

Building Higher Trust 66 Top Down or Bottom Up

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



In an organization, trust is normally generated from the top down rather than the bottom up. Sure, it is important for employees as well as leaders to be trustworthy, but the culture that allows trust to kindle and flourish is usually created by the leaders of the organization rather than the workers.

Blind Spots

It is astonishing for me to see the blind spots that many leaders have about how pivotal their behaviors are to how trust is manifest in their entire organization. If the top leader or leaders do not act with integrity and consistency, it creates loops of "workaround" activity in all of the other layers. There gets to be a kind of pseudo-trust where people look the part and act the part on the surface, but it is only skin deep. Under the surface, the ability to hold onto trust is as leaky as a bucket used for target practice.

Psychological Safety

Of all the behaviors leaders display, I think one shines out as being by far the most powerful for sustaining trust, yet simultaneously the most difficult for leaders to master. That is the ability to create an environment free of fear for disclosing one's opinions about the leader's actions. In most cultures, people are punished if they express reservations about what the leader is saying or doing. Those cultures continually dampen the ability to sustain real trust, and you get the plastic variety that is evident in many environments.

Reinforcing Candor

In brilliant organizations, leaders encourage and reward sharing of scary stuff. I call this skill "reinforcing candor," because it means the leader is not only open to criticism but actively seeks it. The few leaders who are able to understand the power of reinforcing

candor have an easy time building trust and rebuilding compromised trust. This trust is genuine and sustainable; it is not the faux-trust that is so common in most organizations.

If the generation and maintenance of trust is mostly a top down affair, the ability to destroy trust is more balanced. It is just as easy for employees to destroy what trust is there as it is for leaders to do it. Acting in ways that show low integrity is the most common method of harpooning sincere efforts to build more trust. Leaders destroy trust when they are duplicitous and fail to follow through on promises. Employees trash trust when they act without integrity in numerous ways, like stealing from the company or spreading rumors.

Conclusion

The nature of trust is that it is always a relative thing. Trust fluctuates based on the situational context of current actions. One should not always expect to find high trust in any area, even the best ones. There are going to be peaks and valleys, and the smart organizations seek a good average and try to dampen out the spikes, both high and low. It is possible for most groups to make great strides in the trust level if they simply work to understand it and improve it daily. Leaders should not become discouraged if there is a lapse in trust; rather, they should redouble their efforts to maintain it.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.

