TRUST IN THE WORKPLACE

Basic Premise: The ability to work constructively with – or for – another person over time is highly contingent on the level of trust between both parties. Indeed, it is a critical component of any group effort. Therefore, the cultivation and maintenance of trust is more than a component of a pleasant workplace. It is a critical component of an effective workplace.

Overview of Trust: The *Oxford Desk Dictionary* defines trust as: 1) *firm belief in the reliability, truth, or strength of a person or thing;* or 2) *confidant expectation.* In order to lead others, trust must be established between the leader and the follower. If it is not, those being “lead” are simply obeying rather than following. Positional leadership has the power to demand obedience, but not to demand trust. In short, trust cannot be demanded. Rather, it must both be cultivated and earned. The more trust wanes, the greater the power exerted to enforce obedience. This generally requires a clear hierarchy – the distribution of power.

Trust is a necessary component of any harmonious working group (including family, religious congregation or camping group). It is also a critical component of transformational leadership. How then is trust cultivated and nurtured in the workplace or elsewhere? The following are a few simple aspects of creating and maintaining a trusting environment:

- Think before you speak – particularly when what you are going to say might have some negative impact. In short, be mindful about your words.
- Be respectful. Listen first with openness, compassion and empathy. Honor the differences between you and others.
- Demonstrate understanding of what others are saying by trying to say in your words what they mean. Work on it until you get their agreement on “your words”. (This is not the trite “I hear you saying that ….”)
- Be sincere in what you do. Be careful, for this can be undone by your body language, or the pitch and volume of your voice. Speak deliberately, lower your pitch and volume, maintain eye contact, and slow down.

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Developing trust takes time. During that time make certain that you do what you say you will do (remember confidant expectation) or take the time to fully explain why you could not produce as you promised.

Never say, “Just trust me”. One does not ask for trust, one earns it. Asking for trust is a clumsy attempt to thwart the hard work that cultivating trust requires. Generally your actions will earn you the trust, not your words.

Finally, trust yourself. It is difficult to trust someone who is internally wrestling with many fears, who manifests a manner that is discouraging and judgmental, or who needs inordinate support and positive feedback from others. Be secure in your insecurity and confident that your best shot will more than likely be successful.

**Lessons Learned:**

- Most people in a reasonably healthy environment will grant you trust to begin with, so you start on the upside. It is then up to you to either earn it or breach it.
- In a work place, trust if often infectious once it is established. Word of mouth plants the virus.
- Rarely, very rarely, should you attempt to accomplish a group task relying on trust only. Trust is best used as a more subtle grounding and contextual component of a carefully constructed plan of action that can be clearly articulated to others.
- Total transparency within an organization may mitigate against being a trusting organization or person. (This seems counterintuitive.) In short, there may be times when privacy of professional conversations and delicate personnel matters are entrusted to others and should be.
- Related to the above, if the goal is to increase trust, deception rather than secrecy needs to be avoided. Deception directly and totally undermines honesty – the keystone of developing trust.
- The strongest trust is often built when navigating through the most difficult times. During those times, if actions are clearly taken based on the highest level of integrity (which often demands great courage), solid trust is born.

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• Well-placed trust grows out of active inquiry rather than blind acceptance. Hence, earnest and thoughtful questions about any leader’s actions are the building blocks of trust rather than demonstrations of mistrust.

Exercises for self-study:

1. In order to better understand trust, compare and contrast loving someone and trusting someone.
2. Is there a relationship between the notion of trust and faith? How would you distinguish them?
3. In your work experience, do you believe that you have become more trusting over time or less trusting over time? What specific experiences influence your answer?

References:

*Trust and Transparency,* [http://www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/education/betsy/parser.pl/0005](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/education/betsy/parser.pl/0005)

*The Negotiation Focus,* [www.vengieconsulting.corp](http://www.vengieconsulting.corp)

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