

Building Higher Trust 98 Colin Powell on Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Colin Powell gave a response to a student question that I find most helpful. She asked him the following question. *“How would you define the key characteristics of effective leadership that allow you to go and be an advocate for good?”* Colin gave an immediate one-word response, “Trust.”

His experience in a nutshell

He went on to tell the short story of when he first learned this lesson from his superiors 50 years earlier. He was in the infantry school at Fort Benning. Here is a link to a brief [video of Colin Powell’s view on the importance of trust.](#)

His main point is that good leaders are people whose followers trust them. He quipped that if there is trust, people will follow you, “even if only out of curiosity.” It is worth doing a bit of analysis on this concept.

Translating Colin’s message on trust to my own environment

I always thought highly of Colin Powell as a model of excellent leadership. He had a long and industrious career helping our country in the military and as Secretary of State. A key lesson was that once you have built trust, you can be a human being and make a mistake.

Mistakes can happen

Powell made a few mistakes in his career. His integrity was never doubted. People respected him. The most serious blunder was when he recommended the USA invade Iraq in 2003. His analysis was based on faulty intelligence that Saddam Hussein had biological weapons of mass destruction. Those weapons were never found as the invasion unfolded.

A key lesson in leadership

The lesson is, if you build real trust as a leader, you no longer have to be perfect. I learned the lesson when interviewing CEOs in preparation for my third book on trust. Leaders who have not built trust must guard every action or sentence. People are waiting to pounce on any potential inconsistency. Life for these leaders is miserable and highly stressful.

Leaders who build trust can relax and be fallible human beings because people will cut them some slack. That's why the title of one of my books is "Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind."

Two very different ways to lead

The difference in quality of life for the leader who has built trust is palpable. I observed this difference when interviewing many leaders in preparation for the book. Leaders who had not built trust were bundles of nerves and totally stressed out. Leaders who knew the secrets of building trust were relaxed and far more productive. They were actually having a ball because great leadership really is a blast. You just need to learn that the key is trust. Colin learned this lesson early and used it throughout his life.

Colin Powell paid attention as a lieutenant at Fort Benning. The skill he learned made him adored and world-famous. He died on October 18, 2021, at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The cause of death was a compromised immune system: probably complicated by COVID. At his funeral, three current and past presidents hailed him as an American Hero.

Conclusion

Please do not underestimate the power of trust in your organization. Believe me, it changes everything. Not only are you a more effective leader, you also have a much richer and more enjoyable life.

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