

Building Higher Trust 82 Leader's Role in Trust Issues

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



The behaviors of *the senior leaders* in any organization will have more impact on trust issues than anything else. Over many years, I have observed how trust in any organization is influenced most by this single factor. If there are trust issues in an organization, leaders need to look in the mirror for the cause.

There can be trust issues at all levels

The behaviors of the senior leaders are usually the root cause of trust issues in an organization. Please do not misunderstand; there will be trust issues evident at all levels of the organization. Often severe untrustworthy behaviors exist at the operational level. The reality is that in most organizations nearly all employees will exhibit high trust if they are properly led.

Ducking the issue

Many leaders duck culpability, indicating the workers who are not being trustworthy account for low trust. That may be the case, but it is not the root cause of the problem. The behavior of the senior leaders causes employees at various levels to act in a non-trustworthy manner.

The culture of any organization is established from the top. Certainly, there are many levels in any organization and there can be trust issues at any level. The tone of the environment is created by the behaviors and policies set out by the most senior leader.

Leaders usually blame problems on others

Trying to get leaders to step up to cultural responsibility is always a difficult challenge. They would much rather blame others, circumstances, customers, the economy, or anything other than themselves.

I rarely meet an executive who will say, “There is a lack of trust in the organization. Since I am the leader here, it must be originating with me.” Occasionally I will run into someone who thinks that way, but it is pretty rare. We need to convince leaders of their responsibility in terms of creating the right culture. That is the way to create more trust in the world.

Exercise for leaders

Ask yourself what behaviors you would need to change in order to begin a new culture within your organization. Think about your role as a leader in establishing the environment in which all employees work. That environment is the creator of either excellence or trust issues.

Foundational behaviors

Here are four “foundational behaviors” leaders can exhibit that will move the culture to one of higher trust. I will also include my favorite quote for each behavior.

1. **Reinforce Candor** – make people unafraid to bring up issues. “The absence of fear is the incubator of trust.”
2. **Hold people accountable in a balanced way**, not just when they have messed up. “Hold people ‘procountable’ rather than accountable.”
3. **Extend more trust** to the people within the organization. “The First Law of trust: If you want to see more trust, then extend more trust.”
4. **Have firm values and demonstrate those values every single day**. “Stated values that are not demonstrated by leaders act like nuclear missiles to the fragile trust ecosystem.”

Additional actions that accelerate trust

When leaders do these things consistently, there are hundreds of other actions that will accelerate the pace of trust. I will mention just a few of the behaviors here for the sake of brevity:

1. Do what you say.
2. Treat people well.
3. Tell the truth.
4. Demonstrate respect.
5. Be transparent.
6. Use the Golden Rule.

7. Stick up for people.
8. Be ethical.
9. Admit mistakes.
10. Care for the other person.
11. Adhere to values.
12. Listen well.
13. Reinforce good behavior.
14. Practice humility.
15. Be consistent.
16. Right wrongs.

Conclusion

If you are a leader, recognize your role as the primary force that creates the culture in your organization. If there are trust issues, then it is up to you to change the culture to eliminate them. If you are not the leader, you might suggest a group workshop on this topic. It may have an impact.

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