

Expert Sessions: Simone Heng on How to Build Authentic Relationships in Networking (Transcript)

Hi. I'm Simone Heng, author of *Let's Talk About Loneliness* and human connection specialist. Now, today we're supposed to be talking about networking, but it's actually a term that I eschew. You see, we're currently living in a global loneliness epidemic, and what we've found is people are craving deep, meaningful, and authentic connection. And networking has connotations of transactional relationship-building with specific business-related agendas.

And so, today, I'm going to bring you through the five pillars of human connection according to my work in our session. And then hopefully you'll leave with not just the high conceptual levels of why you should connect in a more real way but also some practical tips to take into your next meetup. So let's dive right in.

Our first pillar is rapport, and this is when people perceive us to be more like them than we may actually be. And it goes back to our days connecting in tribes. Now, in this small-group nomadic lifestyle that we lived, our safety and survival were dependent on living in numbers and cooperating with mutual care.

And so, you see, everyone in that tribe looked like us, sounded like us, moved their body like us, and had the same interests as us. And in today's world where we are global and we're connecting across time zones and modalities and cultures, we can still use this powerful wiring in us to connect.

So here are three pillars of rapport that might help you. When you're out and you're looking to build rapport and trust with new connections, one, talk to them about the things they like to talk about first. And you can do this by listening, and they'll drop clues, or they may be wearing clothes or different sorts of markers that might give you conversation points, like a T-shirt from your favorite sporting team that you enjoy mutually.

The next thing is to speak to people like they speak to you. They may phenotypically look different than you, but maybe you might speak the same second language as their first language. So you can switch into that and add different words, closing that connection gap, bringing you closer together. If you don't speak a second language, maybe you can match them in speed, tone, pace, pitch, and volume, all communicating that you're more alike than they may first perceive.

And the very last pillar of rapport is to use your body to mirror and match. So in very subtle ways, if they're weighted toward the right, you can also weight yourself, just like a mirror, toward the left, communicating, again, that you are more alike than they think. You could be from that same ancestral tribe simply by the commonalities that you subtly exude-- rapport.

Pillar number two, commonalities connect. It's no secret that we're living in a deeply polarized world where people are meeting new connections and then measuring the distance between who they assume that person is and their own point of origin. And on human connection terms, this is contributing to our loneliness epidemic.

So one way to combat this and continue to build trust and rapport is to look for your commonalities to connect on first. Maya Angelou famously says, "We are more alike, dear humans, than we think." And that's so, so true. So the next time you're at a conference or a

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meetup, why not look for those subtle cues to connect on? People will often disclose, even in the very small touches of conversation at the buffet line during the conference break, what their favorite food is-- fantastic, nonconfrontational topic to begin connecting on. Talk to them about your favorite food.

I always say to people, connection leaves clues. But we just have to be mindful enough to be noticing them and to remove any of those polarization blocks that we might be carrying with us. A huge tip to make this really easy-- think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At the bottom of that pyramid, we have the basic human needs that tie us all together. They're global commonalities-- food, water, shelter, and as we go further up, love, connection, and belonging.

So let's think about food and shelter. Talk to them about their home renovations or what area you might live in and what you like about your neighborhood. If we're talking about food, talk about what you really love and what you absolutely cannot stand. And you might find that commonalities arise that have nothing to do with hot controversial topics of the moment but also show the other person how much more alike you are than you may first assume.

Pillar number three, vulnerability. Now, this is really where we see more superficial connection moving deeper. It's the vehicle to true, authentic connection, which we're all craving right now. And if you can be the person to bring that to the table, you're going to be very memorable, and you're also going to be less lonely.

So one of my key rules for knowing what is vulnerability and what is oversharing is this-- don't be vulnerable before trust is established. So you need to do the rapport. You need to do the commonalities connect. If you are vulnerable before trust is established, that's oversharing, and it repels the exact kind of connection you're trying to build.

The late Dr. John Cacioppo, who was an expert on loneliness, talks about how we are already skeptical when we first meet another human being. We are a little bit on guard. And so by dumping vulnerability too early, we can absolutely find ourselves more alone than we began. So treat this powerful tool with care.

So what constitutes the kind of vulnerability that can actually work within a business environment? Because it's not like a TED Talk where you can stand on a stage and cry. There are different filters. So I look at vulnerability within the corporate context as any form of emotional disclosure. It's anything that's at a deeper level than surface conversation. So maybe it's as simple as saying you're struggling on a work project right now.

I often tell organizations to implement what I call the huddle. So this is an exercise where you get your team and instead of the weekly meeting, you get them to do the huddle instead. And they begin by having the leader of the team say, "This is what went really well last week, this is what I need to do this week, and this is the help I need from my team this coming week."

Now, that particular disclosure from the leader is a fantastic example of corporate vulnerability. It's appropriate for the corporate environment. It shows this idea of mutual care, which goes back to our ancestral brain in those tribes where we survived and thrived as a species by relying on

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each other. And then you'd go round-robin through the whole team and have them disclose the same prompts. It works incredibly well to connect teams, but it also expresses the right professional amount of vulnerability in a corporate environment.

Pillar number four, being of service. Why is it that our parents told us, from the time we were little, that we should do good deeds for other people? Did they know something that we didn't? Well, it's so interesting. The lonely brain lacks perspective. So when we're lonely and disconnected, we literally feel that our problems are bigger than anyone else's. And so a wonderful way to pull the lonely brain out of its spiral, to give us perspective but also to serve the rest of our community and make us feel more connected, is being of service.

This doesn't necessarily have to be volunteer work or donating money. This can also be you being that person on your work team who helps the new person onboarding virtually to get the lay of the land in the office or just gives them a call virtually and meets up with them and connects. It doesn't have to be a huge thing, but it is a very powerful tool to make us feel more connected. And why is that?

So when we were living in those ancestral tribes, our worst nightmare was to be cast out of the tribe and be roaming lost on the Savanna. We would not survive very long. We would be picked off by a saber-toothed tiger or another predator. And so that entire fear is what keeps us within the tribe.

So what better way to solidify your place in that grouping than by contributing positively to the community? So they would never eject the tribal chief or the medicine man, for example. So what you can do to make yourself feel more socially connected, to get a drop of those feel-good hormones of oxytocin and dopamine, is to do good things beyond your immediate family for no other reason than just to do good things, without an agenda, no quid pro quo.

And what actually happens there is the person receiving the help also gets a fantastic surge of feel-good hormones, too, because they feel they're not forgotten by the tribe. So the next time you're walking through the lobby of your office and you see someone struggling with their laptop bag, ask them if you can give them a hand. It's as simple as that.

Pillar number five may be the most important, in my view, because we can't even retain the information on the first four without this, and it is self-connection, which I define as the awareness of one's own experience in any given moment. And in the conditions of modernity we're living in, that awareness can be fleeting across every single moment of our day.

So how do we retain elements of self-connection? Well, you can put aside time in your calendar-- and you can do it after you watch this video-- with a recurring reminder to take 15 minutes, 10 minutes, out of your day to do some deep breathing, maybe some meditation at your desk, maybe some journaling, and ask yourself, how were you feeling in that moment?

And this is important, because when we are in fight-or-flight mode, we lack the mindfulness to remember to be vulnerable, to look for commonalities. We just default to our natural state of being stressed. And the ironic thing about people suffering from chronic loneliness is that they're

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in this stress state perpetually. So the exact connection they want to bring into their lives they can't be present with.

So we need to start with this, grounding ourselves, and then making decisions about how to connect and show up more throughout our day. And this is also really important in the fight against the loneliness epidemic because, as I mentioned earlier, the lonely brain is not rational. It will ask you to do things like hold your friends to a higher standard than is necessary or not apologize when you have a falling-out with a human connection.

And self-connection, therefore, becomes the tool to maintain these hard-won human connections across the course of your lifetime. And just like you'd water a plant to help it grow, helps to maintain and mend those relationships, making us all less lonely. So when in doubt, connect to the self first.

I hope these five pillars have allowed you to truly rethink the definition of networking. Rather than something transactional or swapping business cards with an agenda, I want you to now think of networking as a gateway to building real connection and potentially friendship in a loneliness epidemic. I want to thank our friends from Singapore Global Network for making it possible for me to bring you some value this session.