

Building Higher Trust 35 Assume Best Intent

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



One way to consistently build trust with people is to assume best intent rather than jump to negative conclusions. The technique can make the environment in an organization much more helpful.

Assuming best intent is rather easy to achieve if you just train people to not react reflexively. Human beings have a curious way of jumping to conclusions when something done by another person does not track with expectations.

Jumping to Conclusions

We jump to assign blame and think of all the evil things that might be behind the action. In doing so, we fail to take into account a myriad of alternate scenarios that might explain the paradox as being something more benign. Maybe it was a misunderstanding rather than something sinister.

We have all experienced this phenomenon, and there is a simple antidote. Assume the best intent rather than the worst.

Electronic Communications

A place to view this phenomenon most easily is in e-mail communication. One person will dash off a note and leave out a critical part of the background for an action. The person reading the note will say to himself, “Ed is clueless. He obviously is out to try to embarrass me with these statements. I don’t care if he is having a bad day or not, he has no business making these statements without getting his facts straight.”

What started out as an innocent note from Ed, turns into the fuel for an **e-grenade battle**. The response coming back to Ed assumes the worst intent, so it is far off base in Ed’s mind. Ed writes back a blistering note, and we are off to the races.

Several days later, after numerous notes and escalating distribution lists, some manager steps in and asks these two feuding juveniles to stop the food fight. All of this acrimony and conflict could have been avoided if the recipient of Ed’s first note assumed the best intent rather than the worst.

He would have gone over to Ed's desk and said, "Your note was confusing to me. I am not sure I follow how you concluded there was no information coming out of my group." Then Ed could have explained how that was not his message at all, the words just did not convey what he was trying to say.

This action gives Ed the chance to write a simple note of apology and clarification, which he is happy to do because he was approached in an adult manner.

The technique of assuming best intent is helpful for all forms of communication, not just the online environment. If we teach people to assume the best intent whenever there is a disconnect, it prevents people from going off on each other inappropriately. This habit creates a significant reduction in conflict, and since conflict often gets amplified in the pressure cooker of the work environment, this little remedy can save a lot of hurtful turmoil and build higher trust.

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.

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