

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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A Formula For Building Trust

by Dr. Mike Armour

In the post-Enron era, trust is of paramount importance. Especially in leadership. How do we foster trust? How do we maintain it? How do we rebuild it once it is lost? These are particularly urgent questions for our day.

Even though we often speak of "earning" trust, trust in fact cannot be earned. Trust is either granted or withheld, based on how others perceive us. Trust, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder.

And because trust springs from perception, we gain the trust of others only by facilitating their positive impressions of us. To that end, let's look at five behavioral patterns that help engender trust. And to make these easy to remember, we will organize them so that their first letters form the acronym TRUST.

Truth

Trust-building begins with truth. Without a reputation for consistent truthfulness, you will never be trusted. Larry Johnson and Bob Phillips have recently published a book entitled *Absolute Honesty* that chronicles dozens of stories of once-thriving corporations that crumbled because truth-telling lost a compelling grip on their culture.

There are myriads of ways to violate the principle of truth-telling. Lying, of course, is the most obvious. But exaggeration is also a misrepresentation of truth. So, too, is the half-truth. Or the ill-founded rationalization. Or the carefully phrased innuendo that has no substance to support it. Then there is the ever-so-common "spinning" of truth. Or the use of selective facts to mislead. We could go on and on. But if you are to foster trust, you must be known for "absolute honesty."

Reliability

If people are to trust you, they must feel confident that they can depend on you. Ask yourself frankly, "Do I follow through on what I promise? Do I consistently uphold my end of the bargain? Can people count on me to deliver? Will the delivery be timely? Complete? Well-executed?"

Missing an occasional deadline is probably inevitable. Making a habit of missing them is a character issue. And trust is at base a perception of character. Of all the vital elements of trust, reliability is second in importance only to truth-telling.

Understanding

It goes without saying that people want to be appreciated and understood. Most do not expect leadership or management to agree with them on everything. Nor do they expect a vote in every decision. But when vital issues are at stake, they want to know that their concerns were genuinely heard. That their point of view received a fair hearing.

Whenever someone says, "You just don't understand me," it's a sure sign that trust is frayed, if not broken. Leaders who gain a reputation for truly listening are building an essential foundation for trust.

Straight-Forward Communication

People can handle bad news better than they can handle incomplete news. Distrust is more easily bred by what people don't know than by what they know. In the absence of information, people fashion their own version of "what's really going on." And given the history of such improvised versions, we can hardly expect them to cast leadership in the most positive light.

The more people are left to speculate about "what's really going on," the more distrust of leadership is likely to grow. Little wonder, then, that one of the highest compliments a leader can receive is to be called a "straight shooter."

Team Care

Trusted leaders are noted for taking care of their team. They are never indifferent to anything that threatens their team's health and well-being. If the threat is external, the leader becomes the team's first line of defense. If the threat is internal, the leader moves decisively to root out the problem before it does lasting harm.

Here in particular actions must speak louder than words. It's easy to say, "I really care about each member of our organization." It's an altogether different matter to take the time to make that care evident. Knowing that our leader is "always watching out for us" is one of the surest ways to engender trust.

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