

Building Higher Trust 107 Trust Cultures

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Over the past forty years, I have studied trust cultures. I have witnessed literally hundreds of organizations and seen the best of the best and the other extreme. Throughout this conquest, I have kept notes on the differences and similarities in order to draw some conclusions.

High trust cultures

The atmosphere in high-trust organizations is refreshing and light. People enjoy coming to work because they have fun and enjoy their coworkers. They are also more than twice as productive as their counterparts in lower trust areas. They honestly feel like winners.

People rarely leave high-trust organizations, because they are aware of how precious their culture really is. High-trust groups still have significant problems to solve, but they do so efficiently and with low acrimony.

Low trust cultures

In groups with low trust, the atmosphere is oppressive. People describe their work as a hopeless string of sapping activities and abuse. These things are foisted upon them by the clueless morons who run the place. Many people are either looking for better employment or simply retired in place. They feel like losers.

Most top leaders understand all of the above. The conundrum is, they sincerely want to build an environment of higher trust. Unfortunately, they consistently do things that take them in the wrong direction. I made a brief video about my observations of many leaders. The video is entitled [“The Role of Leaders.”](#)

Many leaders end up hiring expensive consultants to help create a better environment within their organization. This practice rarely works because the leader does not realize the problem cannot be fixed by an outsider. To fix the problem of low trust, the leader needs to fess up. “The atmosphere around here stinks, and it must be my fault because

I am the one in charge. How can I change my own behavior in order to turn the tide toward an environment of higher trust”?

With that attitude, there is a real possibility an outside coach or consultant can help the organization. Unfortunately, most leaders have a blind spot on their own contribution to low trust, so in those groups, there is little hope of a lasting change.

Leader behaviors that build or destroy trust

It is easy to brainstorm a list of a hundred things leaders can do to build trust. The opposite of these things will destroy trust. For example, if a leader always walks the talk, then trust will grow. If the leader does not walk the talk, then trust will be destroyed. In my classes, I share a couple dozen of the big things that build or destroy trust. If you are interested, here is an article on [“Trust Behaviors”](#) that names several of these factors.

There is one factor that enables all the other factors to work well. I believe it is the **key** leadership behavior to build trust.

Create psychological safety

If you have built psychological safety, then people in your organization know they can share their true feelings without fear of being put down. Once you build that level of confidence with all your people, maintain it. Then all of the other trust-building behaviors work like magic.

As a leader, you build psychological safety by reinforcing people when they are candid. Basically, you make people feel glad they brought up a scary issue. Most leaders cannot reinforce candor consistently, and that is why so many organizations fail to have high trust.

Conclusion

A culture of high trust is precious for any organization. If you have it, you will succeed and if you don't you will surely fail. It is vital to create and maintain high trust in your organization. Leaders create trust by reinforcing candor.

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