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ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF TRUST

Countless management books, seminars and programs offer insights into how leaders can develop trust within their organizations. Their consistent theme—"It begins with you"— is certainly valid, as leaders must model trust and set an example for their people. Success depends on a personal campaign of inner reflection, values assessment and relational intelligence. Training can be effective and rewarding, but much of the focus often stops there.

Leaders develop trust (defined as "relying on others to do the right thing") after observing people's character and behavior over time and gaining confidence in them. They earn trust by consistently displaying personal integrity, accountability and concern for others.

Trust, in fact, is the most potent tool in a leader's arsenal, asserts JetBlue Airways Chairman Joel Peterson in The 10 Laws of Trust: Building the Bonds That Make a Business Great (AMACOM, 2016). Trusted leaders are more productive, profitable and prosperous. Their people are more engaged, morale and loyalty soar, and the overall work ethic is enviable. The organization sees lower turnover, waste and inefficiency.

But trust is not limited to Mahogany Row. While we're often led to believe that trustworthy behavior will permeate the work environment like ripples in a pond, this trickle- down theory is overly simplistic. As Gallup studies reveal, employees trust their coworkers even less than their leaders. Organizations cannot reach their full potential until leaders establish a culture where employees trust their coworkers. Leaders may require assistance from a professional coach to achieve this goal.

CREATE A STANDARD OF INTEGRITY

Leaders are standard-bearers who establish the basic tenets of integrity throughout their organizations. They must clearly communicate four key values and expectations: truthfulness, honesty, respectfulness and positivity.

1. Truthfulness: Speaking the truth is challenging in toxic environments where messengers get shot. It may be tempting to ignore reality and tell people what they want to hear, notes management consultant Jim Dougherty in The Best Way for New Leaders to Build Trust (Harvard Business Review, December 13, 2013). Leaders must nonetheless deliver bad news when it's warranted—and demand honorable behavior from those who receive it. People sense less risk when an organization's culture respects those who tell the truth, even when it hurts. When leaders address mistakes constructively and avoid embarrassing their staff, there's no need to lie or stretch the truth. The penalty for lying must outweigh that for making errors. Enforce this mindset in your culture so truthful coworkers earn others' trust.

2. Honesty: When employees treat each other honestly (do the right thing), trust grows over time. Dishonesty must be met with consequences. If you deal with it firmly, even for subtle infractions, your culture of integrity strengthens and people trust each other more.

3. Respectfulness: A culture of respect and honor fosters high levels of trust among coworkers. Again, a leader's behavior sets the stage for success. Respectfulness includes basic social considerations like accepting people and listening to their opinions and ideas. Leaders also demonstrate respect when they seek feedback without favoritism, encourage participation from everyone on a team and value each staff member within the organization. Such behaviors enhance trust; being judgmental, resentful and prone to attack destroy trust. Instill a mindset of respectfulness into your culture so trust among coworkers can flourish.

4. Positivity: Positivity is an often-overlooked means of building mutual trust, as long as one's efforts are neither faked nor forced. Infusing your culture with a positive mindset has many powerful benefits. Cynicism and sarcasm are trust killers. People are repelled by these behaviors, knowing nothing trustworthy comes from them.

A positive approach assumes the best in people and offers the benefit of the doubt, thereby setting others at ease. Trust-building leaders expect their staff to exhibit thoughtful behavior and language. Add this requirement to your organization's code of conduct or formal HR policy.

PROMOTE A SPIRIT OF UNITY

Employees trust their peers once they experience teamwork. Unity becomes the norm when people share the load and help each other. Reciprocity is a noticeable trust- building act that's contagious. Coworkers dedicated to a common cause commit to each other. They lift each other up and spur one another on. Leaders who instill a spirit of unity build a culture more prone to trust.

Great leaders help employees grasp the power of reconciliation when dissention arises. They don't expect their people to always get along, but they count on them to apologize and forgive so relationships can be restored and strengthened. Durable relationships lead to mutual trust.

RAISE THE LEVEL OF EMPOWERMENT

Leaders confer the highest levels of authority and trust on employees who effectively complete tasks, resolve problems and make fair decisions. These employees, in turn, become more open to trusting others. Trust is a commodity people spend in proportion to what they receive.

As a leader, you convey trust by honoring people's ideas and suggestions and encouraging the pursuit of those with merit. Give people opportunities to earn your trust, and allow the luxury of failure as they work toward accomplishing their goals. Failure is often the most valuable way to learn and grow. As JetBlue's Peterson points out, sharing some of your power creates a higher level of trust among your employees.

Develop a suggestion-submission system, where employees' ideas for improvement are evaluated. Reward those whose ideas are implemented. Examine your policies and procedures to determine whether any can be improved by staff suggestions. Employees are the true experts in how things work at the most detailed organizational levels. The trust they feel from leadership will carry over to their peers.

Allow employees to be cross-trained so they can be more empowered. This raises their level of engagement. Offer them training or continuing-education opportunities. The feeling of being trusted to add value raises their appreciation for trust. A mentor program also empowers both mentors and mentees. Employees who feel trusted claim a higher stake in the organization and have greater trust in their coworkers, leaders and future.

REINFORCE PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

People who can't be counted on lower organizational morale and engagement. They flame resentments and dissatisfaction throughout the rest of the organization. Address this issue by reinforcing the importance of personal accountability.

People demonstrate accountability by doing what they say they're going to do, when they need to do it. Leaders promote this by holding people to their commitments and making accountability part of the performance assessment. In fairness, leaders also need to provide their people with the means to meet these commitments.

Accountability also means tackling problems head on and not running from them. People trust coworkers who meet challenges with noble efforts so everyone wins. A culture of trust thrives only when people at all organizational levels fulfill their responsibilities. Managing work with measurable criteria expands trust in the system. Clarity is a strong trust builder, according to leadership consultant David Horsager, author of The Trust Edge: How Top Leaders Gain Faster Results, Deeper Relationships, and a Stronger Bottom Line (Free Press, 2012).

Accountability often overlaps integrity, in that people who admit their mistakes are trusted more. Inspiring this kind of transparency allows people to air their mistakes and learn from them. Be a leader who encourages learning, focusing on fixes instead of blame, to build trust. The pursuit of solutions empowers people to reach new levels and expands trust.

SHARPEN COMMUNICATION

Many trust issues stem from poor communication. People who don't communicate clearly or authentically aren't trusted. Properly conveying information makes conversations, emails, phone calls and meetings more effective and trustworthy. Leaders need to provide training in communication skills and monitor employee progress.

Anger, resentment, offensiveness and rumors destroy trust. Leaders must take aim at these issues and set behavioral standards that are continuously reinforced. Ask your people to put themselves in other team members' shoes when communicating. How will their words be perceived? Can they achieve a win-win situation? Can they step back from a conflict, calm down and form a more reasonable response?

Employees who communicate reasonably and professionally with each other raise workplace trust. Integrity is best revealed through communication, and unity is best realized in a high-integrity environment.

There's no question that leaders set the tone for every aspect of workplace trust, and the necessary mindsets are passed down through the ranks. Leaders must put policies in place to monitor and correct undesirable behavior. Those who see the highest levels of coworker trust provide ample training, support and enforcement for trustworthy behavior policies.