

Building Higher Trust 46 Trust and Favoritism

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I am sure we all agree that when a leader shows favoritism, it works against a culture of trust. The conclusion is so obvious, it seems there is nothing more to say about it. Unfortunately, the topic of favoritism is much more complex than meets the eye.

Common Problem

I ask the question in every leadership class I conduct. “When a leader plays favorites, does it lower trust?” I always get unanimous affirmative votes. Then I turn around and nail them with the following question, “Do you ever play favorites?” I normally get a pregnant pause, then some uncomfortable responses like “Well I **try** to not do it.”

The reason for the problem is that if you are a human being, there are some people you would rather work with on a certain function than other people. So, you end up appearing to play favorites.

Wisdom from John Wooden

The famous basketball coach, John Wooden, had a unique perspective on favoritism that seems to defy conventional wisdom until you think about it. He said, “The surest way I can show favoritism among my players is to treat each of them the same way.” That sounds backward, but it actually makes good sense.

John recognized that each player is unique and has a different set of needs from the other players. If he treats everyone the same all the time, then he is actually favoring some players over the others. There is an important distinction here when it comes to following rules.

I think if John had just considered enforcing the rules, then when he treats everyone the same way he is **avoiding favoritism**. There is a subtle difference between enforcement of rules and general accommodation of people’s needs. The main objective is to treat each person the right way.

How to Avoid Playing Favorites

There are a few methods that allow leaders to operate in the way they want most of the time without appearing to play favorites. I will share examples of two methods and include some sample dialog that can be useful.

Operate Outside Your Normal Groove

If you do things differently for a small portion of the time, you can avoid the appearance of having favorites. For example, if your “go-to” person on making presentations is Bill, you can say, “Normally I ask Bill to do the presentation, but I am also open to having someone else do it, if you are interested.”

You can have one person do a task most of the time, but if you allow other people to do it occasionally, you avoid the stigma of playing favorites. The good news is that you can pick a low-risk situation to have another person fill in as if your normal “go-to” person is out sick. By cross-training other people, you also have the advantage of greater bench strength for times your usual choice is not available.

If the Person Has the Necessary Background

You might say, “I am asking Sally to prepare the marketing proposal again because she has a graduate degree in that function.” If you can justify selecting a specific person to do some work based on a real credential, people will not accuse you of playing favorites.

Conclusion

In many situations, it is possible to rotate people into different roles so they grow. By doing so, you can improve bench strength and avoid being known as a leader who plays favorites.

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