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**Leadership Essentials**

# Building Trust

Authentic leaders earn trust



**“Trust is the glue of life. It’s the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It’s the foundational principle that holds all relationships. When the trust account is high, communication is easy, instant, and effective” (Covey, 1992)**

Trust is a firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something. Some people are inclined to trust in people and things more easily than others, but trust needs to be earned and, once lost, is difficult to win back.

**The Importance of Trust**

Trust underpins effective working relationships. The more someone trusts a colleague, manager or team member, the greater the likelihood that they will co-operate, share information and work effectively together. So trust helps organisations to run smoothly, increasing positivity, improving processes and driving individual and team performance.

Leaders whom others trust are more likely to attract more and better qualified applicants for any job vacancy in their teams, and are less likely to experience high staff turnover.

Workplaces and teams where there are low levels of trust are usually described as ‘stressful’, ‘frustrating’, ‘threatening’ and ‘de-motivating’ by employees.

A survey carried out by the Institute (The Institute of Leadership and Management, 2014) found that the industries and sectors with the lowest internal trust – i.e. the employees didn’t trust their own organisations – were in turn not trusted much by the public either. So there is a strong link between consumer and employee trust levels and consumers avoiding organisations they do not trust. This is bad news for organisations in low-trust industries and sectors.

The same research found that employees in the largest organisations report the lowest levels of trust, while organisations comprising 50 staff or less had the highest levels.

Galford and Drapeau (2011) – developed a widely recognised formula for **trust**.

$$\text{Trustworthiness} = \frac{\text{Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy}}{\text{Self-Orientation}}$$

<b>Credibility</b>	<b>Words</b> is earned by expertise and by being up-front about your limitations
<b>Reliability</b>	<b>Actions</b> consistency and dependability
<b>Intimacy</b>	<b>Emotions</b> not about revealing personal details, but rather, making the business of the organisation personal and understanding the sensitivities of others
<b>Self-Orientation</b>	<b>Motives</b> the degree to which you focus on your own concerns when interacting with others

**Building and Earning Trust**

A leader wishing to establish or improve trust can do so by focusing on six fundamentals (Covey, 1992):

- **Openness** – this is the single most important driver of trust. Honesty is part of this, including knowing that if someone has made a mistake they will own up to it. If you find admitting to a mistake difficult, remember that nobody is infallible; and trying to cover up mistakes usually leads to worse problems.
- **Effective communication** – employees have a need for clarity, to know what is expected of them by you as their leader, with regular feedback on their performance.

- **The ability to make timely decisions** – this demonstrates your knowledge, confidence and competence as a leader, reassuring your employees.
- **Integrity** – If you have integrity, you are congruent, that is, your actions do not contradict your values. You ‘walk the talk’. You do not say one thing with your words and another with your body language.
- **Empathy and caring** – keeping promises, keeping confidences.
- **Commitment and reliability** – a reputation for these two things makes you inherently more trustworthy.

We are talking primarily of earning the trust of your team here, but the same principles apply of course to all stakeholders, including customers and suppliers. It also applies to earning the trust of your own managers.

If you feel you are lacking in any of the trust fundamentals listed above, the workplace provides many informal learning opportunities. Simply asking for feedback from your team, colleagues, customers and suppliers will not only enhance your self-awareness but can quickly build essential communication skills.

Hurley (2006), states that trust also depends on:

- How secure the parties involved (the person trusting and the person being trusted) feel.
- How many similarities there are between the parties.
- How well aligned the parties’ interests are.

Hurley recommends the following actions for increasing security, similarities and the alignment of interests when you are the one being trusted:

- Spend more time explaining options and the risks of each, and offer some sort of safety net.
- Use the word ‘we’ more often and the word ‘I’ less. Emphasise what you have in common (values, goals, and so on).
- Be clear yourself about whose interests you are serving. Take others’ interest into account and find a way to accommodate them where possible.

**Fixing Broken Trust**

There are many ways to break trust. Reina and Reina (2014) list the following:

- Covering up mistakes
- Gossiping
- Hoarding information
- Leaking confidential information
- Micro-managing
- Sending mixed messages
- Shooting the messenger
- Shutting down others’ ideas
- Taking credit for others’ work
- Throwing others under the bus

We could also add lying, arbitrarily breaking agreements and promises, and any type of callous, thoughtless behaviour.

Re-building trust always takes time. A psychological ‘contract’ has been broken, and has to be re-negotiated. This refers to the unwritten set of expectations of the employment relationship as distinct from the formal, employment contract.

Always start by admitting that you have made a mistake or have acted wrongly. You need to meet with those whose trust has been broken and tell them this. Spell out exactly what it was that betrayed the trust to prove that you know. Say sorry. Allow the injured party or parties to express their feelings fully. Actively listen to them, acknowledging their feelings. Say what you intend to do to restore the broken trust, and check that this is considered adequate. Be prepared for scepticism. Be patient.

Above all, do not let your own ego get in the way. Trust can be rebuilt and, if skilfully mended, can be stronger than before. (Holiday, 2016)

## Trust top tips

- Never underestimate the importance of trust.
- Regularly practise the six fundamentals of trust.
- Work at turning 'my interests' and 'your interests' into 'our interests'.
- Work hard to rebuild any broken trust by being empathic and understanding about the grievances caused.

## References

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