

Building Higher Trust 118 Foundation of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



In my leadership classes, I do a brainstorm of the things leaders can do to build trust. The entries come quickly. Soon we have a list of more than thirty things leaders can do to build trust. The items are all pretty obvious. Here is a very short list to give an idea of the kinds of things people list:

1. Walk your talk.
2. Be honest.
3. Be transparent.
4. Praise people when they do well.
5. Right wrongs.
6. Show respect.

Once we have a good list, I ask a couple of questions. **First**, do you agree that all leaders want to build higher trust? They all do! **Second**, I ask a more probing question. If the way to build trust is so obvious, why do most leaders do a poor job of it? That question is harder to answer. I share my observation based on 40 years of experience with trust. There are four **foundational conditions** that must be in place for the other actions to build trust. If leaders are not practicing these four concepts, little real trust is generated. It does not matter how much the leaders practice the hundreds of obvious little things.

First Foundation of Trust - Reciprocity

Recognize that trust is always reciprocal; it goes in both directions. If you want to see more trust, you must extend more trust to others. Many leaders forget to extend trust as a precursor. They always fail.

If you are a leader who is not satisfied with the level of trust in your group, ask yourself this question. How much trust am I extending to them?

Second Foundation of Trust - Values

Values are critical as they form the basis for trust to form. Many leaders have a set of great-sounding values, but they do not model them **consistently**.

Suppose you have a value that “People are our most important asset.” You need to demonstrate it when things are tight and you are considering laying people off. I tell my students, “Values do you the most good when it is difficult or expensive to follow them.” That is when you show that you mean the values that you profess. People will pick up on any compromise or rationalization of the values, and it kills trust.

Third Foundation of Trust - Accountability

I have done a multitude of surveys on trust within organizations. In the majority of cases, accountability turns out to be a significant limiting factor. The reason is that most leaders view accountability as a punitive concept. They visualize catching people doing things wrong and making them feel bad about it. Accountability discussions are usually one way, ugly, and hurtful.

I show leaders that if they change the concept from punitive to a principle-centered activity, it changes everything. Make sure when having an accountability discussion you stress the following. The reason you are talking is that you really do care about the other person. You want him or her to be successful. Inconsistent performance gets in the way of their credibility, which ultimately limits their success.

Make sure you stress that you and the employee are on the same team. You are working to help each other be successful. Consider that perhaps some of your actions or decisions are making it harder for the employee to perform well.

Fourth Foundation of Trust – Safety

Create a culture where employees feel it is safe to challenge a concept or action. They do not have to worry about some form of retribution. I call the concept “reinforcing candor.”

The leader makes a special effort to make people glad when they bring up scary stuff. The leader listens with empathy and considers the input as valid in the other person’s view. Reinforcing candor is the most direct way to build a culture of higher trust.

I teach leaders to think of one thing first if someone challenges a statement. The first priority is to make the person glad they brought it up. Once you establish a pattern of reinforcing candor, the whole atmosphere changes, and trust starts to grow spontaneously. This is the **secret sauce of building trust**.

Conclusion

There are hundreds of actions leaders can take that can enhance trust. They first must be grounded in the four foundations I have described in this article. If they do that, then

all the little actions will work quickly and effectively at building trust. Leaders must build the foundation first. If they do, all the other actions will enable trust rather than doubt or suspicion.

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