

## Building Higher Trust 80 Does Trust Scale

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD**



Does Trust Scale? My conclusion in a past article was that trust does scale. It is measurable and has properties where it can grow or shrink.

### **Some centering comments**

Ensuing discussions between two of my good friends brought out an important nuance. Both Bob Vanourek and Fred Dewey came back with the concept that trust is not linear at all. A small increase or decrease in trust will tend to grow exponentially as the news spreads. Actions that build trust will become more powerful as a result of the viral nature of information.

Of course, the same phenomenon happens on the negative side. If a leader does something that has a damping effect on trust, that negative impact will become more hurtful as the information spreads virally.

### **Observations by Stephen M.R. Covey**

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, author Stephen M.R. Covey made the observation that there can be an “amplification” effect. Organizations that went into the pandemic with high trust found that trust grew during the chaos. Organizations with low trust tended to see even lower trust during the disruption unless there was corrective action. Here is a [video interview](#) of Stephen sharing his theory.

The nature of trust is that it does scale; we need to be constantly aware of a “hockey-stick” situation. One small misstep magnifies in time and in space. I think this observation has always been true. As we trend toward a greater percentage of information conveyed virtually, the leverage increases.

There is an opportunity to intervene that may be helpful. When something unfortunate happens, it is picked up on social networks. The person who committed the gaff is usually aware of the bad press. It is a kind of moment of truth where the damage is

either made much worse or reversed. This public relations problem can make or break a person's reputation.

### **Case Example**

Let's take a case as an example and dissect the likely outcomes. Suppose a CEO puts out a note to the senior managers that refers to some problem employees as "knuckleheads." One of the managers gets a chuckle out of the wording and elects to pass it along to a couple of underlings as a joke.

One of the underlings is familiar with a person who has been under scrutiny for some attendance problems. He writes to that person and asks "Wonder if you are one of the knuckleheads?" That individual sends it out to everybody in his group, and the cascade is on. Within an hour, the entire organization knows the CEO considers some of the employees to be "knuckleheads."

The CEO will quickly become aware, through feedback, that his note is out all over the plant. Let's look at a few possible approaches for the CEO:

1. He can call a quick meeting with his senior managers to try to find out who leaked the information. That "witch hunt" reaction is unfortunately pretty common when the real witch was actually the CEO.
2. He can ignore the situation and let people calm down over time. That "head in the sand" approach is a common ploy that only feeds the rumors of clueless leaders.
3. A better approach might be a humble apology. He admits to his indiscretion and indicates that his choice of words was inappropriate. He does not try to justify what is already known. He indicates sincere regret and a desire to not repeat it.

You be the judge of the outcomes under these scenarios. Perhaps you can think of other methods of handling the situation. Undoubtedly the best cure would be prevention where the CEO would not send a note like that in the first place.

Even more important, would be to have a CEO who does not even think in terms where he or she has to guard the wording. If your private thoughts show the proper level of respect, then you do not have to scrub your communications. You are free to be authentic.

Of course, this example was a small situation that was contained within one specific organization. Many times people get into trouble when they communicate inappropriate things about people outside the organization. These lapses can lead to embarrassment, loss of one's job, jail time, or worse. When people compromise trust in any type of communication, there is no telling how much damage will ensue.

## Important conclusion

The percentage of communication happening in the virtual environment is growing. It is time to redouble efforts to create the right culture to avoid embarrassing slips. Creating an environment of trust where people can be authentic is the answer. When leaders don't need to spin all communication, the opportunity to have an authentic culture grows.

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