Successful Supervisor Part 21

The Importance of Trust

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In my seminars on trust, I always do an exercise that illustrates the pivotal importance of trust in any organization. In this experiential exercise I split the group up into small discussion groups and give each group a different dimension to work on by answering the following question: for your dimension, can you contrast what it is like to try to accomplish it if you are working with a high trust group versus a low trust group?

I could think up dozens of dimensions to explore, but to keep the exercise bounded in terms of time, I use only nine dimensions with groups. Here is a list of the nine dimensions along with my comments on the contrast of trying to do them in a high versus low trust group.

1. Solving Problems

In organizations of high trust, problems are dealt with easily and efficiently. In low trust organizations, problems become huge obstacles as leaders work to unscramble the mess to find out who said what or who caused the problem to spiral out of control. Often feelings are hurt or long term damage in relationships occurs. While problems exist in any environment, they take many times longer to resolve if there is low trust. In addition, the creative ideas of people are more readily accessible to the group when people aren't afraid to speak their minds.

Sometimes a lack of trust can cause small problems to bloom into first class disasters. A good example of this progression is the Challenger Disaster in 1986. The Rogers Commission (1987) found that NASA's organizational culture and decision making process were key contributing factors of the accident. Technicians who were aware of a problem did not feel it was safe to bring it up due to low trust levels.

2. Focused Energy

People in organizations with high trust do not need to be defensive. They focus energy on accomplishing the Vision and Mission of the organization. Their energy is directed toward the customer and against the competition. In low trust organizations, people are myopic and waste energy due to infighting and politics. Their focus is on internal squabbles and destructive turf battles. Bad blood between people creates a litany of issues that distract supervision from the

pursuit of excellence. Instead, they play referee to a bunch of adult workers who often act like children.

Trust leads to constancy of purpose as well as focus. In *Managing People is Like Herding Cats* (1999), Warren Bennis wrote: "A recent study showed people would rather follow individuals they can count on, even when they disagree with their viewpoint, than people they agree with but who shift positions frequently. I cannot emphasize enough the significance of constancy and focus." (p.85)

3. Efficient Communication

When trust is high, the communication process is efficient, as leaders freely share valuable insights about business conditions and strategy. In low trust organizations, rumors and gossip zap around the organization like laser beams in a hall of mirrors. Before long, leaders are blinded with problems coming from every direction. Trying to control the rumors takes energy away from the mission and strategy.

High trust organizations rely on solid, believable communication, while the atmosphere in low trust groups is usually one of damage control and minimizing employee unrest. Since people's reality is what they believe rather than what is objectively happening, the need for damage control in low trust groups is often a huge burden. Not only is verbal communication enhanced by trust, all forms of communication including e-mail, body language, and listening are improved by trust.

In *A Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, Steven B. Sample (2002) discusses the concept of Artful Listening which enables a leader to "...see things through the eyes of his followers while at the same time seeing things from his own perspective" (p.22). He calls this skill "seeing double." Sample stresses that Artful Listening is enabled by trust.

4. Retaining Customers

Workers in high trust organizations have a passion for their work that is obvious to customers. When trust is lacking, workers often display apathy toward the company that is transparent to customers. Most of us have experienced this apathy while sitting in a restaurant where the service is poor. If there is a low trust environment, we feel an uncomfortable tension that discourages our future return to that establishment. All it takes is the roll of eyes or some shoddy body language to send valuable customers looking for alternatives.

5. A "Real" Environment

People who work in high trust environments describe the atmosphere as being "real." They are not playing games with one another in a futile attempt to outdo or embarrass the other person. Rather, they are focused toward a common goal that permeates all activities. When something is real, people know it and respond positively. When trust is high, people might not always like each other, but they have great respect for each other. That means, they work to support and reinforce the good deeds done by fellow workers rather than try to find sarcastic or belittling remarks to make about them. The reduction of infighting creates hours of extra time spent achieving business results.

6. Saving Time and Reducing Costs

High trust organizations get things done more quickly because there are fewer distractions. There is no need to double check everything because people generally do things right. In areas of low trust, there is a constant need to spin things to be acceptable and then to explain what the spin means. This takes time, which drives costs up. In **The Speed of Trust**, Stephen M.R. Covey relates that when trust is low, organizations pay a kind of "tax." This tax increases costs and reduces speed (Covey, 2006).

7. Perfection not Required

A culture of high trust relieves leaders from the need to be perfect. Where trust is high, people will understand the intent of a communication even if the words were phrased poorly. In low trust groups, the leader must be perfect because people are poised to spring on every misstep or misstatement to prove the leader is not trustworthy. Without trust, speaking to groups of people is like walking on egg shells.

The irony is that leaders should be glad when people are vocal about apparent inconsistencies between actions and values. People will not do so unless the leader has created an environment of trust. This phenomenon was described by Noel Tichy (1997) in **The Cycle of Leadership** as follows: "The truth is that the leader gets nailed to the wall for failing to live the values only if he or she has created an open and honest shop. More often, people simply become demoralized and ignore the values just as the leader does" (p. 43).

8. More Development and Growth

In low trust organizations, people stagnate because there is little emphasis placed on growth. All of the energy is spent jousting between individuals and groups. High trust groups emphasize development, so there is a constant focus on personal and organizational growth, as described in **Treat People Right** (Edward Lawler, 2003).

9. Better Reinforcement

When trust is high, positive reinforcement works because it is sincere and well executed. In low trust organizations, reinforcement is often considered phony, manipulative, or duplicitous, which lowers morale. Without trust, attempts to improve motivation through reinforcement programs often backfire. The trick is to get people to want to do the right thing through reinforcement.   Ken Blanchard (2002) in **Whale Done** wrote "Instead of building dependency on others for a reward, you want people to do the right thing because they themselves enjoy it" (p. 56).

Once groups wrestle with these nine dimensions and contrast what it is like to operate as part of a high trust group versus a low trust one, they understand the immense impact that trust has on every aspect of how an organization operates. Simply put, if you have high trust, all aspects of the organization work well, but with low trust, nothing works as expected.

Seek to build trust at every level all of the time. If trust becomes compromised for any reason, move swiftly to repair it (the subject of a future article).