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## Avoid social awkwardness in workplace conversations

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My last several columns have focused on emotional intelligence. Those with high emotional intelligence have the capacity to “read” others and respond appropriately even under conflict, stress or challenge. Those people who reside in the “it’s all about me” camp can be almost blind to the impact they have on those around them.

Some don’t care (which can be career suicide) and some are just too wrapped up in their own world to notice. Either way, to be effective in the workplace (and promotable) you must learn both how others perceive you and you must develop behaviors that increase others respect and trust of you. One place to start is on improving your social abilities.

Ever notice how some people seem oblivious to their own social awkwardness? Here are a few examples, those who:

- ✦ Enter into conversations too harshly, uninvited (not noticing the two people are having a “private” conversation) or with an awkward off-topic comment (that no one knows quite how to respond to)
- ✦ Constantly interrupt
- ✦ Talk too loudly
- ✦ Get too physically close and invade others’ personal space
- ✦ Talk too much without pausing (you feel breathless trying to get a word in)
- ✦ Miss the social cues indicating that tact and sensitivity are more important during this particular conversation than making a point
- ✦ Make inappropriate comments or jokes.

Unfortunately for the “socially awkward,” most people feel uncomfortable around them and that makes trust and rapport — and therefore their ability to advance in their career — almost impossible.

In contrast, when you witness individuals conversing who are truly “present” with each other, it’s like watching fine jazz improvisation or dancers in sync. There is a matching mood, pace and give and take in the conversation. They have “other” radar that tells them when and how to enter into a conversation, how to put the other at ease, how much to say and when to pause and let the other speak.

### Here are some tips to increase one’s social ability for the workplace:

**Pay attention to other’s nonverbal cues** — tone of voice, facial expressions or body posture that can mean “I’m open” or “I’m closed.” Notice when these clues indicate someone is resisting your ideas or agenda. For example, if most of the team has their arms crossed or are avoiding eye contact with you, this might be a sign they aren’t with you. Or you might notice (if you are paying attention) that the team has suddenly gone quiet. Possibly their silence is indicative of how they have “given up” trying to change your mind.

**Ask more than you tell.** Open-ended questions are best, such as, “Help me understand your concerns?” Then avoid debate, arguing or getting defensive. Frankly, getting defensive when people are trying to offer you their view or feedback is like shooting yourself in the foot. Look at the other side before automatically defending your position.

**Listen carefully to what others are saying in your attempt to truly “understand” them.** This means you can’t be tuned into that automatic tape in your head playing your next attack, defense or argument. Give your full attention — which means you have to be present. Practice doing this without judgment or thinking about how you will next respond.

**Pay attention and be conscious of the meaning, feeling and emotions behind the words you hear.** Many words carry different meanings to different people. To compound this challenge, the “meaning” is often more about “how” something has been said versus the actual words they use. If it’s a loaded word or one with multiple meanings, ask them to tell you more about what it means to them. Inquire about how they are feeling if you are hunching a particular emotion.

**Be curious and present.** In most conversations, there is a subtle emotional dance; eyes that meet and brighten, changing facial expressions, pacing and changing tonality. Connection, rapport and positive feelings (which we “catch”) happen at this level. And this is a good thing for your workplace: Rapport increases creativity, problem solving and better decision making.

Finally, if you are one of the socially awkward and it’s impacting your career, find a coach who can help you develop social and professional behaviors that will get you advanced (and not booted)!

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