronym OUT: Open Using Trust. At the heart of the suggestion is that if you begin a relationship or interaction with messages and signals that you can be trusted, it typically leads to a virtuous spiral of reciprocal trusting signals, actions, and deeds. From there you can form a much deeper relationship in which you can influence and be influenced by your collaborator. But what are these signals and actions that can prompt such a desired state?

I believe this is an area that humans have selected for over the millennia as our biology changed to accommodate our increasingly social reality of living in groups; first families, then tribes, and then villages. As we moved away from those that we were familiar with and knew well from accumulated face-to-face interactions and started going to a neighboring tribe or meeting strangers on a trail, we looked for cues about our safety in this new situation. Basically, could we trust this stranger? So, it is not surprising that many of the ways to send the message “you are safe with me” are pretty rudimentary, but I think all the more powerful because they are deeply innate.

There are undoubtedly many of these cues. I suspect many of them are below our level of consciousness. But here are four platforms with suggestions in each that I find useful in developing an environment of safety and building a relationship of trust. To use these effectively you will need to make them yours in your own distinctive way. They are intended more as prompts for your development, not discrete behavioral rules.

Body Language Basics for Establishing A Safe Environment

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 will come across as an effort to intimidate. Totally absent and “shifty” and it comes across as trying to hide from engagement, or too weak to be a partner. Suggestions are: do a little give and take in 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 practice looking directly at the person when you are speaking to them for at least half of the time you are talking. Take a day and monitor your eye contact, take a note of how much you did the above, and 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. Related to eye contact is **open, comfortable, and appropriate body language**. For most situations this means sitting up straight, facing the individual, open arms, some hand movement, comfortable legs placement, occasional movement in toward them, and doing all of this with welcoming eye contact while speaking — all of which should be done 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 but still helpful would be to have someone observe and give you feedback. As more interactions move to Zoom-

Leadership Tips

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like formats this is more challenging, but still very possible. Ask for feedback from colleagues that are on the receiving end of your Zoom speak.

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 that this is a safe place to be more open. 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 do the following steps. When I first encounter someone, say a desk clerk at a hotel or a person I'm interviewing for the first time, I make eye contact and then take a deeper breath than usual with a little pause, just a fraction of a second, then I smile. I think that sends the subtle message that I see them as an individual, and I'm glad to be there talking with them. If I want this to take on more depth, I might make a statement, "I hope your day has been sunny" or even better, "What is something you learned today?" I have never received anything but nice smiles and some very interesting comments.

Stage Setting

1. If I want to message that this is a safe place to an individual or a group, something I want to project from the start is a positive and constructive climate. This does not mean being overly saccharine, 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 their cortisol pumps to full blast, 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 10 minutes before you ask for a heroic sacrifice from them. But common ground works with new acquaintances 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, both follow that team, find that jewelry interesting, think this current development is creative, or enjoy a rainy day. Some of it seems really silly, but I have seen otherwise deeply rational and suspicious humans come together to play a team game in which sacrifice was essential for no more reason than I called them Team A or gave them yellow caps to wear. It is all around us — use it.
3. Often the relationship is likely to be longer term and I want to quickly and efficiently connect with the person on a deeper level. I find the following question to be pretty magical: "Hey, before we start (the interview, coaching, working on a project, making a decision) tell me some more about yourself." I let them decide if it's professional or personal and how deep to go, and 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 is could go deeper into personal, ask them. I've never had anyone refuse this request (it is always asked with real curiosity and a smile.) Just about everyone is happy to be seen and 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 who 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. It helps me build that common ground.

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 than I am to hear the answer to the first business question. It creates a virtuous exchange of listening and connecting that builds 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**. If you do interrupt, make it about them not about you. Ask them questions that let them enlarge, explore, and go deeper with what they are saying. Don’t interrupt to tell them how much you know.
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?” Make sure that the questions do not take on the tone of the grand inquisitor, rarely a way to make it safer. You can push harder for answers once they are a bit more secure.

Keep it Going

To keep people feeling safe I think it is important to create a **culture of gratitude**. You can thank too many people for too little and inadvertently spawn the thank you equivalent of the soccer trophy organization, so be judicious and focused. But let people know that you see and appreciate their efforts, value working with them, and appreciate their openness, candor, and honesty when it is given. All of this tells them you value a safe place for them and for you.

1. Once the team, unit, or organization is safe and trusting, you can message the growing depth of your trust in them by **challenging and stretching** them to new, higher goals. You will eventually lose some of that trust if you do not push them to grow.
2. To keep the group building the collective trust, the leader has to make sure that **everyone is in the pool**. As teams develop it is quite natural for some members to get the work faster, take some aspects of it deeper, and seem to add more to the enterprise. This is to be expected. But the leader must circle round to those who need a little more help in order to make their best contributions. The performers will be fine without the extra attention.
3. If you have gotten this far and the team is a safe and trusting place, just be sure that it is also **fun**. Light, good-natured kidding is always a good sign for me that the team is in a safe place, particularly when there is a fair amount of self-deprecating humor. Honest laughter is a good sign that relationships are solid and that the climate is open and trusting.

From individual relationships to teams, more work will be done — and done better — and higher goals will be reached for and achieved in environments that are safe and trusting than when fear, trepidation, and anxiety rein.

About Ed O'Neil

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