

Trust: A Personal Value Essential to Organizational Success

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Why spend time developing and nurturing trusting relationships in the workplace? Put simply, trust in the workplace is critical to organizational success. You cannot optimize results by yourself; you need others' support and assistance. Exceptional leaders know they must rely on those who share their vision and goals; they cannot carry the load alone. Therefore, trusting others enough to ask for their help is essential to business success.

How do you define trust, that essential yet elusive ingredient to organizational success?

The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2005) defines "trust" as "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something" and "a dependence on something future or contingent: hope." My favorite definition of trust is the one articulated by Alan Weiss, The Million Dollar Consultant®, i.e., the firm belief that the other person really, truly has my best interest at heart.

Like other values, trust is something that must be gained over time. We are not "entitled" to others' trust; we have to earn it. Other people make the determination about our trustworthiness; it is not ours for the asking.

Unlike other values, trust is very personal. That is, we put ourselves in a position of vulnerability when we trust others, so our well-being rests partly in their hands. In effect, because we cede control of some part(s) of our lives to those individuals, we have a vested and personal interest in the outcome. Our hope is that their actions will justify the faith we have entrusted to them, and that they will live up to our expectations.

The fact that trust is so personal is illustrated by the terms we tend to use when people have proven to be untrustworthy – i.e., we say they have *violated* or *betrayed* our trust. "Violate" and "betray" are very strong words with important emotional connotations. They also are very personal: we feel that someone who betrays our trust has inflicted a personal injustice on us. Now contrast those words to the language we use to describe what happens when people do not demonstrate other values, such as professionalism and integrity: we say those people *are being* unprofessional, or that they *lack* integrity. We tend to view other people's lack of values as indicators of character that have to do with them, not with us – i.e., they do not affect us personally.

What does trust "look like" in the workplace? I recently worked with a client to help communicate and personalize a set of values that executives want employees to embody. Here are a few of the behaviors people identified as indicators that "management is trustworthy:"

- Follow through with what they say they will do
- Walk the talk and keep their promises
- Actions are consistent with stated values
- Do the right thing even when there is pressure not to do so
- Stand behind whatever they are asking someone to do
- Make decisions based on what's good for the organization
- Back employees up
- Have faith employees can do the task without checking; don't doubt them
- Keep confidential information confidential

Some of these points represent important elements of trust, such as having faith in others, acting consistently, and being fair. There is an element of exchange in trusting relationships – i.e., we expect that both parties will give AND receive trust. This notion of exchange is particularly critical in situations characterized by a very low level of trust, and neither party wants to take the risk of trusting the other. Sometimes we have to give trust to others before we can expect it in return. When there is mutual distrust, will you be the one to take the first step toward developing a trusting relationship?

The above list also indicates that trust is a value that requires on-going effort, an investment of time and attention. In effect, we have to demonstrate that we are trustworthy. However, it is possible to shorten the cycle – i.e., the time it takes to establish a trusting relationship. For example, we may choose to take a risk by trusting someone who a friend or trusted colleague has vouched for, or whose trustworthiness has been reported through the grapevine, or whose behaviors inspire our trust. In those cases, we may give the newcomer some latitude. That person still must prove himself or herself, though, and we are quick to revoke our initial trust if our expectations are not met. Once broken, trust is exceedingly difficult to restore.

In case you remain unconvinced of the importance of spending time developing and nurturing trusting relationships in the workplace, or if you must convince others of this point, here is a simple, three-step exercise that you can use to quickly and clearly establish why trust is critical to optimizing business results:

1. Envision a workplace in which there are trusting relationships across the organization. Describe the picture that comes to mind.

For example, I experienced an extraordinary level of trust years ago when I was an employee at FedEx. Senior management was very forthcoming about how the company was doing, employees were given levels of responsibility and authority that matched their expertise and were expected to perform accordingly, employees

were rewarded for taking risks that supported company goals, and practices like the “no layoff” policy signaled that employees were an important factor in our leaders’ business decisions. As a result, the company was able to achieve an explosive rate of growth for its new service.

2. Now envision a workplace devoid of trust. Describe the picture that comes to mind.

For example, recently I was called in to help an organization whose culture included strong distrust between management and employees. Employees experienced management as acting in their own self-interest, as punishing innovation (which was a stated value), as leaving employees out on a limb when something went wrong, and generally as not “walking the talk.” It should not have been a surprise that dysfunctional behaviors and outcomes were rampant, employees were cynical and resentful, productivity suffered, and customer service was an oxymoron.

3. Given these two scenarios, ask yourself in which environment you would rather work – or perhaps you do work.

Your response to step three above demonstrates why trust is critical to optimizing business results.

If your organization is characterized by trusting relationships, celebrate! Be sure to keep up the good work: once lost, trust is exceptionally difficult to restore. If your organization is failing to optimize its results because of a lack of trust, what will *your* next step be? ➔

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