

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Building A High-Trust Culture

by Dr. Mike Armour

For leaders few things are more vital than building a high-trust culture. Only where trust is strong do organizations have the resilience, speed, and adaptability to succeed in today's hypercompetitive marketplace.

A recent issue of *Harvard Business Review* documents that executives make better and more creative decisions in high-trust environments. Not only that, high-trust cultures are more likely to be a fun place to work, making for elevated morale, deeper commitment, and greater productivity.

To foster high trust, five things are essential.

People Must Feel Safe

Trust can never flourish where people feel threatened. Threatening environments give rise to fear, and fear is the arch-enemy of trust. None of us trust people or settings that frighten us.

Feeling safe obviously begins with physical safety, with freedom from fear of bodily harm. Any organization that tolerates belligerence, hot-heads, overbearing management, or hazardous working conditions will never be a high-trust environment.

Equally important is emotional and psychological safety. A place where there is no anxiety about being ridiculed, insulted, embarrassed, or verbally assaulted. A place where people feel appreciated, not intimidated. A place where personal dignity is always protected.

Physical violence in the workplace occasionally makes headlines, often when some disgruntled former employee returns to his former job site, weapons in hand. The far more frequent challenge for management, however, is creating a workplace where workers feel emotionally and psychologically safe. Managers would rarely countenance a workplace that is physically threatening. They must be equally determined to maintain emotional and psychological safety in the workplace, too.

People Must Feel Informed

None of us likes being kept in the dark. Indeed, we feel complimented when people make it a point to keep us informed. Information allows us to make sense of what's going on.

In the absence of information, speculation takes over. And when people speculate, they rarely assume that something good is in the works. Rather, conjure up all sorts of bad things that must be taking shape. Speculation thus raises uncertainty. Uncertainty yields anxiety. And anxiety produces fear, the polar opposite of trust.

In the interest of keeping people informed, can we overcommunicate? Perhaps. But I can't say that I've ever seen it. To the contrary, when looking at nagging trust issues within organizations, I consistently find inadequate communication at the heart of the problem.

People Must Feel Respected

Most of us are highly unlikely to trust a person who treats us with disrespect. That's because in interpersonal relationships, rapport is critical to trust. And disrespect always destroys rapport.

Moreover, when someone treats us with disrespect, we normally interpret their disrespect as a sign that they don't care about us. And when people don't care about us, we typically withhold our trust from them.

Fortune magazine, in its March 16, 2005 issue, describes an employee survey made by Baxter Healthcare, based in Deerfield, Illinois and an international provider of health-care products. Those who evaluated the survey results were surprised at the urgency employees placed on respect. After further reflection, however, the response made sense. As one Baxter personnel specialist put it, "If you don't feel respected, anything else offered — the best benefits or the best compensation package — really doesn't matter."

In the same way, no matter what else you are doing to build trust, none of it matters if people feel they are not treated with respect.

People Must Feel Valued

Feeling valued is closely akin to feeling respected. If I'm not respected, I won't feel valued. But to feel genuinely valued, I need more than respect. I need to sense that my insights, comments, and suggestions are considered worthwhile. I must sense that I'm treated fairly and equitably. I must sense that what I do for the organization is perceived as genuinely important and beneficial.

One of our most basic drives in life is to feel valued. We are constantly taking cues from the world to see if others think there is value to who we are, to what we do, and to what we may become. We are particularly sensitive to the feedback of our leaders. If they do not affirm our value, both verbally and non-verbally, we are again back to the question of whether they truly care for us. And whenever that question is running, trust is being undermined.

People Must Feel Understood

I've never met a person who expected management or leadership to agree with them on every point. Most people learn to accommodate the fact that some management decisions will disappoint them.

However, their willingness to make that accommodation comes more naturally when they feel that their views, values, and preferences have been genuinely heard. That decision-makers truly understand their perspective and feelings. Few things build rapport more thoroughly than listening. And as we have seen, rapport is at the heart of trust-building.

A Final Observation

As you look at these five qualities of high-trust environments, you will notice a recurring theme that underlies the last three (feeling respected, feeling valued, and feeling understood). That recurring theme is care. Unless people feel that leadership genuinely cares for them, trust will be held in abeyance.

Another business consultant who shares my passion for trust-building among leaders has surveyed hundreds of workers in a variety of industries, asking them what qualities contribute to them trusting a manager. No matter what the company, one quality that inevitably ranks toward the top is "someone who truly cares for me."

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