Coaching is a very special learning and development relationship. Among lawyers the ability to coach is a skill that turns associates into partners and partners into leaders.

Lawyers coach other lawyers in their firms and very often they coach their clients as well.

Rapport is special in a coaching relationship. Rapport is one of the active ingredients of coaching that makes it work. More rapport between the coach and client (the person being coached) will typically make the coaching go more quickly. Less rapport will make it less effective. What this means is that more time spent by the coach and their client up front will lead to less effort later to produce results. Less effort up front to create rapport will mean more effort is needed later to stimulate the client to right action.

If you have a coaching role and you have a new client, who will be a challenge, taking the time to establish rapport will make the coaching more successful. In extreme circumstances the rapport building might need to be 99% of the coaching relationship. Imagine having to coach someone who comes from a totally different culture and who may not speak your language. This doesn’t happen in the workplace very often to this degree, but in sports it is happening increasingly. For example, many players in the National Hockey League come to North America with no English, yet they still must be coached.

So what is rapport. The dictionary definition speaks of mutual trust. My favorite definition of trust is ‘an absence of vulnerability.’ So rapport could be considered a ‘mutual absence of vulnerability.’ How is that developed from the coach’s side of the relationship? Here are five ideas.

1. **Be curious.** Ask a lot of questions. People trust people who are interested in them. The reason for this is that people tend to feel isolated as life gets more complicated. And when someone pays attention to us we feel safer and less isolated.

   Think of the car buying situation with the car salesperson as the coach. The salesperson who focuses on finding out the customer’s needs before trying to close the sale will do much better than the salesperson who focuses on the product. When someone tries to sell us something, whether a car or an idea, if we feel they know us, we will feel safer and be more open to what they have to say.

   As a coach the more you use curious information gathering to build rapport the more likely it is that your client will trust you and be coachable.

2. **Be an open space listener.** When you ask a question deliberately pause to let the person you’re asking answer. This is a sign of respect, which builds feelings of safety and trust.
Imagine if you had an audience with the Pope. Would you ask a question and then jump in while he was answering. No, not at all. You would respectfully wait for the answer.

It is the same in building rapport. To build trust you must patiently provide an empty space for the answer to fill. Patient open space listening produces respect, an absence of vulnerability and rapport.

3. **Be a flexible mirror.** To make someone you’re talking to feel comfortable it is helpful to mirror their demeanour. If they are slow and deliberate they will feel most comfortable if you are the same way. If you’re in a hurry they will feel uncomfortable and less safe.

   **When trying to mirror someone look for their language pattern.** Is it deliberate or fast? Try to measure their breathing pattern in the same way. Is it fast or slow? Reflect it. Watch out for their body language. If they are relaxed, don’t lean in aggressively.

Being flexible in how you act around your coaching clients will help you to be a better coach. It will help you build rapport, their feelings of safety and their receptiveness to your coaching.

4. **Be charismatic.** When coaching act as if your client is your whole world. Focusing intently on them will build rapport. It will make them feel important and make it easier for them to trust you and this trust will make them more sympathetic to your coaching.

   In order to focus intently on them get into a quiet space to coach. This should be away from distractions. Make it easy on yourself to focus. For example, don’t coach somewhere where there is a lot of action going on behind your client. If necessary, face a wall with your client in front of you to make it easy on yourself.

   If you are distracted during the coaching session it is like saying your client is of less importance than what is distracting. What does it say to answer a phone while listening to another person?

5. **Be understanding.** One other way to build rapport is let your client know that you understand where they are coming from. When you acknowledge them, that is you say and demonstrate that you understand, it doesn’t mean you agree it just means that you have heard them.

   This creates an absence of vulnerability because people want to know that they have been heard. That makes them feel important and makes it easier to trust.

   To demonstrate that you understand let them know that their words make sense to you and, when possible, that you have had similar experiences and thoughts. This might be done by telling them about a personal experience that is like theirs. If that is not possible say that you understand or ask them to explain further in a way that lets them know you are interested in their experience. Being heard is a building block of trusting.
So building rapport is taking steps to create trust by creating an absence of vulnerability. This is done by helping the client to feel safe. Steps to take include being curious, creating an open space for answers to questions, mirroring the demeanour of the client, giving the client your total attention and acknowledging that they are being heard. It’s all about being an excellent listener.

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http://apps.americanbar.org/lpm/lpt/articles/mgt06041.html