

## Building Higher Trust 19 Reinforce Candor

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Two weeks ago, I wrote about the first part of my Building Higher Trust Model, which was Table Stakes. These elements are prerequisites to building trust. If they are missing, there is no way for a leader to build real trust.

Last week's article was about "Enabling Actions." These elements are not required to build trust, but the more you can practice them the more trust you

will build.

This week I want to discuss the grand daddy of all the behaviors that will help leaders build higher trust. It is called "Reinforce Candor."

Let's examine why I believe these two strange-sounding words are the magic key to great leadership.

### Reinforce Candor

According to Webster, candor simply means frankness. It is the ability to tell an individual exactly what you believe to be true without mincing words. To reinforce individuals is to praise them when they do something.

Leaders go about their day making decisions or advocating actions that they honestly believe are the right things to do. If someone in the organization speaks up with a contrary opinion of what to do, it is only natural for leaders to become defensive and make the person who is being candid feel bad about doing it.

If leaders can take the opportunity to hear the person out without being judgmental, then they reinforce the person's candor. The person will end up glad that he brought it up rather than sorry.

The concept is called "psychological safety" by Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School. She maintains that organizations where people feel it is safe to bring up things that may seem to be contrary to the current path they are on creates more successful organizations. Here is a link to her Ted Talk, ["Building a Psychologically Safe Workplace"](#) on the subject.

### What Leaders Need to Do

How would leaders go about making workers who are candid feel glad they bring up scary things? They do it by not punishing but by reinforcing their candor.

For most leaders, that behavior is nearly impossible simply because they believe deep down that the action they were advocating is the right thing to do. Hence, if an employee advocates a different view, that person must be wrong. That belief leads the leaders to either ignore the employee or push back in a defensive way. This reaction is only human nature, but it definitely does not reinforce the employee's candor.

Leaders need to realize that they wear an "I AM RIGHT" button all day every day. Sometimes leaders have a hard time believing me when I tell them this trait, but after thinking about their mental processes with some guidance, almost all of them can agree they do wear the button. The reason is that the button is consistent with human nature.

The revelation comes when I pass out buttons to everyone in the room and suggest to the leaders when someone brings up a contrary thought, that the first order of business is to see the invisible "I AM RIGHT" button that the other person is wearing. That action will change the leader's body language from one of hostility to one of curiosity; now we are half way home.

Couple the curiosity with respect for the individual and you will have the magic solution to low trust in any organization. If the leader reinforces rather than punishes the employee for his or her candor and treats the individual with due respect, then trust will grow in that transaction.

In 50 years of studying leadership, the technique I just described is the most powerful tonic to change the culture of any organization. That is why I end up teaching the technique to every leader who will listen to me.

## **Bonus video**

Here is [a brief video about reinforcing candor.](#)

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals (2003), 2. Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online (2006), 3. Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind (2009), and 4. Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change (2014). In addition, he has authored over 1000 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations*