

Building Higher Trust 78 Trust and Nepotism

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



The word nepotism comes from the Latin root "nepos" meaning nephew. In ancient times, nepotism described a process in the Catholic Church whereby celibate clergy would elevate their nephews to higher position, because they had no offspring of their own.

Common practice in some societies

In modern organizations, the practice of nepotism is alive and well, and it can have devastating impacts on trust. It is interesting because in some cases we tolerate nepotism without question. In other cases, we find the practice repugnant.

Several societies still have a monarchy whereby a person is born into the line of succession. We accept this practice in numerous legitimate societies without difficulty. We also usually accept the practice of passing on a family-owned business to the offspring of the owner.

Why people hate nepotism

People struggle with the appointment of a close relative if the person appears to be underqualified for the position. The future of people working in an organization is linked to the health of the entity. It hurts to see a weak candidate appointed as a leader due to a blood connection. It feels like a slap in the face at best.

The same helpless feeling occurs in the more common practice of cronyism. A leader selects a favorite person based on their relationship rather than skills.

No real cure

The sad truth is that there is no effective cure for this problem. It can go on at any level in any organization, and it usually trashes trust. How can leaders do a better job of

bringing along new talent if there is favoritism involved? First, you must realize it is a rare situation where there is absolutely zero favoritism. Few leaders will promote based solely on the credentials of the individual without regard to the fit. Some form of advantage is at play in most promotions.

Try being upfront with it

I think it would be a refreshing change if a leader got up and said, "I am appointing my cousin Mark to the job of VP HR. You all realize that Mark and I are related but I trust him." Being upfront about a decision is far better than just ignoring the bias and expecting people not to care. They do care, and the honest approach will at least show some integrity along with a modicum of sensitivity.

Don't run a sham

One thing to avoid is trying to run a sham where the leader indicates they are interviewing several candidates. However, the team has already chosen who is going to get the position. That practice is debilitating and easily detected. The leader who does this is going to suffer a huge loss of credibility and trust. If you have already made up your mind, do not run an interview process that looks like a fair one. You will become exposed more often than not.

There are exceptions where there is a legal precedent for interviewing several people even if the choice appears obvious. It may be an internal company rule that each position must have competition before making a selection. Keeping an open mind that a better candidate may surface is the antidote. It is often the case.

Make sure there is a chance to succeed

When trying to appoint a relative, make sure the person has at least the potential to do well. There have been numerous examples of a leader bringing in a son or daughter which led to the demise of the organization. Dr. An Wang, appointed his son Fred to succeed him at Wang Laboratories in 1986. The company was losing its technological advantage, and Fred was unqualified to reverse the slide. By 1989, Dr. Wang fired his son, but it was too late to save the company.

Summary

Keeping the leadership in the family can work out well if there is adequate attention to grooming the individual. Also, the person must have the requisite skill levels in terms of Emotional Intelligence and mental agility. One thing is for sure, the practice is not going to end any time soon, so get used to it.

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