

Mimicry: Subtle Imitation can Dramatically Improve Deal-Making Prowess

By

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Whether it's encountering a distant board of directors, an employee who wants a pay rise, the grumpy chairman, or meeting a new client for the first time, walking into a high-stakes meeting can be nerve-racking. Building trust and having a positive connection is not always easy, particularly if there is not a natural rapport.

These types of gatherings can involve intense competition, withholding of information and distrust. All the preparation, coaching and rehearsal in the world cannot guarantee that you will be able to get along, negotiate effectively and make the deal you want to make.

If the goal is to come out of that face-to-face with the biggest slice of the pie, to be influential and persuasive, it might be time to think about subtle mimicry.

Mimicry as a scientifically measured and proven negotiation strategy is a new area of study in psychology, and its benefits and limitations are only just emerging from academia.

Matching the mannerisms of another person with our own sends a signal that social bonds are possible. It is something humans do naturally and spontaneously when they are with someone with whom they are in tune.

Lovers or a mother and child are classic examples. With this connection comes the sharing of information and the building of trust, which are also vital ingredients in negotiation and deal making.

Mimicry sounds like monkey business. They lean back, you lean back; they smile, you smile; they scratch their head, you scratch your head. However, the subtle mirroring of gestures and language style can work to build trust and rapport in negotiations, and there is a growing body of evidence to prove it.

The latest research to examine the idea that mimicry can be an effective negotiation tactic comes from an award-winning study by business professors William W. Maddux of INSEAD, Elizabeth Mullen of Stanford University, and Adam Galinsky of Northwestern University.

Their study, *Chameleons Bake Bigger Pies and Take Bigger Pieces: Strategic Behavioural Mimicry Facilitates Negotiation Outcomes*, demonstrates that mimicry can be a highly effective negotiation tool. The research team argues that mimickers 'bake bigger pies at the bargaining table, and consequently take a larger share of that pie for themselves.'

In one of the study's two major experiments, the researchers assigned a group of 104 MBA students in a negotiations course into a role-play exercise between a job candidate and a recruiter. Students were given one week to prepare their stance as candidate or recruiter and told they would be scored in eight areas during the interview.

Five minutes before the interviews started, a sample of the students (both recruiters and job candidates) were given a slip of paper instructing them to mimic the mannerisms of their negotiation partner, and to do it subtly enough so that the other person did not notice what they were doing.

In all of the role-plays, the use of mimicry increased the value of the deal. Subtle mimicry also resulted in better negotiation outcomes, not just for the person using

mimicry techniques but also for their 'opponents'. In the test, participants were asked to rate the other person's performance. The mimickers consistently scored higher.

The study demonstrated that those being mimicked trusted the person with whom they were negotiating more than those in groups where mimicking was not occurring. It seems mimicry can encourage us to share information and make a win-win deal. Where there is cooperation rather than competition, there is an awareness that together 'a bigger pie' can be baked.

In all the study's experiments, participants never noticed they were being imitated. This is a critical point when it comes to mimicry. If someone becomes aware they are being mimicked, all bets are off. 'You want to build a subtle amount of rapport but nothing overwhelming,' Galinsky says.

Melbourne-based psychologist Christopher Shen believes that mimicry can also backfire around those who want to dominate rather than build rapport. 'If they exhibit a dominant posture, they prefer someone who demonstrates a submissive posture – sitting forwards with their legs together and perhaps their hands rested on their lap, for example – and vice versa,' Shen says.

In short, it is more effective to mimic behaviours that aren't confrontational. Galinsky agrees that the use of mimicry is limited. It does not work in hostile situations and single-outcome negotiations where one side wins, one side loses.

Mimicry works in what Galinsky calls 'mixed motive' situations where there needs to be negotiations – give and take, or a sharing of information. Hence the pie metaphor used in the study. An understanding of each other's interests is needed to be able to work out a deal that is beneficial to both sides.

The second experiment in the study was a more complex scenario involving the sale of a petrol station involving multiple rounds of negotiations. The participants were again divided into pairs. Researchers found that mimickers were more likely to make a deal and receive higher trust ratings.

Ten out of 15 petrol station negotiations where mimicry was used resulted in a deal. This was opposed to just two successful negotiations out of 16 when no mimicry was involved.

In the final experiment, a single-issue negotiation, mimicry did not have any impact on results.

Of course, it is one thing to do experiments in a controlled environment. It is another altogether to observe mimicry in the real corporate world, where aggressive, dominant behaviour is par for the course.

In her role as principal consultant with United Group Management, consultant Dr Margaret Byrne works with senior executives on major change projects. She has worked in Asia and Europe as well as with Australian public and private companies. Byrne prefers the term 'mirroring' over mimicry. 'Mimicry sounds like you are sending someone up,' she says. 'In coaching relationships we talk about mirroring very often.'

As well as an alteration of mannerisms, mirroring someone can involve synchronising vocal tone and pace with theirs, even imitating their breathing during discussions.

Byrne observed this during her doctorate studies when she spent six years researching executive behaviour in meetings, and looking at the differences in communication styles between men and women.

Clients always have someone they are beholden to: a chief executive, or a chairman with whom they don't get along. 'We talk about how to influence these stakeholders,' Byrne says.

Byrne works with senior executives on strategies to improve understanding. 'It is easier to build rapport with people from your own subgroup,' she says, because much of the mirroring is done unconsciously. 'But if you are an Australian female executive dealing with a Chinese government official in the Ministry of Finance in Beijing, the rapport-building techniques won't be instinctive and natural.'

Here is where Byrne sees the benefits in carefully mirroring body language and, through an interpreter, picking up the language style of the person with whom you're interacting, and starting to mirror their communication style. This can create a common sense of understanding. 'If you don't have that natural empathy then you have to work hard at building it,' Byrne says.

As is the case with tactics such as flattery, ingratiation or asking for advice, the use of mimicry in meetings has the potential to be manipulative. 'In tough negotiations where your cards are weaker, you can work hard to build rapport – and then break it,' Byrne says. 'And that can feel incredibly uncomfortable.'

In the same way, looking at your watch and yawning can send a very clear message.

There is much to be said for being aware of how others behave in negotiations. Having what psychologists call a 'meta-awareness' of a situation can help build a broader perspective. 'Many executives would vastly improve their outcomes and make their life much easier if they took the time to take the perspective of others and build the trust of their subordinates,' Galinsky says. 'When subordinates feel respected by their superiors they perform better.'

It's been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Yet now it seems that mimicking someone might do more than pay them a non-spoken compliment – it might actually help you come out ahead in a negotiation.

The *Chameleons Bake Bigger Pies and Take Bigger Pieces: Strategic Behavioural Mimicry Facilitates Negotiation Outcomes* study, originally published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology is available online at www.sciencedirect.com.

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Basic body language 101

To build rapport in a meeting

Do

- make eye contact but don't stare/glare (unblinking eye contact is a technique to dominate)
- feel confident and comfortable about being in the space
- have great posture
- respect the other person's space
- use fluid arm movements

Don't

- fold your arms
- cross your legs
- slouch
- twitch, fidget or indulge in other nervous habits such as scratching or nail biting
- be too stiff
- touch your face, throat or mouth
- narrow your eyes
- adjust the crotch
- look up at the ceiling or at the group
- rub the back of your head
- look at your watch

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