

Are You Trusted by Your Employees?

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The 12 points of the Boy Scout Law are: “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.” I wrote that from memory more than 50 years after learning it. I am not saying that to pat myself on the back, but to emphasize how important it was. It made a big impression

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on me, particularly the first point of the Scout Law—trustworthy. Trustworthiness, I reasoned, must be pretty important.

We all know what “trust” is, but I looked it up in the dictionary anyway. I wanted to see what words were used. While over a dozen different definitions appeared in the dictionary I referenced, only three applied directly to the kind of trust that this article is about:

- Reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, surety, etc., of a person or thing
- Confident expectation of something
- A person on whom one relies

In an organization, trust needs to be a multidirectional street—people need to trust the organization, their manager, their peers, and anyone they may supervise. A

lack of trust anywhere can damage morale, productivity, and efficiency.

Why is Trust Important?

When employees trust and respect their manager, they will give more effort, especially when they feel trusted and supported in return. Employees don't usually give their best effort working for someone they don't trust, who they believe doesn't trust them. Without trust, productivity suffers as employees play politics, spend time covering themselves, passively follow policies that may not be best, and never speak up with suggestions for improvement. Lack of trust affects morale and customer satisfaction. Employees' main focus becomes resentment and dissatisfaction toward management.

Little or no trust in an organization is a situation that is readily apparent. According to Robert B. Rogers and Sheryl Riddle, president and senior vice president for DDI Consulting



Services, the following are warning signs that a trust issue exists in an organization:

- An active, inaccurate grapevine
- Elaborate approval processes
- Low initiative
- High turnover
- A high fear factor among employees
- Turf wars
- Defensiveness

If these signs are obvious in your organization, you need to do something about it. You may not be able to change the complete culture of the organization, but you can at least start with your area. Then maybe it will spread. And if you are the head of the organization (or department or project), you can make an impact.

Building Trust

Trust is easy to destroy and very hard to rebuild, but not necessarily all that hard to build in the first place. It does take time, though. Listed here are a few suggestions for building trust. They are just common sense and are taken from various sources, including personal experience. They are not only valid in the work environment, but in your personal life as well. Being a trustworthy person helps you be a trustworthy manager.

Trust is built over time; one action, thought, or decision won't do it. It requires a consistent set of attitudes and actions. You have to continually show that you are worthy of the trust of those around you. Each time that you do something "right" is a step toward winning trust. With some of those around you, it may be a long journey.

Find ways to be regularly available to your employees. Be responsive; unresponsiveness causes unease and distrust. Be action- rather than talk-oriented. Be willing to talk to them. It also gives you the chance to learn about them as individuals.

Your workers need to be able to express concerns, identify problems, share sensitive information, and raise relevant issues. It is important to set the ground rules as to how you will handle information brought to you in confidence. Sometimes this will be exceedingly difficult.

Take the time to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Consider how you would react or what you would think if you were that other person in this situation. Having empathy for others is a good start.

Ask for feedback. Make it clear that respectful feedback is welcome, even if you don't agree with it. Make your attitude one of "It is important that I know what you think, whether I agree with you or not." Truly listen to the feedback that you get. Don't get defensive or emotional.

Share information regularly. Let people in on the data you get as a manager whenever possible. Managers who communi-

cate openly and frequently can build solid relationships and trust with their employees. Don't make them guess what you know or what you are thinking. Tell them. Employees sense that no news is bad news and that you are hiding something from them. A lack of interaction can erode trust. Face-to-face communication is the best method to build trust.

Sometimes you will have to pass on orders or implement a policy that will be unpopular. Don't shirk responsibility for what you are doing, even if it wasn't your decision. Don't just blame it on upper management or the chain of command. Let them know why the policy or decision was made. If you have to decide on an action that will be unpopular, it may help to bring your employees in on the decision-making process. Get their input. Show them that they have a say, but remember that you will still have to make the decision.

Don't hide or lie about bad news. Chances are the truth will come out eventually. If you hide the bad news and it does come out, you have lost your credibility and their trust. Sometimes a response of "I don't know," "I hope not," or "I'll tell you as soon as I can" is acceptable. If you can't answer a question, just say so. Tell them that you can't say anything, but that you will as soon as you can—and do it. The same goes if you don't know the answer. Just tell them that you don't know. However, don't say that you will find out and get back to them if you know that you can't.

It is important for a manager to create an environment of trust. This begins by trusting others. Assume employees are trustworthy unless they prove otherwise rather than waiting to give trust when they have earned it. If your employees feel that they are trusted, they will find it easier to trust in return.

Keep your word or explain why you can't. Do what you say you will do and make your actions visible. People quickly pick up on insincerity and don't like broken promises. Keeping commitments will foster trust. Whenever you don't or can't meet a commitment, be up front about it. When you point out and explain your own lapses or potential roadblocks, it engenders trust in your honesty. Of course, if your failure to follow through for whatever reason happens frequently, you are just seen as incompetent, insincere, or untrustworthy. Then you lose their respect and trust.

Trust also results from consistent and predictable actions and decisions. If you respond differently from week to week, it becomes harder to win trust. If you take action on a whim or your decisions are inconsistent, you will be seen as untrustworthy. Consistency in your treatment of others is a part of earning trust, too.

Don't talk about people behind their backs. If you can't say it to a person's face, don't say it at all. If another manager asks what you think about one of your employees, be honest; however, nothing should be said that you haven't told or wouldn't tell the person in a feedback or appraisal session.

Hold yourself and others accountable. If someone is promising results and delivering nothing, call them on it. No matter how trustworthy you are as a person, if you don't manage your people well, they'll lose trust in your management ability.

Don't hog the glory or take credit that isn't due. If you take an idea or suggestion from one of your people up the chain and it is accepted, give the proper credit. When your team or department meets their goals, share the credit.

When it comes to trust and respect, these qualities are earned, not demanded. So don't demand trust. Just keep working away to earn it. You can't create it directly; it comes when the conditions are right. When they aren't right, it simply won't happen. So focus on creating an environment where trust can grow. It won't happen overnight—it may take months rather than days, but it is definitely worth having.

Destroying Trust

Trust will start to crumble when people perceive that you are not **"walking your talk."** Sometimes these perceptions reflect reality, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes the issue is less you than it is the whole organization's culture, and in those cases you may have an even tougher hill to climb. Trust can be destroyed in a number of ways—and you want to stay away from all of them.

Listed here are some of the common actions that cause loss of trust or prevent it from developing. These are basically the converse of how to build trust:

- Not trusting your employees.
- Lying to your employees. As mentioned earlier, the truth usually comes out and your credibility is shot.
- Holding back information—good or bad, but especially bad. When employees find out that you knew and didn't tell them, trust takes a hit.
- Not following through on commitments or promises.
- Having a focus on what employees do wrong, putting people down, belittling them, and making them feel unworthy.
- Not showing respect toward your employees.
- Yelling at employees and making public humiliation a weapon. People will start avoiding contact with you.
- Trying to use fear as a management tool. Saying things such as, "Don't do this, or you're fired" or "Do that, or you're fired." It may work, but only for a short while, and it destroys trust.
- Not being accountable yourself, but expecting accountability from your employees.
- Not recognizing achievements or rewarding a job well done.
- Showing favoritism or not treating people fairly.
- Not being ethical.
- Taking credit for the ideas or work of others.
- Never admitting that you made a mistake. Not apologizing when you do.

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As you can see, issues of trust can easily result in problems. It must be so, because a recent survey of employees in the United States shows that "Only about half [49 percent] of employees said they have trust and confidence in the job senior managers are doing." That is not a very good showing.

Conclusions

It all boils down to common sense. There are no special gimmicks, silver bullets, or other simple solutions. You can't create trust with high pay, great company picnics, or wonderful working conditions. It is generated through teamwork, honesty, and fairness.

It is hard to show a direct proportional relationship between trust and productivity because trust is an intangible. But I and many others in the management field believe that the direct relationship exists. Where there is trust, high morale and productivity result. That is what you want in your organization.

You could say that the trust of the employees toward the manager is really just a byproduct of good management practices. Almost everything discussed in this article as a way to build (or destroy) trust is a good (or bad) management practice.

Of course many of the attitudes and actions described spill over into your personal life, too. You not only want trust and respect at work—you want it in all facets of your life. So follow the guidelines (with sincerity) and you should find it.

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