Building Higher Trust 76 Trust But Verify

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD

The phrase "Trust but verify" was made famous by Ronald Reagan. He used it in December 1987 after the signing of the INF Treaty with Mikhail Gorbachev. The Russian leader quipped, "You repeat that at every meeting," to which Reagan replied, "I like it." The origin of the phrase is actually from a Russian proverb, "doveryai no proveryai" (Trust but verify).

Last year, I read the notion by one trust expert, "If you have to verify, it isn't trust." I got into a similar discussion last week with a local friend. I wanted to give my opinion on the matter because the conundrum is interesting.

The phrase is an oxymoron

The concept of "trust but verify" being an oxymoron makes sense because the word "but" is often an eraser word. When used in a comparative context, the conjunction "but" renders whatever comes before it as moot. If I say, "I liked your book, but it was too long," what is the meaning? Normally what you interpret is that I did not like the book.

Don't apply blind trust

The need to verify implies that complete trust in the other party is lacking. I am troubled by that because it implies that in order to be real trust, it must be blind. The concept of blind trust is covered in *Smart Trust* by Stephen M.R. Covey. He says that blind trust is not the best strategy to employ in a low-trust world. Sure, we can point to exceptions, and yet the general rule is wise. Try asking the former clients of Bernie Madoff. Most of them would have achieved a better result if they had verified.

"Though we've become very good at recognizing the cost of trusting too much, we're not nearly as good at recognizing the cost of not trusting enough." Stephen M.R. Covey.

The point is that when we extend more trust to others, we will normally receive more trust in return. I call that "The first law of trust."

A Better phrase to use

Consider changing the phrase from "Trust but verify" to "Trust and confirm." That might make the phrase less of a dichotomy and make it more operational. The reason we must confirm is that there is a finite chance that the person did not understand.

When we confirm that our expectations were met, we reduce the chance of being disappointed in the result. The reason I like the second phrase better is that the more inclusive conjunction "and" replaces the exclusive conjunction "but."

The confirmation process is the due diligence that recognizes the fact that activities do not happen in a vacuum. We often act as the agents for others as we trust someone to perform a task. Confirming that things are correct is just being prudent and being true to the trust others have in us. If people know we are responsible by confirmation, they will be more likely to perform to a high standard.

"Trust and confirm" does not sound like an oxymoron to me. The concept of "trust and confirm" leaves the concept of trust more intact than "trust but verify." It is not just a matter of semantics.

Conclusion

The words we choose make a difference in how people interpret meaning. You will have a better result if you avoid using the phrase "trust but verify." By using "trust and confirm" you will send an unambiguous message that avoids blind trust.

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