

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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How New Leaders Build Trust

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In 2007 I was introduced to an informal initiative at Microsoft called 42Projects. Formed largely by word-of-mouth, 42Projects is a grassroots community with a singular purpose: to find practical ways to increase innovation by enhancing team trust.

The group is coordinated by Ross Smith, an imaginative leader and a master of collaboration. Since I first addressed the 42Projects team two years ago, they have launched Trust 2.0, an experiment in using wikis, blogs, and productivity games to expand trust within an organization.

Trust-Building Priorities

This month I was back in Redmond to speak to them again. We met at noon over pizza in a spacious multi-media center, with others around Microsoft joining through a video feed. The topic, as you might expect, was trust-building. In particular, we talked about building trust when you move into new management or leadership positions.

During the question-and-answer period, one person observed, "When you step into a new position like this, it's vital to become trusted by both your team and by those above you. Which of these should be your priority in the first months on a job?"

That's an intriguing question. No one had ever put it to me quite that way before. Yet the question is universally relevant to managers and leaders. How would you answer?

Some might argue that you should build trust first and foremost with those above you. After all, they control your funding. And need we mention their clout in making or breaking your career?

But I took the opposite stance. I argued that your first priority as a new manager or leader is to build your team's trust in you and to strengthen trust within the team itself.

Here's my rationale. Those above you already have a certain degree of trust in you. Otherwise they would have never placed you in this new role. The team you are leading, however, probably had little or no voice in your selection. They might not even know you, especially if you were hired from the outside.

Yet your success in the eyes of those above you will largely be measured by how well your team performs. And every study on the subject shows that teams perform at their best in settings of high, mutual trust. To the degree that you build productive, high-trust

relationships with your team and within your team, you make their success all the more likely. And in the process, you gain greater trust from those to whom you report.

Engendering Trust

Someone then followed up with a second question: what should I do in the first months on a job to engender trust within the team? This was a more familiar question for me. It comes up frequently in Q&A sessions or radio interviews. And I've boiled my response down to a simple three-point approach.

First, you use your initial weeks in a new leadership or management role to establish your "likeability." I'm not talking about launching a charm offensive. Or setting out to win a popularity contest. But your new team is watching from day one to see if you are truly a likeable person.

- Are you approachable?
- Are you friendly?
- Are you courteous and well-mannered?
- Are you thoughtful and considerate of others?

If your team quickly decides that you are likeable, it becomes easier for them to trust you. Or to put it another way, we don't readily trust unlikeable people.

But it's vital to keep a key distinction in mind here. Being "likeable" and having people like all of your decisions are two entirely different matters. People want leaders whom they like. But they also want leaders who can make tough, timely decisions. If you become known for putting off critical decisions, hoping to find a solution to everyone's liking, you will soon lose your team's respect.

Which leads us to the second point. We tend to withhold trust from people whom we don't respect. Therefore, in the opening weeks of your new role, you must work daily to build respect for yourself. Here I'm not talking so much about respect for your authority. I'm talking about respect for you, personally.

This is not to downplay the importance of respect for authority. It's clearly important. And in military-type organizations it's paramount. For them success in the thick of battle depends on respect for authority, whether you happen to like the person in authority or not.

Outside of military-type organizations, however, effective leaders today rely far more on personal influence than on command and control. And personal influence depends directly on the level of respect that others have for you as a person.

How, then, do you gain people's respect? You begin by respecting them. When someone treats us with respect, we find it easy to reciprocate in kind.

Building Respect

In your opening weeks in a new leadership or management role, therefore, you must work daily to show your team – collectively and individually – that you respect them.

- Do you seem genuinely interested in their ideas?
- Are you responsive to their emails and inquiries?
- Do you openly commend them for a job well done?
- Do you share the credit for success with them?
- Do you actively discourage jokes, sarcasm, or derisive statements that demean people or treat them dismissively?

Treating your team with respect, however, is merely the first step in gaining their respect. Equally important is acting in ways that merit respect.

- Are you truthful?
- Do you keep promises?
- Do you meet deadlines?
- Do you refrain from vulgarities and off-color jokes?
- Do you avoid favoritism?
- Do you hold yourself to the same standards that you expect of others?

If not, the team may appreciate you for respecting them, but they will not give you their full respect.

Consistency

The third key in transitioning to a new position of leadership or management is consistency. The team will be watching to see if you are consistently trustworthy. Absolute perfection is not necessary. Slip-ups now and then are to be expected. But overall the team is looking for consistent, trustworthy behavior over the long haul.

In the sequence of three priorities, I purposefully put respect ahead of consistency. Once the team genuinely respects you, they will be more willing to overlook an occasional lapse in consistency. Because of their respect for you, slip-ups now and then are not as likely to cost you their overall trust. But if they neither like you nor respect you, even the slightest inconsistency will serve to jeopardize trust.

Special Note: I've provided additional information about [42Projects and Trust 2.0](#) on the LeaderPerfect website.

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