

families, football and other similar topics unconnected with business. You begin to use first names and to know the names of spouses and children; perhaps you learn or tell of the recent illness of children or their successes at school or in sport. The conversation continues in this manner quite informally. As the snack concludes, the senior host looks at his watch and reports that he has another appointment in half-an-hour. Now you all agree to return to the office and resume your seats around the large meeting table, and this time there is a quick period of negotiation concluding in an outline agreement to do business.

This apparently ordinary business meeting illustrates a number of vitally important but rather subtle effects of spatial distance. The original and final business meetings are conducted in a room with a sufficiently large table to keep the protagonists far enough apart to allow for negotiation. Negotiation depends upon taking up a position that is not necessarily your final one. The first price you quote may well not be the one you will ultimately accept. In effect, not to put too fine a point on it, business negotiation depends upon telling lies! Now it is extremely difficult to deceive someone who is very close to you, so business simply cannot be done at such close quarters. The meeting table is designed to hold people apart as much as to bring them together! In fact it is necessary to maintain a certain minimum distance.

After taking up their initial positions the actors in our scenario engineered a more social situation over lunch. Of course then the business stopped but the process of growing familiarity and sharing of experiences was designed to develop some trust. This increased level of familiarity was facilitated by the shorter interpersonal distances enforced by the fixed seating and rather small table in the pub. This in turn enabled the rapid completion of business back in the office, and by then the atmosphere was one of co-operation rather than confrontation. The entertaining of business customers does far more than simply give them a perk; it potentially changes the context of all subsequent social interactions. However, more importantly here, it crucially requires appropriate settings in order to weave its magic!

We have by now seen some crucial distances in human relationships. We have seen that these distances are not absolutely precise, but we have also learned that neither are they entirely arbitrary. In fact they are closely linked to how we sense and then perceive other people. How we choose to allow others to relate to us depends on a number of factors – these sensory factors, our own personality, and the occasion and our wider culture. The consequence of distance for us humans is far more complex than for all other species, largely due to our sophisticated culture. It is now time to define these distances more carefully. Different writers have tended to use a variety of terms for these distances, but by far the most authoritative exploration of them is that by Edward T. Hall. We shall therefore stick to his taxonomy here (Hall