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Tips for Reading the Room Before a Meeting or Presentation

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In every conversation at work, there's the explicit discussion happening — the words being spoken out loud — and the tacit one. To be successful in most organizations, it's important to understand the underlying conversations and reactions that people in the room are having. But if you aren't picking up on those subtle cues, how can you learn to do so? What signals should you be looking for? And what can you do to influence the unspoken dynamics?

What the Experts Say

"Knowing how to read between the lines is a critical workplace skill," says Annie McKee, a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of *How to Be Happy at Work*. "You need to understand other people — what they want, what they don't want, their fears, hopes, dreams, and motivations," she says. "This builds trust. And trust is fundamental to getting things done." In addition, you must be aware of your effect on others, according to Karen Dillon, coauthor of *How Will You Measure Your Life?* "You need to be constantly assessing how other people are responding to you," she says. "Some people find this easy and intuitive. For others, it's a challenge." The good news is that this skill can be learned. Here are some ways how.

Observe

The best way to read a room is to pay close attention to people — and not just what they're saying. "If you're relying [solely] on their words, you're only getting half the picture," McKee says. Upon entering a meeting, she recommends, do "a quick scan of the individuals," noting "who's next to whom, who's smiling, who's not, who's standing, who's sitting, and how much space is between people." Next, try to pick up on "the almost invisible clues on how people are feeling" by looking carefully at "their facial expressions, posture, and body language." Be on the lookout for "quick microexpressions" such as "fleeting smiles, raised eyebrows, or even tiny frowns." Vigilant observation will give you the information you need to interpret group dynamics. Dillon recommends identifying role models to further improve your social awareness. "Think of people you admire who are great at reading the room," she says. "Isolate the things they do and try to emulate those."

Control how much you talk

You can't observe if you're spending most of your time talking. You need to listen, Dillon says. "Be conscious of how much you are saying."

Whether you're in a room with a large group of people, a small group, or you're speaking with a colleague one-on-one, she advises taking frequent pauses "to really think about what the other person is saying" and watching out for the nonverbal cues. Don't just wait for your turn to talk; there is "no shame" in silence. When the conversation is more intimate, Dillon says, you must strive to "make the other person feel heard." Be present. Be engaged. Make eye contact. "Position yourself so that you're not inviting others to butt into your conversation. Help the other people feel confident that you are all in the moment together." After the other person says something, paraphrase what they said to indicate that you're paying attention. Similarly, "if the other person doesn't seem to be hearing what you're saying, and you start to realize that you're talking at them, you should ask a question," she adds. Try open-ended questions such as "What do you think about…?" or, "What are the consequences of…?" or, "Have you experienced this?" The answers to these questions help you uncover what's really going on.

Interpret your observations

Once you've "tuned into the emotions and energy in the room," you can "try to make sense of what you think you know," McKee says. She recommends "generating multiple hypotheses about what's going on." Consider the people in the group more broadly and reflect on the possible reasons for their individual and collective emotional states. "What's happening in their lives? What's going on in their jobs? What do you know about these people?" If you don't know much, this can be tricky, but you can still come up with hypotheses for what's motivating people. At the same time, you shouldn't project your feelings onto the group. "Keep your emotions in check," McKee says, adding that this is a feat that "takes tremendous skill and self-control." If, say, the room is reverberating tension, don't let yourself "be hijacked by negative energy, and don't give in to your natural inclination to be frightened and

angry." Remember, too, that the emotions you perceive are not personal. "It probably doesn't have anything to do with you."

Check your hypotheses

When you've developed a few explanations for what's going on in the room, check your understanding. You can do this by continuing to gather further information — though you should continue to be open to what you're seeing and sensing so that you don't fall prey to confirmation bias. You can also ask people directly, in private, McKee says. When you're in one-on-one conversations, you might say something like, "In the meeting I saw you furrow your brow when discussion turned to the xyz project — how do you feel about it?" Most likely, your colleagues will be pleased you noticed, she says. When you make note of people's feelings and reactions, they "feel attended to." Another tactic McKee suggests is talking with a trusted colleague, mentor, or coach. "Talk about what you've observed — not in a gossipy way, but as a learning opportunity," she says. "You want someone else to check ideas with" so that you can say, "What do you think is going on with that colleague? Or that coalition?"

Put your perceptions into practice

If in the midst of a meeting or interaction, you notice that things are getting tense or heated, you can "take the opportunity to shift the emotional reality of the room," McKee says. "Use humor," she adds. "Or empathize with the group — make them feel okay." She recommends determining who in the room has "the most social or hierarchical capital" and then focusing on getting that person on your side. "It could be a person who has the most seniority, or the person who others are sitting closest to. It could be the person who's telling jokes and has the ability to lighten the mood." Keep an eye out "for any positive signals" — the executive in the corner who's smiling, for instance — and concentrate on those. Importantly, continue to pay attention to what's

not being said. “Most people are just waiting to talk,” she says. As a result, “we may catch most of the words, but we miss the music.”

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Consider the people in the room more broadly and reflect on the possible reasons for their individual and collective emotional states.
- Look for microexpressions such as fleeting smiles or raised eyebrows. These offer clues to group dynamics and individual emotions.
- Isolate the behaviors that your socially aware role model exhibits and try to emulate them.

Don’t:

- Be distracted. Maintain eye contact and be present and engaged in conversations with others.
- Make it all about you. Ask open-ended questions to help you uncover what’s really going on.
- Allow yourself to be hijacked by a room’s negative energy. Keep your emotions in check and do what you can to shift the emotional reality of the room.

Case Study #1: Pay attention to people’s body language and facial expressions

As the chief human resources officer at Prosek Partners, the global PR company, Karen Niovitch Davis has a good deal of experience reading rooms. “I’ve had a 20+ year career in HR,” she says. “A lot of what I do is about trying to really understand what people are saying when they are not actually saying it.”

Every week, she attends a management meeting at Prosek for senior vice presidents, managing directors, and partners. The company's CEO leads the meeting, and Karen, because of her role, is often aware of what's on the agenda.

"Since some of the things that we discuss are sensitive or controversial, I am often prepping for how my colleagues will react," Karen says.

Recently, for instance, the CEO announced that the company would be expanding and that it had signed a lease for more space in the building. Certain employees and teams would be moving to another floor.

Karen paid close attention to her colleagues' body language and facial expressions to gauge their reactions. She was prepared for a mixed bag. "I knew everyone in the room was thinking: What does this mean for me? What does this mean for my team? Are we all going to have to move?" she says. "That's human nature."

Many of her colleagues seemed "genuinely pleased" by the news, she recalls. "They were excited because the move means we are growing."

Others, however, gave off a decidedly different vibe. Some people's faces went blank; others visibly frowned. One — we'll call her Jane — looked down and scribbled a note to a colleague sitting next to her.

Karen assumed that Jane wasn't looking forward to the prospect of moving. She thought about what she already knew about Jane. "She does not like to change her routine," Karen notes.

Shortly after the meeting ended, Karen approached Jane. She told her that it seemed that she was unhappy about the move. "I wanted to make sure she knew I noticed her," Karen says.

Jane appreciated that Karen noticed. "She said, 'I don't want to move because I like where my desk is now,'" Karen says. "She told me that she didn't want to say anything in the meeting because she didn't want to come off as not a team player."

Karen listened attentively to Jane's reasoning. She empathized with her and asked her open-ended questions about her concerns. She wanted to make sure Jane felt heard. "I told her that the office would be an exact replica of our current space and that the views would be better," she says.

But Jane was not swayed by the argument. "I told her we would work something out so she would not have to move," Karen says.

Case Study #2: Don't assume you know how other people feel — ask them

Heather Anderson, an executive mentor at Vistage International, the San Diego–based advisory and executive coaching organization, says that she often speaks to her clients about the importance of social intelligence. "Emotions contain data," she says. "I tell them that the emotional data they receive in their team meetings, their one-on-ones, and their client calls are just as important to their end game as anything else."

She speaks from experience. Recently, Heather ran a meeting for one of her peer-to-peer coaching groups at Vistage. One of the agenda items was to provide feedback to one of the newer members — we'll call her Susan. These meetings happen regularly; their purpose "is to challenge each other to be better leaders."

"People are candid in these meetings and it can feel harsh if you're on the receiving end — particularly when it's your first time," Heather says. "It's intimidating."

Heather first scanned the room to gauge the temperature; it wasn't particularly tense, but she could tell that Susan was nervous. Next, she listened carefully to what others said. The comments were "frank," and it wasn't particularly positive.

She paid close attention to Susan's body language. "I could see the look of surprise and fear on Susan's face," she says. "She shrunk in her chair and her shoulders dropped."

Heather empathized with Susan's emotions and reflected on what was happening. "I thought she felt threatened," Heather says. "I wondered, 'Should we soften our words?'"

To be sure, she asked Susan how she felt. "I said, 'How are you feeling? What is it like to get this feedback?'"

Susan surprised her. "She said, 'Wow. This is intense, but this is exactly what I signed up for.'"

Heather realized that she had projected some of her own feelings onto Susan. "I expected her to feel a certain way," she says, "but you can't assume you know."

Later, Heather asked Susan how she planned to use the feedback she received during the meeting. "Susan was able to recite very specific action items, and she talked enthusiastically about the things she wanted to do and changes she wanted to make," Heather says.

Heather plans to follow up with Susan in a few weeks.

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Rebecca Knight is a journalist who writes about all things related to the changing nature of careers and the workplace. Her essays and reported stories have been featured in The Boston Globe, Business Insider, The New York Times, BBC, and The Christian Science Monitor. She was shortlisted as a Reuters Institute Fellow at Oxford University in 2023. Earlier in her career, she spent a decade as an editor and reporter at the Financial Times in New York, London, and Boston.

