

Building Higher Trust 115 Unexpected Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Unexpected trust is a very powerful form of trust between people. This condition happens for a number of reasons that I will explain. The result can be a huge powerful gain in trust, especially for leaders.

What is unexpected trust?

When people have been working in a low-trust environment, they naturally expect the abuse to continue. There is no reason to believe that a clueless manager is going to make a change.

In reality, when most leaders are showing low trust in people, they are not even aware of it. One cause is the false assumption that if the leader does not check up on people they will abuse the system.

Conventional remuneration schemes for organizations have historically been based on hours worked. There is a natural tendency to check that people are working as much as they report. That is called command and control.

In the conventional office setup, managers can see when people are not applying themselves to the work. When working remotely, it requires some form of extra verification such as a tracking system.

Tracking systems lower trust

All tracking systems have ways they can be defeated or at best confused into sending false signals. When this happens, managers are forced to verify the tracking system, and more damage is done. In these situations, both the employee and the manager are miserable. Trust takes a hit.

There were several studies done near the start of the COVID pandemic. Most of them show that unmonitored employees put in more than the expected hours. The reverse is

also true. Heavily monitored employees found ways to trick the system and worked less than expected.

There are many different techniques that can take the sting out of tracking systems. One is to simply eliminate them.

Try visibly removing a system that checks up on employees

Management could simply reiterate the expected work hours (typically 40 per week) and show trust that employees would comply. This seeming loss of control would actually result in higher levels of work performed. A manager could explain it to the crew by stating the rationale. "Since I trust you, there is no reason to continue this cumbersome checking system."

In addition, the quality of work would increase because people would not feel the prying eyes of the managers. The unexpected trust would be refreshing for the workers.

Unexpected trust when a new manager takes over

One convenient time to shift from heavy control to one of higher trust is when a new manager arrives. The manager can state that this is a new era in trusting the workforce to do what is right. Not only would the quantity of work increase dramatically, but the problem of turnover would go down. The quality of work would improve also.

In addition, the phenomenon of "quiet quitting" would go away because there is no longer a reason for the employee to play games.

Summary: Less control means more work

Most managers have trouble believing that lower control means more work gets done. Once they realize the tremendous leverage they are missing, maybe conditions will change. If you cannot believe this, then try an experiment in a small group. You will see the amazing power of unexpected trust.

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