

Building Trust

“I heard what they said. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“You can say that again.”

– Two employees talking after a communication briefing

Since Adam whispered his first words to Eve, people have been communicating. Billions of words are spoken, listened to, and acted upon every day. With every word spoken, people make a decision ... do I believe what I heard or not?

The manager’s role is to communicate in a manner so that the team understands what is being said and makes a decision to accept and support the message. The simple part is getting people to understand. The tough part is getting each individual on the team to decide – on his or her own – if they believe the message and will follow the manager’s direction. To make that decision, employees must trust the manager.

Trust is the core of communication. Without trust, does it really matter how charismatic you are, how you “wordsmith,” or how well you speak in front of your team? Without trust, does it matter how great your memo is? Speaking and writing well are important characteristics for managers to learn; but for long-term, sustained success, leaders must have their followers’ trust.

Trustworthiness is more than just a character trait that is valued in business ... it is the foundation for building understanding, support, and acceptance. Lack of trust creates a barrier to

connected communication that is difficult to overcome. Once a manager loses the team's trust, he or she will constantly fight an uphill battle with all communication efforts.

Some employees will even go out of their way to avoid communicating with a manager they don't trust because they see it as a waste of time. In fact, one of the main reasons for voluntary turnover within organizations is a loss of trust. Most resignations are not because of pay, benefits, or other workplace-related events. Most people resign because they lose trust in their immediate manager – something happens to destroy the employee/manager trust, resulting in constant doubt about the manager's "real agenda." The reality is, people quit people before they quit companies.

A common mistake of new managers is to immediately make changes before establishing trust with their team. The new ideas might be great, but people will not accept and support them until the manager proves he or she is trustworthy.

Managers must earn their employees' trust ... and constantly re-earn it. The harsh reality is that it takes years to develop trust

within an organization, yet it can be lost in minutes because of one mistake. Managers must guard the trust they have earned as if it is their most precious management possession ... because it is. What can managers do to build trust so that employees will be more inclined to accept and support their leadership? There are three critical behaviors managers can adopt to eliminate the static that destroys trust:

“One of the most striking differences between a cat and a lie is that the cat only has nine lives.”

–Mark Twain

- 1. Communicate – and consistently reinforce – the acceptable standards of behavior for your team.** People become confused when there are no established performance standards, when the rules are contradictory, or when the stated values are not being followed.

For instance, we may communicate that we respect employees' time, yet we consistently begin our meetings fifteen minutes late – wasting fifteen minutes of *everyone's* time. Perhaps we say employees are our most valuable assets, but we hire the first “warm body” we can find to be on the team. Or maybe we tell people that we value excellence, yet ask more and more from our top performers, while tolerating mediocrity and poor performance from others.

Earning employees' trust begins with clearly establishing acceptable standards of behavior for the team. To do that, managers must first answer the question, “What are the team's values?” Then they can determine the “rules of the road” and decide which behaviors are “non-negotiable.” If the standards are not clearly established, are continually changing, or are contradictory, you can't expect to develop personal trust. After all, what would they be trusting?

When people understand the rules of the game, generally speaking, they will do their best to play by the rules.

- 2. When in the “gray zone,” choose employee fairness.** Management often involves making decisions about situations where things are not exactly black or white. For example, if an employee makes a decision where there is no obvious right or wrong answer, and that decision results in a less-than-perfect outcome, stand up for the employee.

Most people do not look at events as isolated incidents. Employees evaluate a manager’s decisions regarding others as if they were personally involved and make the assumption the manager will treat them the same way. If they perceive the manager was fair and reasonable, they will assume the manager will be fair and reasonable with them. But the opposite is also true.

When faced with a situation in the gray zone, err on the side of employee fairness. You earn trust when employees perceive you will be fair when there is no obvious right or wrong.

- 3. Live up to your commitments.** Every day, the ultimate test of trust is given. Your word – your commitment – is judged every time you say you’re going to do something, regardless of how insignificant it may be. Even the smallest commitment is a representation of your integrity.

Your team grades the trust test when they evaluate whether or not you did what you said you would do. For instance, suppose you show

up late for a meeting with your team because your boss created a last minute “fire drill.” You can easily convince yourself you have a good reason for being late ... and you may be right. You can justify your action based on your good intention. Your intention was to be on time, and you would have been if not for the emergency call. Unless you clearly explain the circumstances, people at the meeting will see your tardiness as an inconsiderate action. In most cases, they could have been doing something more productive than waiting on you.

If your team has to make a choice to trust you based on what you say or what you do ... what you *do* will “win” every time.

*We judge ourselves
based on our
intentions ... but others
judge us based on our
actions. And ... actions
speak louder than words*

*–WALK THE TALK ... And Get
The Results You Want*

Building understanding, support, and acceptance begins with earning trust. When employees clearly understand the standards of behavior, perceive they will be treated fairly, and see that managers live up to their commitments – then you will connect with them and get the results you want.

“There are no
misunderstandings;
there are only failures
to communicate.”

– Senegalese proverb