

## TRUST AND LEADERSHIP

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### Introduction

In an article entitled “Enemies of Trust” by R. Galford and A. Seibold Drapeau, the authors stated: “Trust is the crucial ingredient of organizational effectiveness. Building it, maintaining it and restoring it when damaged must be at the top of every CEO’s agenda.”

If this is so, why is it that so many organizations struggle to achieve and maintain trust, yet fail to achieve commitment from their staff? The answer is that, lacking an understanding of the connection between trust and commitment, organizations do not invest in their leaders. Or if they do, the investment is haphazard and often doesn’t deliver the value needed.

Without trust in the organization’s performance, its leadership, and, most important, the immediate supervisor, it is impossible for an employee to feel committed to the organization’s strategic direction. In health care, performance is enhanced at an individual level because professional staff are committed to their professional standards. However, this falls far short of organizational commitment precisely because it is individually based. Individual commitment is uneven in that it is the individual’s interpretation of what is needed that prevails and not the organization’s.

In the following discussion, we will examine the factors that create trust, the enemies of trust, and some steps that can be taken to mitigate the failure of trust. We will also identify skills and abilities needed by managers and leaders at all levels to create and maintain trust and build staff commitment.

### Elements of Trust

The first element is **organizational performance**. Employees learn to trust the leaders of an organization that performs to expectations. They trust an organization that is clear and excited about the organization’s direction, its place in the community, and its place in the particular industry.

What detracts from trust are lack of vision, mediocre performance, lack of values, inconsistent application of the stated values, ignoring difficult issues that hinder performance, and not tackling awkward situations, such as conflict in the work place. These detractors hit at staff’s confidence in their leaders and this reduces trust. It is difficult to get excited about leaders whose performance is mediocre or appears to be failing.

To mitigate this potential loss of trust, organizations need to develop clear vision, mission, and values. They must also create confidence in staff by having achievable goals and objectives, which are then monitored; everyone is held accountable for the results through a well-thought-out performance management system.

The second element of trust is **consistency**. Once strategic objectives based on mission and vision have been developed, it is reasonable for employees to expect that leaders will achieve them, consistent with the established values and standards. Employees need to know how managers will react in various situations.

For example, we want employees to take risks; so to encourage them, we tell them not to be afraid to make mistakes. By definition, when one takes risks occasionally things will go badly and, in retrospect, the actions may be seen as mistakes. How leaders react in these situations will go a long way in determining the level of trust in leadership. If the organization looks on these mishaps as learning experiences and values the attempt, then they are behaving consistently with the values of the organization. If, on the other hand, they punish the person who created the problem, then leadership is behaving contrary to the value and is therefore inconsistent. At this point the 'guilty' employee, as well all those who see or know about this inconsistency, become confused; they are no longer certain that they know how to behave in light of the 'disconnect' between stated and practiced values. Thus trust is diminished and, with it, commitment to the organization and its vision, goals, and objectives.

The third element of trust is **communication**. Staff want open and honest communication. They need to receive messages that are timely, honest, clear, and easy to understand. This type of communication will always generate trust and commitment. Clearly this entails a carefully thought-out employee communication strategy to ensure that staff receive the information in a way that generates credibility, which leads in turn to trust and commitment.

## **Enemies of Trust**

The first two enemies of trust are closely connected. The first is a **lack of transparent processes** that demonstrate to everyone that the values and standards are being applied in a consistent manner and that therefore there is no 'disconnect' between the stated and practiced values and standards.

The second is a **lack of trust in subordinates**. It is difficult to create trust in leadership when leadership, consistently through its actions, demonstrates that they do not trust their employees to do the right thing or make the right decisions. If the mission, vision, values, and strategic objectives are clearly articulated, there is no reason not to delegate decision-making to the appropriate level in the organization. There is no reason not to provide staff with scope to create, innovate, and challenge the status quo. In short, there should be no reason not to trust the employee to do the job.

To address these issues, leaders should create and follow transparent processes. Staff should be able to comprehend a decision made by a leader by the process that is followed. In particular, leaders should be totally transparent in how they arrived at decisions involving or affecting staff, such as promotions, work assignments, performance evaluations, and so on. This is important because a visible or transparent process is the only way staff will know that there is alignment between stated and practiced processes. To deviate, even when the outcome is very clear to everyone, will confuse staff or, worse, make them suspicious of the intent; trust will be diminished as a consequence.

Trust in others can best be demonstrated by allowing subordinates' decisions to stand if they meet the stated criteria. The temptation to change a decision because the leader would have preferred a different approach must be resisted. Intervention from a leader must be done only if a significant outcome is at stake and not when one has a different approach or preference. To intervene unnecessarily is to say to the employee that only the leader knows best and therefore the subordinate cannot be trusted to do the right thing. These conditions apply when an employee is performing satisfactorily. When an employee is not producing for whatever reason, then it is reasonable to manage this individual much more closely to ensure competent outcomes.

To be sure, there will be times when normal processes cannot be applied because to do so would create a negative situation. In the case of an emergency, fast and decisive decisions are necessary. In an emergency, the normal, inclusive process or concern over who has authority is not acceptable because no one has the time to include others or delegate decision-making. On the whole, staff understand the need for quick and decisive decisions from their leader in an emergency and, in fact, would expect nothing less than decisive leadership.

The third enemy involves **faulty communications** and takes many forms. Of course, **falsehoods** destroy trust. However, less obvious failings also diminish trust. **Taking too long** to communicate gives rise to rumours, which always take away from truth or accuracy. This in turn creates lack of credibility and loss of trust.

Another enemy of trust is **selective communication**. This occurs when only information that makes leadership look good is communicated, while 'bad news' is delayed or avoided altogether or is accompanied by a lot of confusing excuses. At this point, people feel manipulated and become very sceptical about what they hear.

Finally, communication that is **not created specifically for staff** as an audience can confuse or, worse, come across as condescending or manipulative, leading to mistrust and loss of commitment.

## **Trust is Fragile**

As can be seen, to maintain employee commitment, an organization needs to create and maintain trust. Even if leaders have positive, employee-friendly instincts, it's not enough to maintain trust because even positive actions can be inconsistent and thus not create trust. Leaders should acquire skills that enable them to make well-thought-out decisions in the context of understanding that trust is very fragile. If before we might have thought that commitment was independent of trust, now we know that is not the case. To have commitment, we must have trust.

How do we then ensure that leaders are properly trained to manage such complex relationships? The answer almost always lies in leadership development. In this context, development can be achieved by a variety of learning methods, including classroom teaching, experiential learning, reading and research, external learning in academic settings or at conferences, and mentoring and/or coaching.

## **Leadership Development Training**

If we look at the three major components of trust (organizational performance, consistency, and communication), an effective leader must possess many skills and abilities to be successful in promoting trust and commitment to the organization's goals and objectives among employees.

Here is a list of skills and abilities that I believe are needed to develop competent leaders. (Only the skills and abilities that need to be acquired are addressed, not methodology of learning.) There are four major categories to be considered:

1. Basic skills
2. Organizational competencies
3. Leadership skills
4. Visionary skills

Each of these includes several areas of competence, as described on the next page.

### 1. Basic Skills

- Planning
- Organizing
- Performance Management
- Finance
- Human Resources
- Public Affairs & Communications
- Technical competence in a particular field

### 2. Organizational Competencies

Each organization develops its own competencies. These may include client focus, creative problem-solving, etc. Training plans must include an evaluation of these skills among staff in advance and then measure any change in the level of competence after the training.

### 3. Leadership Skills

- Change Management
- Execution/Project Management
- Team-building
- Dispute Resolution
- Motivational Skills
- Coaching
- Mentoring

### 4. Visionary Skills

These are the most difficult skills to describe clearly. However, we know that an effective leader needs to be forward-thinking, creative, and a dreamer. Abilities that can move mountains lead to dramatic change. Many of these skills can only be learned by living and doing, by trial-and-error, or by lessons learned from those who have 'been there'. Nevertheless, no leadership development program would be complete without an attempt to at least have a conversation with successful leaders and determine what skills and abilities enabled them to be good leaders. To grow as a leader, individuals must be open to feedback, continuous learning, and adjusting their own behaviour.

## CONCLUSION

Developing and maintaining trust with staff is a vital component of successful leadership because it leads to commitment. Thus leaders must acquire the skills that will help them develop and maintain trust. It follows, then, that investing in leadership is essential to the success, integrity, and longevity of every organization.

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