



BEHAVIORAL MIRRORING IN INTERVIEWING

By ROBIN K. DREEKE and JOE NAVARRO, M.A.

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Whether preparing for an interview or meeting with an informant, investigators should spend a significant amount of time planning for the most important part of any human interaction—creating and building rapport. Consistently building rapport with various individuals of different genders and ages who represent diverse backgrounds, educational levels, experiences, ethnicities,

and mental health concerns proves challenging to many law enforcement professionals. Everyone has their own personality and preference for how they like to give and receive information.¹

One of the most powerful and proven ways of establishing rapport is isopraxis, or mirroring another's behavior.² From the time people are born, they learn to share mirroring behaviors. When a mother

smiles, her baby smiles; when she giggles, her baby giggles; when she arches her eyes, her baby does the same. These mirroring behaviors continue into courtship behaviors reflected back as part of the mating game. People find comfort in and, therefore, seek mirroring behaviors. They also discover solace in processing information presented consistent with their personality and preferences.³

Personality mirroring corresponds with nonverbal mirroring—it tries to match the thought process and style of communication a person prefers. Some people like to socialize as part of the communication process, while others prefer a more direct, task-oriented tact. People tend to favor information that they receive in a pleasing manner, and, consequently, they become more attentive and receptive. Studies have shown that individuals have different personality types for processing information, as well as preferences for how they give and receive information.⁴ Investigators who assess for such traits can effortlessly mirror communication styles to conduct

more effective interviews and better develop informants. To demonstrate this concept, the authors offer an overview of a law enforcement professional's attempts to develop a source and his partner's assistance in doing so.

Background

Wilson has worked with the Joint Terrorism Task Force for a number of years, and, because of the great relationship with and mentoring from his training agent and partner, Smith, he has become one of the squad's more notable interviewers and source developers.⁵ His techniques include active listening skills, personality and emotional assessments, and a consideration

of the best tools to use when dealing with individuals.

Despite Wilson's excellent track record in conducting interviews and developing sources, his encounters occasionally did not go as well as he hoped or planned. Sometimes, despite his best and concentrated efforts and the open minds of individuals he interacted with, his ability to develop a relationship proved elusive. Wilson typically dismissed these infrequent anomalies as part of the unpredictability of human nature. Because he had numerous successful results, he never fully explored the possibility that he may have had some responsibility in his occasional failures until he had one interview that forced him to reflect on and rethink his process.

The Interview

Wilson has been working on an investigation for some time and desperately wants an informant close to his subject who will help him gain a valuable personality assessment on the individual, as well as some firsthand knowledge of his criminal activity. One morning, Wilson asks his partner, Smith, if he has a few minutes to talk about his case.

"OK, so what do we have?" inquires Smith. Wilson briefly explains the investigation as Smith begins flipping through



Special Agent Dreeke serves in the FBI's Counterintelligence Division.



Mr. Navarro, a retired FBI special agent with the National Security Division's Behavioral Analysis Program, currently provides private consultation to the intelligence community.

some of the surveillance logs. Smith quickly notes that the subject frequents a local tavern that he is familiar with from a case he worked years earlier and asks Wilson if he has had any success trying to get a source there. Wilson says that he has struck out in that area. Smith details the case he had a few years ago, describing how his subject frequently hung out at the tavern for hours and socialized with patrons who came in after work. Smith had talked with the owner, formed a professional relationship, and opened him as a confidential source who provided valuable assistance to Smith's investigation. After the case ended, Smith closed the source but occasionally reached out to him to check in and ask about him, his work, and his research. Smith says that although some time has passed, he feels confident that the owner, and former source, will give Wilson a hand. Wilson asks Smith to arrange an introduction.

A few days later, Smith sets up a coffee meeting between Wilson and the former source. Wilson begins preparing for the interview and asks Smith to tell him a little about the source. Smith informs Wilson that the owner is very busy running the tavern while pursuing research for his Ph.D. Further, he is a serious, analytical person with

Active listening involves numerous nonverbal communications, such as reflecting eye gaze behavior, sitting attentively (leaning forward), listening to words used and registering their frequency and priority, mirroring body behavior to complement the transmitter of information, using head tilt to indicate receptiveness, and restraining facial indicators of disagreement or contempt.

well-determined, long-range goals. Wilson asks Smith if the source likes baseball or any other sport that they might talk about to break the ice and develop some rapport. Smith replies, "I don't think so; he is more studious. Because my background is in engineering like the source's, that is generally what we talked about." Wilson shrugs it off and says, "That's OK. I'm sure I can find something he's interested in." Wilson thinks to himself that this should be no big deal. He will just "chat him up" and touch upon myriad topics until one seems to strike a cord and work. Wilson thinks his high-energy approach should win the day.

Wilson arrives at the designated coffee shop a little early, like he usually does for a source meeting, and finds that the source has arrived before

him and is sitting in an appropriate quiet back table looking at his watch and tapping his foot. Wilson strides toward him and introduces himself with his trademark broad smile and firm handshake, stating, "It's a pleasure to meet you. My friend Smith said you are a great guy and sends his regards." The source stands, slightly bows, and tightens his lips momentarily as he asks quizzically, "Do you mean Agent Smith?" Wilson responds, "Of course, our friend Agent Smith." He gestures for the source to sit down and then offers to get them coffee. The source declines, stating that he does not have much time today.

Wilson thanks the source for coming and says he understands that he is busy and does not plan to take a lot of his time at this first meeting. Without giving him much time to respond,

Wilson asks the source to tell him something about himself, his work, and his Ph.D. research. The source again forces a half smile and shifts his chair so that he is not facing Wilson directly anymore but somewhat angled toward the front of the coffee shop and the exit. The source then sits up straight and places his hands on his lap as he thoroughly describes the nature of his research and studies.

Despite Wilson's lack of knowledge of the source's topic, he attempts to listen intently. But, before the source finishes speaking, he quickly interjects a question of where the source was born and grew up. "Oh, Riverdale in the Bronx, New York City," the source responds. Wilson seizes what he perceives as his first opportunity to develop some rapport and quickly asks, "Ah, so you must be a Yankee fan? I also was born in New York and am an avid New York Yankee fan. We should try to catch a game together sometime. As a matter of fact, the Yankees are playing at home against the Boston Red Sox next week, and I have a buddy who has two extra tickets I could get. That sounds great doesn't it?" The source leans back and away from Wilson and simply responds that his research and the tavern keep him occupied, and he does not really enjoy baseball anyway. Wilson responds,

"That's a shame; you'd love it. I'll work on getting us some tickets for later in the season. We'll coordinate your schedule to make it happen for you." The source angles himself more toward the door as he looks at his watch and begins to lean toward the door. Wilson again starts into a monologue about New York sports and what he perceives as some great rapport building with the source.

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Wilson finally takes a break from his monologue long enough for the source to look at his watch again and ask Wilson what exactly he can do for him. Wilson nods and says, "Well, I'm just interested in your thoughts and opinions from time to time about some individuals who may be frequenting your tavern." The source again reminds Wilson that he is very busy with his Ph.D.

research and asks if Wilson has any specific needs or tasks in mind for the source to review to determine if he can accommodate them in his schedule. Wilson shrugs his shoulders and says, "Not really. I'm not that organized yet. I just wanted to chat with you and give you a brief idea of what I'm hoping to do and just take some time for us to get to know each other better." The source responds, "I apologize; if you don't mind, I have to be going. I need to get back to my office. I need to prepare for a class this evening and still have to go through last evening's receipts from the tavern."

Wilson stands and says, "Sure, by all means," with another broad, somewhat nervous smile. Wilson then thanks him for taking the time to meet. He asks the source if they can get together again in a few weeks to possibly discuss some more details of how the source could provide assistance. The source responds that he is not sure because his schedule can be quite busy, so Wilson asks if it is OK to call him and set something up in a day or so after he reviews his schedule. The source agrees, and Wilson again thanks him for his time and the productive meeting while enthusiastically shaking his hand.

Back at the office, Smith asks Wilson about the meeting.

Wilson replies that he thinks it went well and that he will try to get baseball tickets for a game for them to go to in a few weeks to help build some rapport. Smith gives a quizzical look and asks Wilson to keep him posted.

Wilson documents what he perceives was a good interview and completes the necessary paperwork to reopen the confidential human source. After about a week, he attempts to contact the source but can only leave messages on his voicemail. After a few more days, Wilson finally reaches the source on the telephone and comments that he must be a very busy man. The source responds that he is and his research is in a critical stage. Wilson advises that he understands and adds that the source probably could use a break. Wilson quickly interjects that they should grab lunch together, so they both can unwind. The source says that he really does not have time.

Wilson politely presses for some sort of get-together. The source finally states that he does not think that he will be able to help him. Stunned, Wilson respectfully responds that he understands and asks if he might contact him again in the future when his schedule allows. The source pauses and reluctantly agrees but advises that it will not be anytime soon.

The Problem

Wilson slowly hangs up the telephone, feeling extremely low and dejected. He had high hopes for both his case and the working relationship with the source. Now, he faces the embarrassment of closing a source he just opened. He decides that before he takes any action, he will talk to Smith. Maybe his mentor can shed some light on this puzzling problem.

Wilson relates the story of his contact with the source. Surprised, Smith asks details about their conversation. Wilson conveys these and explains how he tried to get the source to go to a baseball game and out to lunch but that the source absolutely refused, saying he would not be able to help him at all. Smith is shocked and says that the source had just completed his master's degree when they met. He asks Wilson what the

source's Ph.D. research is about and how it is going. Wilson shrugs his shoulders and says, "I don't know, we didn't talk much about it." Smith then asks Wilson what plan he proposed to the source that was not agreeable for them to work on together. Again, Wilson advises that they had not spoken about it. Smith begins to nod. Slowly, Smith looks up and says, "I think I know the problem." Wilson exclaims, "Great! What should I do?" Smith offers that first, he would like to explain some of the highpoints of how he and the source used to work together on his case. Smith describes the case and how he had brought a detailed list and plan to the source for them to go over together. Following their planning session, the source had contacted Smith using the protocols they established, and they met for a businesslike, organized debriefing. The source

Private individuals may avoid eye contact or stare unblinking. Their chins may not jut out, and their arms may be still or even restrained. They may orient their attention slightly away as they do not like to be stared at; look down at their feet; give short, rather than long, answers; and tend to touch less and illustrate less with their hands. Idle chatter is generally wasted on them.

always was well prepared and thorough, checking off items on his list of points to cover. The source had stated it was a great diversion from his work, the different challenge was mentally stimulating, and he really enjoyed it. Smith adds that because the source's contributions were so significant, he was able to get him a signed letter of appreciation from the director. Smith asks if any of this sounds familiar to the type of dialogue Wilson had with the source. Wilson replies, "Not even close." Smith says, "That's the problem."

The Solution

Smith asks Wilson to remember the first interview they conducted together a number of years ago. Wilson recalls that Smith had acted more chatty and gregarious than he does around the office and in his

personal life, and Smith had said he was practicing the "Platinum Rule." Smith had explained that people want to be communicated with as they like to communicate, and four basic personality styles define how people prefer to give and receive information: directors, socializers, relaters, or thinkers.⁶

Smith asks Wilson to recall his interaction with the source and describes how individuals are either people oriented or task oriented in how they prefer to communicate. He opens a notebook and shows Wilson a chart containing descriptors of the two (see chart 1).⁷ Smith asks Wilson to think of the source in his work setting and, between the two columns, how he would best describe him. Wilson remembers the beginning of the interview

when he introduced himself. The source corrected Wilson by stating Smith's full title and then slightly bowed. Wilson circles the words *formal*, *proper* and regards the rest of the list, talking with Smith about each choice. He chooses *focuses on facts* and *task oriented* and describes how the source wanted to know Wilson's specific task or plan. Wilson regards the next set, *readily shares feelings* and *keeps feelings private* and says that he does not know the source well enough from the one meeting to make an educated guess. Smith nods and suggests that people may not always be able to choose accurately between the two columns because these represent only illustrators of tendencies and are not definite.

Smith asks Wilson to describe how the source sat and communicated nonverbally. Wilson advises that the source seemed to look stiff in his chair with a straight posture, kept his elbows tucked into his sides, and was not very animated with his hands. Smith commends Wilson on his excellent observations and says that the source most likely fits the category of *keeps feelings private* based on several closed nonverbal displays.

Smith reminds Wilson to just look for tendencies in the source's personality based upon a majority of observations, not

Chart 1

Communication Description

People oriented

relaxed, warm
likes opinions
relationship oriented
readily shares feelings
flexible about time
feeling oriented
spontaneous

Task oriented

formal, proper
focuses on facts
task oriented
keeps feelings private
disciplined about time
thinking oriented
prefers planning

Chart 2

Communication Categories

Direct

takes risks
swift decisions
confronting, expressive
impatient
talks and tells
outgoing
offers opinions freely

Indirect

avoids risks
cautious decisions
less assertive
easygoing, patient
listens and asks
reserved
keeps opinions private

100 percent accuracy in any one column. Wilson quickly circles the phrases *disciplined about time* and *prefers planning*. He believes that the source most likely was *thinking oriented*, rather than *feeling oriented*, but he leaves that blank for now as well.

Smith then asks Wilson to tally the results. Wilson has five in the *task-oriented* column and two undecided. “Perfect,” Smith says, “I think we can safely say we are dealing with a predominantly task-oriented individual and not a people-oriented one. Therefore, the source is either categorized as a thinker or director.” Smith uses another chart to determine whether the source prefers to be direct or indirect (see chart 2).⁸

Wilson regards the list and, from his conversation with Smith and the source, quickly discerns that the source makes *cautious decisions*, is *less*

assertive and *reserved*, *listens and asks*, and *keeps opinions private*. Smith states, “Again, we don’t have 100 percent, but we definitely can see a trend.” Smith then suggests that based on his knowledge of the source, he believes he *takes risks* and tends to be *impatient*. Smith explains to Wilson that having a mix is both normal and expected. Smith asks Wilson where he thinks the source falls in the four-domain personality model he described earlier (see chart 3).⁹

Wilson notes that the source is predominantly task oriented and indirect and, therefore, confident that the source is a thinker. “Exactly what I also would

assess,” states Smith, who turns to another page in his notebook and shows Wilson another chart (see chart 4).¹⁰

Wilson determines that he is a socializer and chuckles as he regards the chart—he does not see the socializer personality type near the thinker. “I guess I was a bit off when trying to relate and develop rapport with the source,” Wilson said. “I probably would have gotten the nonverbal message over some time with the source, but I just went in there with my socializer style blazing away.” Smith explains that this review helps assess how individuals prefer to give and receive information, enabling investigators to more rapidly match, or mirror, it. With this powerful understanding of how people prefer to communicate, interviewers and human source developers can more rapidly adapt to someone’s style to develop better and quicker rapport.

Chart 3

Personality Model

Director

Socializer

Thinker

Relater

To communicate with directors—

- support their goals and objectives, if possible;
- remain businesslike in your dealings;
- use facts, not feelings, to convey your thoughts if you do not agree with them;
- be precise and well organized;
- remain brief with supporting analysis when recommending other actions;
- get to points quickly;
- do not repeat—they understand quickly; and
- emphasize winning results and growth potential.

Greet directors appropriately, use manners, be formal and precise, ensure nonverbals support your message, and use your hands to illustrate and demark what is important. Respect their space and use your body as a shield from others as they prefer privacy. Time is important to directors, so do not waste it. Use demonstrative materials sparingly; sit at angles but not too close; mirror their behavior; and look for intentional signals that indicate “We are done.” Avoid unnecessary touching; it is not usually welcome.

Source: Tony Alessandra and Michael J. O’Conner, The Platinum Rule (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 2001), 144.

To communicate with relaters—

- be warm and genuine;
- support their feelings by showing personal interest;
- assume that they will take personally whatever facts you state;
- give them enough time to develop trust in you;
- if you disagree with them, do so with more personal feelings and not facts;
- communicate in a steady, slower, and informal manner;
- use active listening skills and encouragers; and
- give assurances of minimizing risks if possible.

With a relater, nonverbal communications are easier to mirror—take the lead from them. You can use more eye gaze behavior, sit closer, touch more often, interject more thoughts, and use hands to illustrate and punctuate with more frequency. These motions will be well received, as well as your emphasis with voice and such behaviors as arching of the eyes. Listen for the pace at which they deliver their message and match their speech and loudness.

Source: Tony Alessandra and Michael J. O’Conner, The Platinum Rule (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 2001), 145.

To communicate with socializers—

- focus your interest on them;
- support their ideas, thoughts, and opinions when possible;
- communicate with a fast-paced, upbeat, stimulating conversation;
- be tolerant of digressions and allow time for the discussion to go on as long as possible;
- avoid arguing;
- be enthusiastic and casual;
- articulate how actions can enhance image and reputation; and
- avoid details.

Socializers generally appreciate comments about appearance or inquiries regarding their family. They tend to sit closer and even communicate while walking, often feel free to interject thoughts, which, at times, may not have any relevance (communication and fellowship are more important), usually interrupt more and expect you to chime in with thoughts. But, give socializers the last word. They maintain eye contact but will look away when relaxed. Socializers liberally use hand gestures and allow for touching to emphasize, especially hand-to-arm touching; share food and drinks as this is well received; and, although they view time as more flexible, investigators should not abuse this privilege.

Source: Tony Alessandra and Michael J. O'Conner, *The Platinum Rule* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 2001), 149.

To communicate with thinkers—

- be thorough and well prepared;
- support their organized and thoughtful approach;
- use actions, not just words;
- remain detailed, accurate, and logical;
- discuss pros and cons of actions;
- provide solid, tangible evidence, not broad speculations;
- have and adhere to established procedures; and
- assure them that decisions will not backfire.

Thinkers appreciate timeliness and brevity, seeking to minimize, rather than maximize, it. Once they understand, leave them to think. Do not interject; be ready with information, do not delay answers; be emphatic but not loud, and confident but not cocky. Avoid arrogance; limit amount of touch; allow for distance between parties; and, when seated, try to sit at 90 degrees. When the encounter is complete, shake hands briefly and leave promptly.

Source: Tony Alessandra and Michael J. O'Conner, *The Platinum Rule* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 2001), 150.

Chart 4

Compatible Combinations

Best combinations at task compatibility

Thinker – Relater
Director – Relater
Socializer – Relater

Second best combinations at task compatibility

Thinker – Thinker
Relater – Relater
Socializer – Thinker

Analyzing people for particular personality and communication styles and then mirroring those traits can prove key when investigators attempt to build relationships. Law enforcement personnel who use this behavioral tool will foster stronger rapport and glean valuable information in the furtherance of their cases. ♦

“This is a powerful tool,” Wilson declares. Smith adds that the lists they used to identify the communication style help interviewers mirror observable traits. Interviewers who adapt and mirror both before and during the interview greatly enhance their chances of success.

Smith says, “So, let’s look at the source again and devise encounter plans based on what we know behaviorally.” Wilson responds, “I’ll definitely adapt myself to communicating with a thinker as we have described here. The source likes procedures and protocols. I’ll have a detailed, accurate, and logical agenda so I don’t waste his time. I’ll then try to mirror him by being more formal and proper, fact focused, task oriented, and disciplined about time, especially his. I’ll also tone back my own personality and be less assertive, listen

and ask questions more, and be more reserved. I’ll avoid the areas that we were unsure about until I can discover what his preferences are, but this is a great place to start.”

Both Smith and Wilson lean back in their chairs and breathe a long sigh. Smith feels good about being able to pass along this vital key he has successfully used over the years. Wilson appreciates Smith’s insight and is excited to recontact the source and put his new tools into practice.

Conclusion

The challenge that Wilson faced often occurs in the law enforcement profession. Investigators encounter individuals with whom they just cannot seem to make a connection or develop rapport, not only during the interview but in human source development as well.

Endnotes

¹ Tony Alessandra and Michael J. O’Conner, *The Platinum Rule* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 2001), 4-6.

Special Agent Dreeke draws upon his vast experience as a qualified practitioner of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Personality DISCernment Instrument for information in this article regarding personality and communication styles.

² Joe Navarro, *What Every Body Is Saying* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2008), 27, 90.

³ John R. Schafer and Joe Navarro, *Advanced Interviewing Techniques* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2004), 39-43.

⁴ Alessandra and O’Conner, 5-6.

⁵ Robin Dreeke, “It’s All About Them: Tools and Techniques for Interviewing and Human Source Development,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, June 2009, 1-9.

⁶ Alessandra and O’Conner, 5-6.

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰ Ibid., 119.

The author invites readers interested in discussing this topic to e-mail him at Robin.Dreeke@ic.fbi.gov.