

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Leadership, Reputation, and Trust

by Dr. Mike Armour

I've often described trust as the glue that holds an organization together, especially in times of adversity. Indeed, it's super glue, with a power to unite that is transcended perhaps only by love and the bonds of family.

Yet, despite all of this strength, enduring trust takes time to build and can be easily and quickly lost.

In public and business life, trust is inexorably connected to reputation, as we shall see later. And reputations are fragile things.

Warren Buffet has noted that "it takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it." Charles Osgood once made the same point in a clever bit of doggerel.

*One robin doth not a spring time make,
One swallow no summer at all.
But I think I can state
Without fear of mistake:
One lark has caused many a fall.*

How We Build Trust

Like trust, reputations are built and lost in two arenas of life. One is the quality of our character. The other is how well we deliver. How well we perform. Because they are both linked to character and performance, trust and reputation tend to rise and fall together.

I'm speaking here of the reputation that you have developed within the organization that you currently lead, not the reputation that you brought with you when you came to your post. People don't trust you because of the reputation you've gained elsewhere. They trust you based on what they have personally seen from you.

There are exceptional situations, to be sure, when leaders have such stellar, widely-heralded reputations that they are afforded an initial level of trust when stepping into new roles and positions. Yet, even in this kind of extraordinary circumstance, the initial level of trust has an extremely short shelf life.

As soon as leaders begin to interact with their people, as soon as their people have an opportunity to see them in action and to monitor their exhibited behavior, any influence from the old reputation starts to wane. People are now forming their own independent judgments of the new leader, feeling no duty whatsoever to conform their opinions to some prior reputation.

Trust-Building in Leadership

This towering influence of reputation, more than anything else, distinguishes trust-building in leadership from trust-formation in personal relationships. Trust among friends, acquaintances, and colleagues derives from the quality of their one-on-one relationship. Reputation plays little if any part.

Within organizations, however, few people have an opportunity to know their leader in anything more than a passing relationship. Their opinion of the leader — particularly when people are new to the organization — is almost exclusively a function of the leader's reputation and public persona.

Unfortunately, reputations have a powerful and influential life of their own, much of it outside the leader's control. Over time an unpredictable admixture of rumor, selective memory, speculation, misunderstandings, distortion, and suspicion color a leader's reputation.

All leaders face this hazard. And the hazard is not inconsequential, since trust cannot escape unscathed whenever the leader's reputation is damaged.

No Unforced Errors

Leaders may not be able to control their reputation entirely, but neither are they powerless to keep it in good repair. To borrow a term from tennis, they can certainly prevent "unforced errors." They can avoid statements and behavior that discredit themselves needlessly.

They can also be vigilant to self-edit what they say and do. And when they realize even the slightest potential for a statement or action to be misunderstood or misinterpreted, they can waste no time in making timely clarifications before their reputation sustains inadvertent damage.

For leaders who are building high-trust, peak-performance organizations, or simply those whose goal is a culture of trust, it is essential to excel in both character and performance. The two are equally important. Even though this article speaks of character and performance as separate domains of trust, they cannot be divorced in reality.

They stand side-by-side in shaping a leader's reputation. They are like those twin stars that NASA telescopes have identified in the recesses of space, two massive solar bodies in a locked orbit with one another. They have an interdependent co-existence. Any wobble in the rotation of one affects the orbit of the other. The same is true with character and performance.

When my children were small, some of their favorite toys were Weebles, round-bottomed little characters which are weighted so that they pop back into an upright position when pushed to one side or the other. As the children played with these little figures, they would chant the Weebles advertising slogan which was, "Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down."

Unfortunately, that's not always the case with reputations. Twin stars may develop a wobble and continue in orbit for light-years. Weebles may wobble, but keep standing.

When character or performance starts to wobble, however, reputations — and the trust that goes with them — are always at risk. One lark still causes many a fall.

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