Two Snap Judgments People Make When They First Meet You

Amy Cuddy, a psychologist at the Harvard Business School, has been studying first impressions for more than a decade. She and her colleagues found that we make snap judgments about other people that answer two primary questions:

- Can I trust this person?
- Can I respect this person’s capabilities?

According to Cuddy’s research, 80% to 90% of a first impression is based on these two traits. Subconsciously, you and the people you meet are asking yourselves, “Can I trust that this person has good intentions toward me?” and “Is this person capable?”

We often assume that competence is the most important factor, and people have a tendency to play this up when they meet someone; however, Cuddy’s research shows that trust is the most important factor. In order for your competence to matter, people must trust you first. If there’s no trust, people actually perceive competence as a negative. As Cuddy said, “A warm, trustworthy person who is also strong elicits admiration, but only after you’ve achieved trust does your strength become a gift rather than a threat.”
How to Master the Art of the First Impression

Since it only takes seconds for someone to decide if you’re trustworthy and competent, and research shows that first impressions are very difficult to change, the pressure that comes with meeting new people is justifiably intense.

If you try to project confidence but haven’t first established trust, your efforts will backfire. No one wants to end up respected but disliked. As Cuddy said, “If someone you’re trying to influence doesn’t trust you, you’re not going to get very far; in fact, you might even elicit suspicion, because you come across as manipulative.”

Once you recognize the importance of trustworthiness over competence, you can take control of the first impressions you make. Here are some tips to help you make that happen the next time you meet someone new:

**Let the person you’re meeting speak first.** Let them take the lead in the conversation, and you can always ask good questions to help this along. Taking the floor right away shows dominance, and that won’t help you build trust. Trust and warmth are created when people feel understood, and they need to be doing a lot of sharing for that to happen.

**Use positive body language.** Becoming cognizant of your gestures, expressions, and tone of voice and making certain they’re positive will draw people to you like ants to a picnic. Using an enthusiastic tone, uncrossing your arms, maintaining eye contact, and leaning towards the speaker are all forms of positive body language, which can make all the difference.
Put away your phone. It’s impossible to build trust and monitor your phone at the same time. Nothing turns people off like a mid-conversation text message or even a quick glance at your phone. When you commit to a conversation, focus all your energy on the conversation. You will find that conversations are more enjoyable and effective when you immerse yourself in them.

Make time for small talk. It might sound trivial, but research shows that starting meetings with just five minutes of small talk gets better results. Many trust builders, such as small talk, can seem a waste of time to people who don’t understand their purpose.

Practice active listening. Active listening means concentrating on what the other person is saying, rather than planning what you’re going to say next. Asking insightful questions is a great way to illustrate that you’re really paying attention. If you’re not checking for understanding or asking a probing question, you shouldn’t be talking. Not only does thinking about what you’re going to say next take your attention away from the speaker, hijacking the conversation shows that you think you have something more important to say. This means that you shouldn’t jump in with solutions to the speaker’s problems. It’s human nature to want to help people, but what a lot of us don’t realize is that when we jump in with advice or a solution, we’re shutting the other person down and destroying trust. It’s essentially a more socially acceptable way of saying, “Okay, I’ve got it. You can stop now!” The effect is the same.

Do your homework. People love it when you know things about them that they didn’t have to share. Not creepy stuff, but simple facts that you
took the time to learn from their LinkedIn page or company website. While this may not work for chance encounters, it’s crucial when a first meeting is planned ahead of time, such as a job interview or a consultation with a potential client. Find out as much as you can about all the people you’re meeting, their company, their company’s primary challenges, and so on. This demonstrates competence and trustworthiness by highlighting your initiative and responsibility.

**Bringing It All Together**

It’s the little things that make a first impression a good one, and the importance of establishing trust cannot be overstated. Now if someone would just tell this to the politicians!

*What do you do to convey trustworthiness to the people you meet? Please share your thoughts in the comments section below, as I learn just as much from you as you do from me.*

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