

Leadership Barometer 113 Building Trust When Your Manager Doesn't

Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



Sometimes building trust within your organization is difficult because your manager is not good at fostering trust in the larger organization.

In my work with leaders who are trying to build higher trust within their organizations, the most persistent complaint I hear is a mid-level manager who says, "Your material is excellent. I know this can make a huge difference in our organization, but my boss seems intent on doing things that destroy trust almost daily. How can I be more effective at building trust in my arena when the environment is habitually trashed from above?"

This is an interesting conundrum, and yet it is not a hopeless situation. Here are six tips that can help.

First – Recognize You Are Not Alone.

Nearly every company today is under extreme pressure, and restructuring or other unpopular actions are common. There are ways to build and maintain trust, even in draconian times, but the leaders need to be highly skilled and transparent.

Unfortunately, most leaders shoot themselves in the foot when trying to manage in difficult times. They do lasting damage rather than build trust during the struggle.

Second – You Have Limited Ability to Control Your Manager

My favorite quote on this is "Never wrestle a pig. You get all muddy and the pig loves it." The best you can do is point out that approaches do exist that can produce a better result.

Suggesting that your leader get some outside help and learn how to manage the most difficult situations in ways that do not destroy trust will likely backfire. Most managers with low emotional intelligence have a huge blind spot where they simply do not see that they are causing the problem.

One suggestion is to request that you and some of your peers go to some training, or bring in a leadership trust seminar and request the manager come along as a kind of "coach" for the group.

Another idea is to start a book review lunch club where your peers and the manager can meet once a week to discuss favorite leadership books. It helps if the manager gets to nominate the first couple books for review.

The idea is to get the clueless manager to engage in dialog on topics of leadership and trust as a participant of a group learning process. If the manager is especially narcissistic, it is helpful to have an outside facilitator help with the interaction.

The key flavor here is to not target the manager as the person who needs to be "fixed." Rather, view the process as growth for everyone. It will promote dialog and better understanding within the team.

Third – Avoid Whining About the Culture Above You

Griping about the situation does not help the people below you feel better (it really just reduces your own credibility), and it annoys your superiors as well. When you make a mistake, admit it and make corrections the best you can.

Fourth – Create a Culture of Trust in the Environment That You Influence

That means being as transparent as possible and reinforcing people when they bring up frustrations or apparent inconsistencies. This habit can be tricky because the lack of transparency often takes the form of a gag rule from on high.

You may not be able to control transparency as much as you would like. One idea is to respectfully challenge a gag rule by playing out the scenario with alternate outcomes. The discussion might sound like this, "I understand the need for secrecy here due to the potential risks, but is it really better to keep mum now and have to finesse the situation in two weeks? Would we be better served being open now even though the news is difficult to hear? My observation is that most people respond to difficult news with maturity if they are given information and treated like adults."

If your desire to be more transparent is overruled by your manager, you might ask him or her to tell you the words to use down the line when people ask why they were kept in the dark.

Another tactic is to ask how the manager intends to address the inevitable rumors that will spring up if there is a gag rule.

Keep in mind there are three questions every employee asks of others before trusting them:

1) Can I trust you?

- 2) Are you committed to excellence?
- 3) Do you care about me?

Fifth – Lead by Example.

Even though you are operating in an environment that is not ideal, you can still do a good job of building trust. It may be tricky, but it can be done. You will be demonstrating that it can be accomplished, which is an effective means to have upper management see and appreciate the benefits of high trust. Tell the manager how you are handling the situation, because that is being transparent with that person.

Sixth – Be Patient and Keep Smiling

A positive attitude is infectious. Many cultures these days are basically worn-down and morose. Groups that enjoy high trust are usually upbeat and positive. That is a much better environment to gain the motivation of everyone in your group.

Great Additional Resource

For additional information on this topic, call up the article [“Leading From Below”](#) by my friend Gregg Vanourek.

The preceding information was adapted from the book [Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind](#), by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

Robert Whipple is also the author of [The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals and, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online](#). Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc. a company dedicated to growing leaders.

