

Leadership trust in a fast-changing world: Lessons from The Charge of the Light Brigade

Steven T. Hunt, Ph.D.

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The importance of [leadership trust increases as the pace of change accelerates](#). Leaders in hyper-competitive and turbulent business environments need employees to support decisions without a lot of extensive explanation and back and forth discussion. It is not that change management topics like “what’s in it for me” are not important. It is simply a matter that when you need quick action, you may not have time to fully explain why this action is critical.

The need for fast action creates a dilemma for leaders. To move quickly, leaders need employees to accept and believe in their decisions without demanding a lot of discussion and justification. On the other hand, leaders do not want employees to blindly accept leadership decisions if they know these decisions could be leading the company down a path of failure. This issue was famously captured in Tennyson’s poem “[The Charge of the Light Brigade](#)” where he described soldiers responding to a questionable order with the stanza “theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do & die”. While this phrase summons up notions of courage and duty, the story it describes is a tragic example of people following leadership orders that they knew they were foolish. In the case of the [Light Brigade](#), the unwillingness to question the wisdom of their leaders led to hundreds of men needlessly sacrificing their lives.

Leadership in fast moving world requires asking employees to trust your decisions while ensuring employees are willing to criticize your decisions. To quote General Colin Powell, “Leadership is solving problems. The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them.” How can leaders create the sort of trust that strikes this balance between employees accepting decisions but also questioning them? The following are some suggestions based on psychological research studying trust in organizations.

[If you do not trust your employees, they will not trust you](#). People are good at picking up subtle cues that show whether their coworkers trust their commitment and abilities. If a leader lacks trust and confidence in their employees, then employees will soon lack trust and confidence in that leader. This is a major issue when companies restructure. It is common to assign leaders to “fix” struggling divisions of a company. If these leaders believe existing employees are to blame for the previous problems, then they are almost certain to fail in gaining the trust of those employees when they most need it.

[Trust depends on sharing bad news](#). Some leaders believe the best way to build employee confidence is to hide bad results and downplay challenges the company is facing. This behavior damages leadership trust. Employees put more trust in leaders who openly share information with them, both good and bad. This goes back to employees trusting leaders who trust them. Leaders who trust employees with sensitive information about company performance are both educating employees on the realities the company is facing and building leadership trust in return. There is a right way to share bad news to avoid undermining confidence. But not sharing bad news at all undermines trust.

[Trust comes from you knowing your employees \(not just them knowing you\)](#). One often hears leaders attempt to build trust by saying things like “anyone who knows me will tell you I am a person of my word”. What these leaders fail to understand is trust, particularly when it comes to providing critical

upward feedback, is often more dependent on leaders knowing their employees than employees knowing their leaders. Employees put themselves at risk when they say things that might be viewed as critical of leadership decisions and behaviors. And employees do not want their only interactions with leaders to be centered on them sharing problems. This is captured by something a colleague once told me, “why would I tell our division president what he is doing wrong if he doesn’t even know what I do. He’d just think of me as that person who complains.”

Building trust with employees depends on getting to know employees. The only way to know your employees is to spend time with them. Short personal interactions have big effects on trust. One way to see the difference between effective and ineffective leadership in this area is to observe executives at company conferences. The ones employees trust are the ones who spend time with employees two or three levels below them. These leaders intentionally start conversations with employees they do not know. Executives employees often mistrust are ones who spend their time in closed conference rooms or fancy dinners talking with other senior executives and people they already know.

Leadership trust comes through manager trust. Managers play a critical role in building leadership trust. Managers have more time to spend getting to know employees, and as a result they can build far stronger relationships. What is interesting is that how much employees trust their managers depends in part on how much managers trust their own leaders. There is a “trickle down” effect associated with trust. When leaders build trusting relationships with their managers, their managers are more likely to build trusting relationships with their employees. This is good news for leaders because it means that they can delegate the role of building trust to managers. But the only way to do this is to spend time with their own direct reports. And increasingly companies are adopting organizational structures where executives will have 15 or more people reporting to them. This increases the risk that executives may not spend enough time building trusting relationships with their own reports, which in turn will undermine leadership trust lower within the company.

It is often said that “trust takes years to build but seconds to destroy”. The first part of this statement is not necessarily true. Trust can be built fairly quickly. This is good news for leaders in a fast-moving world where trust needs to be established in a matter of days or weeks. But leadership trust will not come from leaders simply saying, “trust me”. The only way to build leadership trust is for executives to demonstrate that they trust the employees, communicate with employees in a transparent manner, make time to get to know employees at all levels, and focus on building strong relationships with the people who actually manage the employees. Building leadership trust may not take years, but it does take active time and attention.