

Denying Distrust a Foothold

Why Leaders Must Help People Feel Safe

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Over the past 20 years I have written extensively and spoken to audiences regularly about the importance of trust. In fact, I even trademarked the phrase Trust-Centered Leadership. In discussing this type of leadership, I speak often of creating a culture of trust within an organization.

I've learned from experience that distrust is insidious. It often does its work quietly and covertly in organizations whose leaders are completely oblivious to its presence. Distrust has a knack for manifesting itself in subtle, almost unnoticed ways. But when we know what we're looking for, it's not that difficult to bring it to light.

And I've learned one other thing. Wherever we find distrust, elevated fear and anxiety are lurking nearby. Fear and anxiety are the off-spring of distrust and uncertainty.

In today's program we are going to examine what leaders can do to keep trust in good repair by building a defensive barrier against fear, anxiety, and distrust. Developing the skill to recognize and disarm distrust is one of the most powerful ways to Upsize Your Leadership.

If a culture of trust is to thrive in an organization, people must feel safe, above all else. Physically safe, naturally. But also emotionally and psychologically safe. This means safety from threats, humiliation, intimidation, and retaliation. Few work environments today present serious hazards to physical safety. But every work environment is vulnerable to actions and attitudes which leave people feeling emotionally unsafe.

If people do not feel safe, no exercise in trust-building will yield telling results. As Abraham Maslow pointed out in his hierarchy of motivational impulses, the need for safety is wired into our very nature as human beings. In infancy, long before we are able to verbalize questions, we are busy checking out the world which we've entered, trying to determine if it's a safe place. We want to know if it can be trusted. Will it come to my aid when I'm hungry? When I'm hurting? When I'm upset?

The prominence of this trust issue in early childhood explains why abuse at such a tender age has lifelong consequences. Childhood mistreatment and abuse leave the victims with gnawing questions about the world's trustworthiness, making for a lifetime of deep-seated insecurity.

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Because the question of safety is so fundamental from birth, we never outgrow the need to feel safe. And at an emotional level trust and safety are so inseparably linked that they mutually reinforce each other: we feel safe with those whom we trust and we trust people who help us feel safe. Conversely, trust evaporates in situations or relationships which leave us sensing a threat.

One of my most uneasy moments came in Russia, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was taking my first flight ever on Aeroflot, the Russian airline. And it would be a rather lengthy trip, leaving Moscow about midnight to fly to the heart of Siberia.

As soon as I entered the passenger cabin, I noticed broken seats, inoperative seat belts, and burned out cabin lights. The first question which came to mind was, "If they are this careless about internal maintenance, how careful have they been in maintaining the engines and hydraulics?"

Now, in that moment of speculation, which vanished first – my trust or my sense of safety? In essence they faded simultaneously.

For this reason, the most powerful trust-busters are those associated with feeling unsafe. Fear, of course, heads the list. To the degree that fear is present, trust is constricted, or even choked out altogether. A famous question from Jesus highlights the incompatibility of fear and trust, when he asked his frightened followers, "Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?"

While "faith" and "trust" are different words in English, they are identical in the original language of the New Testament. At a conceptual level we retain this identity in modern speech, where the statements "I trust you" and "I have faith in you" are fundamentally synonymous. So Jesus was saying in effect, "The presence of fear points to a deficit of trust."

Anxiety, a close cousin of fear, is another trust-buster. It, too, connotes a sense of being unsafe. While fear usually centers on a specific, identifiable threat, the threat in anxiety is typically somewhat vague. It's often little more than a looming apprehension that some possible future development could prove undesirable, unpleasant, or even unbearable.

Because the anticipated threat is so lacking in detail, anxiety leaves us perplexed about how to respond, uncertain about which course to take. The Greeks captured this perplexity in their word for anxiety, which literally means "to be of two minds."

As with fear, acute anxiety is evidence of diminished trust. A pilot who trusts his aircraft doesn't become anxious just because he encounters turbulence. Nor does a woman who trusts her husband live in constant anxiety about him being unfaithful.

From a diagnostic standpoint, widespread fear and anxiety within organizations are clear indicators that trust is in short supply. People are reluctant, however, to talk openly about their fears (and to a lesser extent their anxieties), especially in work settings and among fellow

workers. Men in particular want to avoid seeming weak in the eyes of peers, which is a risk they take if they acknowledge fear or anxiety.

In addition, an interesting paradox is at work here. If trust is high enough for people to freely admit their fears and discuss them, trust is already so strong that there are probably few, if any fears to discuss. By the same token, once fear becomes a serious morale or trust factor, people are usually already intimidated. They no longer feel safe enough to speak “on the record” about why they feel unsafe.

Thus, an unwilling conspiracy of silence develops around the subject of specific behaviors, policies, groups, or individuals which are sparking fear. If workers speak of their fears and anxieties at all, it’s in muttered remarks, whispered to one another in guarded, hushed tones. Or they make quiet head nods to new employees to warn, “Watch out for that person over there.” (Hence the joke in HR circles that what new hires want most from an orientation session are the three B’s: when are the breaks, where are the bathrooms, and who are the people to beware of.)

People are more likely to be forthright about their workplace fears and anxieties in conversations with outsiders, where they feel free of peer pressure and have no concern about retaliation. This is why consultants or anonymous surveys frequently uncover deeper patterns of fear, anxiety, and distrust than management itself perceives. This is not an indictment of management. It’s simply an acknowledgment that fear and anxiety are not always easily detected. To borrow a noted phrase from submarine warfare, these two trust-busters – fear and anxiety – prefer to “run silent, run deep.”

But observant leaders can use telltale signs to recognize that fear and anxiety are at work, even when they are otherwise hidden from sight. Some of the more frequent indicators of a fearful or anxious culture are:

- hesitancy to take personal initiative
- widespread defensiveness
- reluctance to challenge the viewpoint of managers or of strong opinion leaders within the group
- unwillingness to acknowledge personal responsibility for an error in judgment or some lapse in performance
- unwritten codes about things which “we don’t talk about around here”
- nervous concern about communicating bad news to superiors
- disproportionately small numbers of people willing to consider positions as supervisors or managers
- a prevailing attitude that “play it safe” and “keep your head down” are the primary rules of the road
- waiting for an unequivocal sign-off from management before chancing any action
- undue preoccupation with obtaining leadership’s assurance that a job is being done well
- insistence on detailed document trails to show that every action was properly approved
- a tendency for people to become disproportionately upset or fretful when something goes wrong

When fear grips us, we feel an urge to shrink back from the threat, or even to run from it. With anxiety we are torn, unsure what action to take. Neither fear nor anxiety, then, moves us forward decisively.

This is why organizations that seek peak performance must rid themselves of fear and anxiety. These emotions are like a virus in any organization, spreading a contagion of distrust far and wide.

As long as human societies have existed, trust has battled this virus. But in today's world of business, epidemics of fear and anxiety are more commonplace and more consequential, simply because of the pace of competition and innovation. Both competition and innovation demand constant change. And with change there is always a certain degree of uncertainty, the ideal soil for fear and anxiety.

Change also entails trade-offs. In these trade-offs some elements of the organization inevitably gain strength at the expense of others. Resources, and often budgets, are likewise reapportioned.

While management sees these shifts as tactical necessities or (in the case of more sweeping change) essential strategic realignments, workers view them differently. Workers have a propensity to interpret change through the lens of winning or losing personally.

- Was my project a winner or loser in this change?
- How did our department do – did we come out on top or toward the bottom?
- Am I in a more advantageous position as a result of the latest restructure of our department? Or am I now in a disadvantaged position?

These questions preoccupy workers because employees typically view “losing” as a potential threat to job security, increased pay, and promotability. As a consequence, the mere rumor of restructure, budget cuts, downsizing, mergers, or plummeting stock prices can be enough to usher in fear and anxiety.

The process usually proceeds along these lines. The rumor itself starts people speculating about whether they will end up winners or losers after all is said and done. Those who see themselves as potential losers then grow anxious about what awaits. And as the number of self-perceived “losers” multiplies during a reorganization or restructure, anxiety within the entire organization grows accordingly, sometimes geometrically.

Here again is a paradox. Restructuring, “right-sizing,” acquisitions, and mergers (whether we're speaking of departments, divisions, or entire companies) hold the promise of increased returns for stockholders, not to mention opportunities for upper managers to earn handsome bonuses through efficiency improvements which increase profits. For these two groups reorganizing is loaded with potential wins.

By contrast, among workers and lower tiers of management only some will be winners. The rest will be “losers” in the competition for prestige, prominence, promotions, and pay, or even retention. They greet the change with trepidation, not excitement.

So long as fear and anxiety remain relatively mild, the impact on productivity and trust may be limited. But as the rumors gain credence, an elaborate political dance begins. On the theory that the name of the game is now “survival of the best connected,” people start trying to position themselves to avoid being a “loser” in the ultimate outcome.

Anyone seen as a contender for any of their resources is no longer viewed as a colleague or collaborator, but as a competitor. Rivalry supplants cooperation. Friends become adversaries. Turf-protecting becomes more determined. In this atmosphere, trust has a hard time holding on. And often it doesn't.

As these kinds of scenarios unfold, odds increase that the level of anxiety or fear will damage trust so thoroughly that the anticipated productivity gains from the new alignment are never realized. Even if people who perceive themselves as potential losers eventually find their worst fears unfounded, weeks or months of fear and anxiety will leave trust bruised and bleeding.

This, then, is why leaders should guard against frequent reorganizations or a steady pace of non-essential change. When change is persistent, anxieties from one change never have adequate time to settle before announcement of another change adds further anxiety to the mix. And in the case of sweeping or transformational change, anxiety takes significant time to subside. This may be why studies find notably lower levels of trust in organizations which have been through mergers or acquisitions within the previous two years.

Trust-Centered Leadership™ thus presumes that change – especially wholesale change – will inflict a blow on trust, and it takes proactive measures to minimize the injury. The best proactive measure is to optimize trust during periods of relative stability so that when change does come, the reservoir of trust is well supplied.

Deep trust, built up in advance, provides two essential defenses when unsettling events arise.

- First, it gives the organization greater resistance to fear and anxiety when they seek to gain a foothold.
- Second, it lessens the ability of fear and anxiety to drain trust entirely before these two trust-busters are defeated and turned back.

When I'm working with transformational leaders, there is one principle which I constantly emphasize, namely, trust-formation must precede transformation. Trust-building is a vital enterprise even in organizations where trust is currently in good repair, because wholesale change can be thrust upon them unexpectedly and at any moment. When this happens, every organization needs to have a reservoir of trust that is as deep as possible.

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