

Stop Reading People. Start Tracking Them.

The WWII Radar Trick Behind Real Rapport

THE IDEA

During the Second World War, the mathematician Norbert Wiener was asked to solve a brutal targeting problem: how do you aim a gun at a plane that is actively trying not to be where you last saw it? The answer wasn't a better snapshot of the plane's current position. It was a loop — sense where the target is, predict where it's going, act on the prediction, then immediately recheck and correct. Wiener named the whole discipline that grew out of this work “cybernetics” (from the Greek for “steersman”), and in 1946 it became the subject of the Macy Conferences — the meetings where an unlikely mix of mathematicians, anthropologists and engineers spent years working out what feedback actually is, and how far the idea reaches.

The core insight is simple to state and easy to underestimate: a feedback loop doesn't correct once. It corrects continuously, using the gap between where things are and where they need to be as the very signal that drives the next adjustment. A system that only reacts to where a target was is always a step behind. A system that tracks — that predicts, acts, and rechecks — stays locked on, even while the target keeps moving.

Source: Norbert Wiener's anti-aircraft predictor, 1942 → Macy Conference I, 1946

OPEN WITH

“Every NLP pattern is a feedback loop wearing a costume.”

THE NLP CONNECTION

Rapport is usually taught as something you build — a state you arrive at and then have. Treated as a feedback loop instead, rapport is something you run: you calibrate on a channel (tonality, physiology, predicates), you predict where the other person is heading emotionally or relationally, you adjust your pacing on that prediction rather than their last position, and then you recheck. The moment you stop rechecking, you're not doing rapport anymore — you're just repeating a snapshot that's already out of date.

This is also why rapport can be lost so quickly even by skilled practitioners: they calibrated once, got a read, and then stopped tracking. The read was correct. It just stopped being current.

A PRACTICE TO WORK THROUGH

Use this the next time you notice a conversation, a negotiation, or a piece of your own self-talk starting to drift off target. Work through it as a loop, not a checklist to finish once.

1. NOTICE THE SIGNAL

- ☐ Name, specifically, what you're actually calibrating on right now — tone, pace, posture, word choice, energy — rather than a vague overall impression.

2. PREDICT, DON'T REPORT

- ☐ Ask where this is heading next, not where it currently is. State the prediction to yourself in one sentence before you respond.

3. ACT ON THE PREDICTION

- ☐ Adjust your next move to meet where the signal is going, not where it was when you first noticed it.

4. RECHECK IMMEDIATELY

- ☐ Take a fresh read straight after you act. If the gap between prediction and reality has grown, that's not a failure — it's the system doing its job. Correct again.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

- Where in your own work are you steering off a target's last position, instead of its predicted one?

- What's the actual channel you calibrate on first — tonality, physiology, predicates — and how fast is your own loop?
- If rapport is a tracking problem, what counts as lock-on for you?

LINEAGE

This idea comes directly out of the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics (1946–1953), the meetings that gave the twentieth century its working model of feedback, and which — through Gregory Bateson's involvement — fed directly into the systemic thinking that NLP later drew on.