Meaning of TRUST

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In your opinion, what is the meaning of trust? Most of us use the word trust several times a day. It is actually one of the more common words in our lexicon, yet when I ask people in my seminars to define what it means, I often get an awkward silence, then a few definitions come out, like "confidence," or "integrity," or "walk the talk." Eventually, most groups come up with a dozen or more definitions, and they begin to realize that what they pictured as one single phenomenon is actually a myriad of concepts that mean vastly different things in different circumstances.

I have been working in the area of trust for nearly 20 years. The topic is infinitely fascinating to me, and I am always gaining new understanding thanks to the many other authors and people who network with me. I have found several concepts to be central to the idea of building and maintaining trust, and as I thought about some of these words, they started to form an acronym for the word TRUST.

Acronyms are strange mutations of the language that I find curious. Sometimes an acronym will seem rather strained or far-fetched as an attempt to be cute or simply a trick to help people remember concepts. The acronym below is neither of these; instead it is a way for me to highlight five central issues about trust that I continue to emphasize.

Trusting others. I have coined what I call "The First Law of Building Trust." It is that when leaders are not satisfied with the level of trust they see within their organization, the first question to ask is how they can show more trust in others. Trust is a reciprocal relationship, and numerous authors have identified the best way to have people trust you more is to increase your visible trust in them.

I once observed a Vice President who really struggled with trust. I asked him if he could find ways to demonstrate more trust in his people. His reaction was, "You are asking the impossible; these people show me by their actions every day that they cannot be trusted to do what is right." As I dug into the situation, I found that his workers had been so abused by this manager, they had no reason to even try to do things right. It was a

toxic environment, where the VP would literally yell at the people and say things like, "You are so stupid I cannot rely on you for anything. I have to watch you like a hawk or you will just goof off and not even try to do your job right." This is a classic case of a Theory X management style described by Douglas McGregor in the 1960's, and the VP was truly unaware that he was the real cause of his problem.

I grant that in any workforce, there are some bad apples who can never be trusted, but if you have any of these people on your team and tolerate them, shame on you. Get rid of them. The vast majority of workers, I believe over 95%, will respond positively and do good work if they are treated correctly. When trust is low, The First Law of Building Trust puts the onus on the *manager* to do three things:

1. Recognize his own contribution to the problem,
2. Modify his behavior to be more trustworthy, and
3. Start showing more trust in his workers.

Unfortunately, the first step is the most difficult. I have observed numerous managers who are simply blind to the fact that they are causing their own problem. It is so much easier to blame the workers than to take a hard look in the mirror and ask some tough questions.

There are numerous other actions required to build and maintain trust, but the three steps above are the precursors that must be in place, or nothing will change. Also, recognize that the process to rebuild lost trust is arduous. Wounded workers will observe improved behaviors for a long time before believing they are genuine.

Reinforcing candor. After a couple decades studying trust, I believe the most central enabler of it is reinforcing candor. This is the leader's ability to refrain from punishing people when they speak their truth. Most leaders cannot do this. When workers state that a manager is doing things inconsistent with the vision, they take a risk because most managers punish that kind of candor. Brilliant leaders recognize that if they can establish a pattern of making people glad when they bring up difficult issues, it enables trust more than any other single factor.

I put reinforcing candor in the center of my Leadergrow Trust Model because it is the one skill that most leaders find difficult to do, yet once they understand its power, they have a much easier time creating and maintaining trust.

Universal goals. I have found when trust is absent in an organization, usually individuals and groups have conflicting goals. They often do not realize they are pulling in different directions. When you have an organization that is truly focused on one consistent set of goals, then you have alignment. Many organizations struggle with poor alignment such that only a small fraction of the workforce is actually pulling in the

direction of the stated vision. Organizations with high trust achieve the reverse of that condition and have almost all people in the organization pulling in the direction of the vision.

It is easy to see if goals are not universal when you observe silo thinking, conflict, low trust, lack of respect, fear, management abuse, and any number of other organizational ills. The starting points for establishing an environment of high trust are 1) complete agreement on where the organization is trying to go, and 2) enrolling all members of the organization to engage their full effort toward that vision.

Sincerity. This is the human dimension that shows leaders care about everyone in the organization. It is never the case that all people in an organization are exactly equal, yet the role played by each individual is of critical importance to the organization's success. When managers and leaders are duplicitous, people quickly get the idea, because they see a lack of sincerity and care for individuals.

The antidote for low sincerity is very simple. The Golden Rule is the most important concept to show others that we care about them. If you treat other people the way you would like to be treated, you will find they respond in a positive way because they know you care. It is quite simple, but unfortunately many leaders have their priorities mixed and put short term financial performance above the notion of caring for the people in the organization.

The best approach is to treat people the right way, which means being alert to the needs of each person as a unique individual and treating him or her as a person who will happily perform well if treated properly.

Transparency. The final T in my trust acronym is transparency. Organizations that share information widely about what is happening, what the goals are, where we are going, what the strategies are, what behaviors are needed, and how we have been performing recently, get the best that people have to offer. Transparency is an interesting concept because it is not always good, or even legal, to be totally transparent. You must combine common sense, kindness, ethical behavior, and care into the equation when deciding how much information to reveal. Unfortunately, most organizations err on the side of too little transparency rather than too much.

The irony is that transparency is becoming less of a choice for senior executives due to social networking and the ability for people to get information more quickly and easily than ever before. Leaders who try to hide information from workers are becoming increasingly frustrated because the information leaks out anyway. A better approach is to aim for maximum transparency and very fast response time when incorrect information gets out in the social networks.

These five concepts: **T**rusting others, **R**einforcing candor, **U**niversal goals, **S**incerity, and **T**ransparency form the acronym **TRUST**. While there are many other concepts and issues around trust and being trustworthy, I believe these five concepts are really at the core of creating an environment of higher trust.

Researchers have established through numerous studies that organizations with higher trust out-perform those that have low trust. A high trust group enjoys two to five times the productivity of a low trust group. No organization can survive for very long if they have an environment of low trust. Focus efforts on these five concepts, and you will improve your ability to achieve and maintain high trust in any organization.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online,* and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind.* Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, ***contact him at*** www.Leadergrow.com***,*** bwhipple@leadergrow.com ***or*** 585.392.7763