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Trust-Building

by Dr. Mike Armour

Over the past few weeks I've been honing and fine-tuning a series of keynote speeches and workshops on trust-building. One is entitled "Leadership at the Speed of Trust."

We don't normally think of measuring speed in terms of trust. But trust always determines an organization's top speed. No company can run at 130 miles per hour if trust limits it to 90.

For me, looking at trust as a speed issue emerged from years of helping companies large and small improve performance. In case after case I found that the greatest hindrance to improved performance was unresolved – and often unrecognized – trust issues.

The High Cost of Distrust

Distrust always gums up the works. Bogs things down. Protects turf. Thwarts change. Building a high-trust culture, on the other hand, is like adding a turbo-charger to everything you do. It gives you the kind of essential speed and adaptability that are vital to success, if not survival, in a hyper-competitive world.

In high-trust cultures things run more smoothly, more quickly, more profitably. Marketing is more cost effective because it's easier to retain preferred clients. Turnover costs drop sharply because talented employees are eager to stay. Morale is higher. Productivity is greater. Commitment is deeper. The *Harvard Business Review* recently documented that executives make better and more creative decisions in high-trust environments.

Unfortunately, it's often easy to be blind to distrust that's growing in the organization, because distrust has a way of masking itself as other issues. Here are some things I've learned to monitor when scanning for possible trust issues in a business, institution, or non-profit:

- Compromised integrity
- A pattern of broken promises and missed deadlines
- Closed, self-protecting communication
- Determined resistance to change
- Large servings of sarcasm in comments about management
- Demoralizing problems that no one dares mention
- Disconnects between espoused values and actual practices
- Worker or volunteer apathy
- Unresolved resentment and frustrations

- An atmosphere of disrespect or biting humor
- Workplace fear, insecurity, and anxiety
- Constant finger-pointing and blaming
- We-versus-them mindsets
- Feelings of intimidation or powerlessness
- Deep suspicions of management intentions
- Serious reservations about how much workers or volunteers are respected and valued

Do any of these sound familiar? Do you encounter these issues like this in your organization? To the degree they are present, distrust is afoot, even if it is hidden from sight and lurking in the shadows.

Taking Action

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix for turning a corporate atmosphere of distrust into one of trust. But the solution always starts with personal initiatives. Building greater trust within your organization begins with you and others like you. You may not be able to change the depth of trust through the entire culture. But you can optimize trust-building in your own immediate sphere of influence.

A popular bumper sticker several years ago read, "Think globally. Act locally." That's sound advice for trust building. Keep your aspirations fixed on increasing trust in your entire corporate culture. But don't just wait for the culture to change. Take daily and steady actions to improve trust in every setting you influence. If nothing else, increasing the level of trust in the circles you impact creates a far more pleasant and productive environment for you and all those you work with.

But in addition, your "local action" will begin nudging the overall culture toward greater trust. Corporate culture never changes until personal behaviors change. That change might as well start with you.