

Leadership and Trust

Humans are very sensitive creatures. Our survival instincts are ever alert to the surrounding conditions of trust. In an organization where there is little or no trust, effective communication or valid knowledge exchange is a virtual impossibility.

As a leader you need to know what is going on — but if your people do not trust you, they will not readily provide the often hidden data required for good decision making nor willingly offer the secret know-how needed for innovation. Any delay in receiving such information can be potentially disastrous, especially where suppliers or customers are involved.

What can you do as a leader to nurture and develop trust in your organization? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer lies more in your own leadership behavior than it does in the behavior of your followers. Trust doesn't arise through demanding it. If you want trust, then you as leader must give it. You inspire trust by extending it.

Trust emerges from acting responsibly, ethically and consistently. In particular, your public demonstration of the following four practices is key to your being trusted as a leader:

1. *Tell the truth and live as your word.*

Trust that your people not only want and deserve the truth but that they can handle it, warts and all. What they can't abide from a leader is any form of misinformation or deception, especially where promises are concerned.

You build your reputation for sincerity and reliability by keeping your word. Where you realize you can't keep your word, for whatever reason, let your followers know immediately and seek to renegotiate your promise.

Notice this principle does not say "Do not lie." The spirit of this practice is proactive, direct, open, sincere and timely. Anything less is not worthy of you or them.

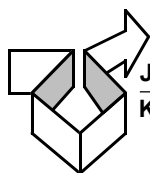
2. *Listen ... and keep listening.*

Once you have spoken what you honestly see or feel to be your truth, take a deep breath, pay strict attention and keep completely silent while those around you voice their reaction. How you are seen to respond while listening either encourages further sharing of vital information or it closes down the possibility of frank exchange both now and in the future.

3. *Admit mistakes publicly with an intent to learn.*

When you realize you've blown it or some brave soul brings this to your attention, admit your mistake immediately, unequivocally and make sure you do whatever is needed to get back on track with the job and especially the people involved.

Public disclosure of your mistake or error in judgment may seem risky, especially if you cling to being a leader who always "knows." Hiding ignorance or masking incompetence, however, are not acts of integrity. Use your



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SMART LETTER

mistake as a visible opportunity for learning: for your own development and as a reflective lesson for the whole organization. Your followers don't expect you to be perfect but they do want you to be effective. To maintain trust, be sure that their perception of your competence has a real foundation, not an illusory one.

4. *Ensure forgiveness.*

Apologizing is never enough. In addition, always ask what restitution you can make that would lead people to forgive you. Don't expect people to forget your mistakes — they probably won't, especially if they are big ones. Do make sure, however, that you have been forgiven by doing what's needed to repair the damage.

If when you say "I'm sorry. Do you forgive me?" you are greeted with a less than enthusiastic "Yes" or, worse, with a sullen "No", immediately follow up with "What can I do to make it up to you?"

Depending on the answer, you may need to negotiate the content or scope of the required repairing action but, above all, don't just give a cursory apology and expect the follower to learn to live with the consequences of your error. The residual resentment will come back to bite you later, often at the worst possible time. Clean up your mess now, whatever it takes.

Your demonstration of grace under embarrassing or threatening circumstances speaks loudly about your character as a trusted leader and provides a potent model for organizational emulation. Just make sure it's the model you want emulated!

Vital Questions for Reflection

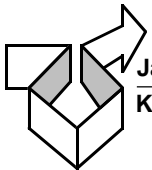
1. How trusted am I as a leader?
2. Which tough, truth-telling conversations have I been avoiding with my people?
3. What can I do today to build more trust in my organization?

Recommended Reading

Roderick Moreland Kramer and Tom R. Tyler (Eds). *Trust in Organizations : Frontiers of Theory and Research*. Sage Publications, 1996.

Francis Fukuyama. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. The Free Press, 1996.

Adam B. Seligman. *The Problem of Trust*. Princeton University Press, 1997



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