

Gaining Respect in the Workplace

by Ben Rawal

What does it take to build professional respect, and achieve positive outcomes for your organisation? In this article, Ben Rawal explores how your communication and behaviours will either help or hinder your ability to establish and maintain a respectful relationship.

Being successful in your role as an accountant is reliant on a variety of competences, skills and techniques. In most instances, the way we behave, communicate and manage our emotions are key to how we are perceived and what others think about us.

At times, we may consider the perceptions of others to be inaccurate or unfair, especially when there is little or no evidence available. Unfortunately however, it is these perceptions that will ultimately determine whether we are admired, trusted and respected.

What is respect and why is it important?

Similar in many ways to other intangible words that we use to describe an individual's personal attributes, respect captures a combination of feelings, beliefs and personal values. Often aligned closely with the feeling of admiration, gaining respect from others often takes time and can be difficult to reverse when damage has been done.

As a concept, respect is a powerful yet vague term. For example, compare the differences in your own behaviour when working with individuals that you respect, and those that you do not. Your willingness to interact, listen, trust, and empathise with those that you respect will often prioritise your personal endeavours without too much thought.

It is for these reasons that building and maintaining respect can offer distinct advantages in your role as an accountant – both within your own team and with clients.

Building Respect

Despite the challenges in describing the feelings of respect, there are

many behaviours that can be used to maximise your chances of building respect.

One of the key aspects here is your ability to be consistent with your behaviours – this will provide others with a clear indication that your approach is predictable – a no surprises approach. In addition to consistency, the following behaviours will also help to increase the level of respect you achieve with others:

Listen!

Listening is a difficult skill to master. Many of us believe we are 'good' listeners, being able to follow others' conversations and engage in the topic being discussed.

Regardless of your thoughts on this point, the research into listening skills indicates that most of us hear (and understand) a message that differs to the one being provided by the other individual. This occurs due to a variety of factors, including our own beliefs, biases, and past experiences of 'similar' conversations.

To make matters worse, at times other behaviours can indicate (rightly or wrongly) that we are not listening to another individual. For example, if our eye contact is focused elsewhere, or our posture indicates that we are disinterested in the conversation, it could be perceived that we are not listening. Even if we have heard every single word, we may not give this impression.

Individuals that display good listening skills through their body language, eye contact and verbal responses help to create a level of respect with others.

In part, these behaviours help to build a reliable relationship where the other

person feels comfortable that they are being heard.

“Make sure you show others that you are paying attention to the conversation – good eye contact and posture demonstrate interest in the other individual's comments”

Understanding Perspectives

Good listening involves understanding another individuals' perspective. This often takes a little work, particularly when we simply don't agree with what is being said. It's probably not difficult to recall a time when you disagreed with another's viewpoint, but did you take the time to understand how they had formed their view?

From time-to-time, we all make decisions and form views based on assumptions, beliefs and cognitive biases. As an accountant, using logical and rational thinking is a pre-requisite to success, but at times we all make emotional decisions.

The critical point here is to understand; you don't have to agree. An understanding will enable more effective questioning, challenge and most importantly, respect. Consider your own conversations with others where the individual has disagreed or argued their point, without fully understanding yours. It instantly becomes more difficult to respect the individual due to the imposition of their viewpoint at the expense of yours. They may have won the conversation, but almost certainly lost the respect.

Interrupting the conversation

At times, many of us possess an urgency to make our point. This can occur for a variety of reasons, including the fact that we disagree, we feel aggrieved in some way, or even due to excitement or lack of emotional control.

This type of behaviour is unhelpful when seeking to build respect with others. By interrupting, you are likely to encourage the other individual to stop speaking – before they have finished the point they were attempting to make. If this type of behaviour is a consistent occurrence, it will eventually reduce any respect that the individual may have once had.

The growth in video conference discussions and meetings during the past 12 months has certainly increased the likelihood that you will interrupt an individual. We often rely on visual cues that an individual has finished speaking, and this is easier to identify when we are in the same physical environment. However, the key difference here is the accidental, rather than the deliberate act to make ourselves heard before the other individual has finished their point. The key learning points are simply to apologise for interrupting and challenge yourself on why you were so eager to raise your point.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the points raised above, there are times where interruptions pose little threat to the level of respect in place between individuals. This is often observed in groups where the level of rapport is high and has been enhanced over time. However, this type of interaction is commonly associated with a relaxed environment, usually involving friends and family. There is potential for transference to a professional setting, but only in the right types of conversation, environment and general acceptance that interrupting is part of the relationship.

“Allow others to finish their point before you respond. This simple sign of respect indicates that you are genuinely engaged in what is being said, rather than simply trying to make your own point heard”



Let's be honest

How difficult do you find it to admit your mistakes to others? If you regularly find yourself making excuses, blaming others, or even rationalising your behaviour as acceptable, you are likely to damage your respect building abilities.

Most of us find it uncomfortable when we do or get something wrong. The realisation of a mistake frequently leads to feelings of guilt and shame, and our immediate response generally illustrates our coping mechanism for the emotion – often wanting to avoid any ownership or responsibility for the error.

Admitting a mistake changes the dynamic of the conversation. It sends a very clear message to others that perfection is a fallacy and that we are all vulnerable to a greater or lesser extent. Breaking through the awkwardness is incredibly powerful from the perspective of building respect – it indicates openness and honesty on your part.

However, a final word of warning here – make sure your honesty is supported by a plan to resolve the issue or error. Getting it wrong from time-to-time is fine, but make sure you learn from the

mistake. Failure to do so will eventually harm any earlier respect that you had achieved.

“Be prepared to admit (and learn from) your mistakes. Being honest, showing vulnerability and taking action are all effective ways of developing respect”

Asserting yourself

Imagine interacting with three individuals. The first is incredibly passive: allowing others to impose their needs without pushing back, and frequently agreeing to activities that they do not want to do. The second individual is more aggressive: ensuring that they get what they want regardless of the impact on everyone else, often supported by unreasonable behaviour.

Finally, the third individual is confident and self-assured. They make requests of others, ensuring no one is diminished during the interaction, and are prepared to deal with others' unreasonable behaviour.

The behaviour of the three individuals demonstrates the difference between passive, aggressive and assertive behaviours, respectively. It is very difficult to genuinely respect either of the first two approaches, given that the behaviour displayed leads to a 'winner' and a 'loser'.

Assertiveness creates a fine line between passive and aggressive behaviours, and is difficult to consistently achieve during your interactions. One of the common blockers is self-confidence – it is almost impossible to display assertive behaviour without the positive beliefs and mindset required for the task. Examining, challenging and 'testing' your beliefs are a highly effective way of improving your confidence level, and engaging in more assertive conversations. Respecting yourself will ultimately help you achieve respect from others.

“Don't confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness – the two behaviours are very different, and will also develop or hinder your chances of gaining respect”

Summing It Up

The concept of respect requires a careful analysis of our own behaviours and communication skills when interacting with others. By paying careful attention to the two-way interaction with others, we will maximise our chances of gaining respect.

The starting point is ultimately about achieving self-respect and respecting others, before you achieve a mutual response in return.



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Ben's top tips for gaining respect:



Listen up

Actively demonstrate that you are listening to others, through both your verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Ask questions, and take a genuine interest in what is being said and how the messages are being delivered.

Take a different perspective

We frequently focus on our own perspective when attempting to explain our point. This can sometimes cause problems, especially if we fail to understand how others have formed their viewpoint. Remember, we don't always have to agree with what is being said.

Let them finish

Interrupting others in most instances is seen as being rude and not genuinely listening to what is being said. Help build respect with others by keeping quiet until they've finished their point.

Being honest

Admitting your failures and your plans for resolution – are a great way to build respect. It demonstrates that you are willing to display a level of vulnerability and that perfection simply doesn't exist.

Assertiveness

Standing your ground and communicating your needs in a non-aggressive manner are both important if you are to command a level of respect with others. Start by developing your own level of self-confidence.