

Building Higher Trust 105 Stupid or Brilliant

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



I do a fun exercise in my leadership classes called “Stupid or Brilliant.” I go through a number of scenarios and specify an action that, on the surface, appears to be stupid. In each case, the loss of control would appear to be devastating from a risk point of view. I ask the participants to vote if the action was stupid or brilliant.

Participants have to vote on Stupid or Brilliant

I give each participant a card that has a big “thumbs down” on one side and a brilliant light bulb on the other. After considering each scenario I ask the participants to vote with their card without talking.

There are some examples where there is a documented correct answer, but most of the questions can lead to lively debate. Here is an example of a question with a real surprise answer.

Selling Doughnuts in NYC

A doughnut street vendor at the base of a skyscraper in New York City noticed that the line was too long while people waited for him to make change. He was losing customers. He put out a box with change and small bills and a sign that read “In a hurry? Make your own change: I trust you!”

At first glance, putting money out in trust in NYC would be stupid. People could just take the cash and go. Instead, the vendor found the strategy more than doubled his revenue. It was brilliant for three reasons:

1. The throughput of his vending operation increased by 50% because the line moved faster.
2. People started talking about his trust throughout the building, and they came out to buy from this honest vendor.

3. Many people would not even take the change. If their total came to \$3.75, they would just put in a five-dollar bill and walk away. They did not want to be seen rooting around in the change box.

What appeared on the surface to be a stupid idea turned out to be brilliant in the real world at that time.

Different Stupid or Brilliant situations

Other strategies for trusting people leave room for analysis. For example: One consultant decided to charge only what the customer felt was appropriate after completing his work. He would leave the fee totally up to the discretion of the people he was helping. This tactic defies negotiation logic. It ignores the principle that the value of the service is reduced after the service is rendered. Yet, this consultant generally did very well and often earned large fees. He made more than he would have if he had negotiated a firm price before doing the work.

A work example

One organization was forced by market conditions to do some downsizing. They decided to allow the impacted people to continue to use their old office. They used their computers, and cell phones while they were looking for work elsewhere. There were a few stated rules about not being disruptive and honoring professional behaviors while on the premises. Other than that, the severed employees were treated the same as the ones retained. There was a risk, but the company found that the benefits far outweighed the risks. The company was able to show compassion for the workers at a very low cost.

For sure this is stupid

You can carry blind trust to an extreme where a strategy is truly stupid. The owner of a bar does not charge patrons per drink but asks each customer to keep track of what he consumed. He will pay at the end of the night. Obviously, most people vote for this as a “stupid” strategy. On the other hand, it would make an interesting experiment, because it may be possible that customers would pay more than required on average rather than pay less.

The point is that when we really do trust people to do the right thing, they often respond in ways that defy conventional wisdom. We derive that logic from a social norm based on a controlling philosophy. Most people react with integrity and gratitude when we extend trust to them. That is why it is better to trust people working from home and not track their daily output.

I have developed what I call the “First Law of Trust.” It is: “If you are unhappy with the level of trust others have toward you, the first corrective action is to find ways to extend trust more to them.” Trust is reciprocal in nature, so the best way to receive more trust is

to give more. Try this technique with the people in your life, and you will see a dramatic increase in trust. Often what seems like an unwise risk to take will turn out to be rewarded by far greater loyalty than you can imagine.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations