



Leadership and Trust

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As we begin a new year this might be a good time to take stock of your leadership skills, and the most important for me is trust. Like no other attribute, your capacity to convey trustworthiness has a huge impact on your ability to effectively lead others. That's because nothing impacts an organization's overall productivity more than the level of trust found within it.

Is your organization one where trust is especially low or high? If trust is low, I suspect employee engagement, job satisfaction, and overall productivity are also low. On the other hand, if trust is high, more than likely there is better employee engagement, higher job satisfaction, and greater overall productivity.

According to author Stephen M. R. Covey in his book "The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything," when trust goes down productivity also goes down and costs go up. Conversely, as trust goes up productivity increases and costs decrease. This is the economics of trust in the organization.

And nothing impacts your ability to motivate employees more than the level of trust they have in you as a leader. Trusted leaders, first and foremost, are those whose actions match their words. In the same way children emulate what parents do more than what they say, employees look to see if the actions of their leaders align with their words. Keeping words and actions in lock step builds trust and credibility like nothing else.

In addition, a trustworthy leader:

- Tells the truth even when it is easier to tell people what they want to hear;
- Acknowledges when he or she does not have all the answers;
- Is approachable and friendly to people without using his or her position of power to win them over;
- Really listens to others by using paraphrase to check for understanding;
- Shows support for employees, especially when mistakes are made;
- Balances the need for results while being considerate of people's feelings.

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All of these attributes enable you to build lasting trust, and when people trust you, your ability to persuade them increases ten-fold.

According to Covey, trust is ultimately a function of character and competence. Character in this sense means integrity, motives, and intent with other people. Competence is your capabilities, skills, results, and track record. Both greatly impact the level of trust in any relationship.

But what if trust in your organization is already low? Is there anything that can be done to restore the lack of trust employees have in you? This is hard because trust is based on a feeling and you can't force someone to trust you. Still, you can attempt to rebuild trust if you are: (1) sincere in your apology for any part you may have had in creating the distrust, (2) transparent with your intentions moving forward, (3) consistently able to walk your talk, and (4) able to demonstrate credibility in all your actions.

Effective business has always been the result of trustworthy relationships. If your trust as a leader is in doubt, then your organization will suffer. Strengthening this trust will serve you as well as your employees, suppliers, partners and customers like nothing else.

"The ability to establish, grow, extend, and restore trust with all stakeholders--customers, business partners, investors, and co-workers--is the key leadership competency for this new global economy," says Covey.

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