

Leading Ways: TRUST

In an exercise on trust, when asked to identify a situation when trust was lost, 90 percent of participants choose a situation when they lost trust in others. The honesty and courage of the small minority to acknowledge the reality that the distribution of trust loss should be 50-50 between us and others is encouraging. But most of us do not so easily see that we are not as trusting as we seem to ourselves, that others have failures that have nothing to do with trust and that trust which seems so absolute is really a quite slippery leadership quality.

IS TRUST AN ABSOLUTE ?

The answer to this seems pretty straight forward, either I can trust you or I can't. But the reality is murkier. In one experiment conducted overtime, individuals who were judged by themselves and others to be of "high integrity" acted dishonestly to benefit themselves when they thought that their actions would be anonymous. This carries over to the realm of power as well. If individuals have more social or economic power or perceive themselves as having more, a perception that can be triggered as simply as being described as a "manager" in a behavioral game, then they feel justified to act in a more self-interested manner. They often do not recognize their behavior, but can become very critical of other, less powerful, individuals who are acting in the same manner. In other words, there is a tendency for power to corrupt.

IMPROVING TRUST

Trust certainly has something to do with character, but it is messaged to others by actions. Here are some leadership practices that will lead others to trust you more:

- Always advocate for others and recognize them for their work.
- Deliver on commitments and when you cannot not – apologize, explain why and ask what can be done to remedy the situation – if at all possible do it in person and as soon as possible.
- Minimize how much you talk about your role and your contributions.
- Be clear and forthright in communications, decisions, addressing conflict and raising difficult issues. Do not judge these situations exclusively from your perspective, but seek understanding from others.
- Do not be a "pleaser" by overly bending and adjusting the message for different groups and individuals. Say what needs to be said, being sensitive to where they sit.
- Ask questions and care about the answers.
- Do not over sell. Do not over commit. Do not say yes when you know it should be no. Do not shade or embellish.
- Keep confidential matters confidential.
- Admit mistakes. Never blame others. Take responsibility. Tell people what you learned from the mistake. Solve the problem as it is. Move on, in a humble manner.
- Be as consistent as possible and when you change a position or understanding of an issue,

share the change with those that will be impacted and tell them why you have a new view.

- Balance and understand that there are different perceptions of all actions. In the extreme, one person's creative action can be seen by another as an unprofessional or unethical act.
- Be mindful of the situations identified below, they can lead to you being a less trusted leader.

WHEN YOU MIGHT NOT BE TRUSTED

Yes, you are trustworthy, but are there situations when trust in you might be more suspect? Trust is in part a cultural derivative and it changes over different cultures. In dynamic times something that looks to you like a creative response to a pressing problem may look to others to be an unnecessary rush to judgment and violation of a norm of sacrosanct cultural borders. If so, you might look to be untrustworthy:

- When you have power or formal authority over others.
- When things are changing.
- When the goal, roles, process, success, or rules have been poorly defined.
- When the situation involves individuals and groups with highly diverse backgrounds, perspectives or aims.

REBUILDING LOST TRUST

We all make mistakes, and mistakes around loss of trust when you are responsible will be a situation that all leaders face. It is hard to admit our culpability in this area because it seems like such a character flaw. The real flaw comes in not addressing the issue in a forthright manner. Here are some considerations:

- Acknowledge the mistake and apologize.
- In doing so, do not blame yourself. You are a competent, caring individual, but you are human and make mistakes.
- Do not try to explain the situation away, but it is fair to share why the situation was challenging. Careful here to not talk too much about matters that are confidential, blame others or make it seem that anyone in this situation would have done the same thing as you.
- Indicate what you have learned from the situation and how you will apply the lessons in the future. But do not over promise such as, "this will never happen again." Better to say, "I have learned that I need to share my uncertainty about outcomes with you, rather than being overly optimistic."

If you want a bit of leadership practice on trust, try the following one page homework assignment. And, let me know what you learned.

One Page Homework: REGAINING TRUST

There are lots of ways to get better at building and sustaining trusting relations. One specific activity that can lead to growth in this area is taking the initiative to make peace with someone that you have not gotten along with in the past or someone who you feel may have been disappointed in you or your work.

Follow these steps:

1. Identify the person that you would like to have a better relationship with.
2. Start a journal where you note the steps you are taking, the feelings this is creating in you, the reactions of the other person and its impact on you.
3. Identify the things that you believe influence this relationship in a way that makes it difficult for both of you. This could be a dishonest exchange from the past, different styles, competition, aggressive or passive behavior.
4. Think about the positive qualities that this person has and the positive contributions that they make to the organization and the work or others.
5. Schedule an appointment with the person and give them a heads up that you would like to discuss if you should improve your relationship and how you can go about it.
6. In the conversation with them, be honest, "I don't think we have always gotten along and I would value seeing if we can change this for our mutual benefit and for the organization." Stop there and see what you get back from them.
7. If you get an affirming response that they agree, let the next step be to focus on positive ways to improve as you go forward, do not go back into the past and issues just now. If you see hesitancy or reluctance, ask them to think about it and let you know if it is something that they might value as well.