



FORGET VISION – FIRST COMMUNICATE TRUST

By: Jeffrey W. Ganthner, AIA

ABSTRACT

Leaders, especially new leaders, are under extreme pressure to develop, communicate, and implement a vision for an organization quickly. They often make the fatal mistake of launching a vision too early and onto a team not prepared to accept it. By first, earning and communicating trust, a leader prepares their team to receive and embrace a vision. However, focusing on building trust is hard, takes time, and perseverance. The return on investment will only be recognized after trust within a team has been achieved and the organization is advancing towards its vision.

Keywords: trust, vision, mission, leaders, followers, communication

FORGET VISION – FIRST COMMUNICATE TRUST

In less than 48 hours, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam made national headlines on two separate and polarizing issues. The first came when he supported legislation that would allow an abortion to be chosen by a woman and her doctor even after a live birth has occurred in the third trimester of pregnancy. This sparked outcry and controversy that rekindled the flames of the abortion debate. For those who support abortion, he was a bold hero and his vision was embraced. The second came when a long-forgotten yearbook photo surfaced that showed racially charged photographs allegedly tied to the governor. As a liberal politician, he was supported and defended by many who desire legal abortion for any reason. His values were championed as being progressive and in touch with the values of many on the far left. That all changed quickly, and he was summarily dismissed by those very same people when his "out of touch" values were on full display through an old photo. How can a person be loved one moment and then despised another by the very same people? Simply put, they lost trust in who he really was as a person. Trust is an all or nothing proposition. Either a person can be trusted, or they cannot. No one cares about Governor Northam's plans or vision moving forward to address the needs of the Commonwealth of Virginia. He has lost the people's trust and he is a very compromised leader moving forward.

Communicating Trust

Leaders are often urged to first communicate a grand vision or course of action to those in their organization. This is especially true with new leaders who feel the real pressure to layout a clear vision of where the organization should be going and how it will accomplish a change. They are often challenged to be transformational leaders first when they should really focus on being authentic leaders. Transformational leaders start with a clear vision for the future and begin to implement change. They believe that their leadership will be measured by how quickly they move an organization through the change process. Great authentic leaders also have a vision, but they are communicating trust as their first priority. They understand that leadership begins with trust from those they are desiring to lead.

Prioritizing trust first is a radical change for most leaders and is against how many learned about leadership and even view successful leaders. Patrick Lencioni, famous for his leadership fables, describes that “extraordinary” leaders practice four key disciplines. The first one starts by building and developing a strong and cohesive leadership built around trust. Trust within a team will then lead to the elimination of backstabbing politics and a sharp rise in team effectiveness.

The best way to communicate trust is through action. Legendary former NFL football player and coach, Tony Dungy, in *Quiet Strength*, told the story of how he was asked to take the head coaching job of his boss and head coach Dennis Green. If he took the job, he would be fulfilling a dream to be a head coach in the NFL, but it would also mean that his mentor, friend, and boss would be fired. He refused the offer because he knew that in the highly competitive world of the NFL that “loyalty and relationships” were scarce and valuable. He would not violate the trust of his boss just to advance his own career. He communicated his values through his actions. He proved that he could be trusted first.

Communicating trust first is a change for many. It requires an emphasis on followers first and the leader second. Trust is built over time, but it is worth the investment. Great leaders know this and understand that if they can earn the trust of their team then they will be able to accomplish great and lasting achievements together with their followers built off the foundation of trust. A leader can use the simple power found in storytelling to connect with others and to build trust. A leader can tell their story in a way that shows their strengths and weaknesses and helps to frame for others how they think, value, and act in different situations. It allows a team to begin to trust their leader.

The Problem of Vision Without Trust

In May 2002, Hewlett-Packard (HP) CEO Carly Fiorina announced the mega merger with Compaq Computer. Instantly, this created an organization of over 140,000 employees spread across 178 countries. This new powerhouse organization had a grand vision to not just dominate its technology markets, but to forever change them. The merger started out with the best of intentions by placing an immediate emphasis on making people the priority. They

developed a three-step process with the goal of creating committed individuals and teams across the organization. Thus, capitalizing on its newly combined talent base. However, it was rushed as overlapping practices in this same region found themselves in internal competition with each other. It was quickly learned that there would be winners and losers in this new organization. New leaders were named within weeks of the merger and trust was never given the opportunity to take hold before everything changed as the corporate vision for success was not going to be slowed down for any reason. The pressure to achieve near term success set the new HP up for failure. The vision was moving forward by corporate leaders regardless of the people's commitment to it or not. HP had a great vision but lacked the trust of its people to the organization and each other to achieve it.

Additionally, many large organizations are set-up to communicate and flow information from the top-down. The leaders at the top might have a pure message to communicate, but that message must travel through what Paul Harris and Lisa Johnson describe as the “camouflage layer” where a message can become distorted or changed. This middle layer in many large organizations tends to put its spin on the message to often serve its own interests. A great vision may then be delivered by persons who lack trust and operate in this layer of the organization in a negative manner.

Therefore, it is critical that leaders find ways to directly communicate with every member of the organization to build trust first especially when delivering a new vision for an organization. President Trump, though flawed, has found a way to bypass all internal organizational layers and even the external traditional filters of mass media to communicate directly to anyone willing to listen through his daily Tweets on his Twitter account. He gets his story out and people can choose whether they can trust him or not.

When a leader breaches the trust of a team, tremendous damage can occur that may not be recoverable. Former presidential candidate, Herman Cain, famous for his 9-9-9 plan on improving our nation's tax code and empowering our economy had one of the best visions laid out in any presidential campaign. Then he got caught in a cover-up for a personal failure and

overnight his candidacy was dead along with his 9-9-9 plan. Trust was broken and he was no longer seen as a viable leader.

Developing and communicating a vision is critical but absent of trust creates a situation where the message may be not be believed and stands a great chance of failing. Followers will give everything they got to an organization if they believe they can trust it. A leader who first communicates and achieves trust with their team will then be able to deliver a vision that will be accepted and have a chance to succeed. Successful relationships between leaders and followers in an organization are built on trust.

The Power of Trust for an Organization

The organization that is led by leaders who are trustworthy and communicate from a platform built on authenticity and trust is set-up for success. Communicating trust is hard to fake. Either people trust each other, or they do not. When trust is achieved in an organization, then that organization can fully focus on the mission at hand. It is often said that General Patton was such an effective general in World War II because he was singularly focused on the mission at hand which was to march the 3rd Army across France through Germany and onto Berlin. He was able to focus on this mission and inspire others to follow because he had first earned their trust. In the 1970 movie, Patton, the actor George C. Scott captures the character and beliefs of the great general when he stated that there is no individuality in the army and that team success is the only real path to victory. He attacked the trust task quickly and decisively first to then be able to focus on the mission at hand. Trust amongst a team will enable it to accomplish far greater things than they could ever achieve by themselves. For General Patton, trust amongst his team was the only path that will bring about victory, the vision/mission, in World War II.

Path Forward

Creating trust in and organization starts with the leaders themselves. John Maxwell in Your Roadmap for Success describes that leaders must first know their purpose. Knowing your purpose and being able to clearly articulate it to others is the first step in communicating trust.

Being bold, but authentic, with who you are to yourself and others communicates a powerful message that you can be trusted.

When a football coach calls in a play during a critical moment in a game, the players on the field must be able to trust that their coach has called the right play and that each player can be trusted to execute to the best of their abilities their role in that play. Similarly, the coach must have trust with the players on the field. Trust flows both ways between leaders and followers. Now when that play is called is not the time to earn trust. Trust is earned well before the game has started through practices, meetings, and other interactions over the course of a season. The team knows they can trust their coach or not.

Simply put, building trust takes time regardless of the organization. Leaders must spend time with their team individually and collectively to earn their trust. They must be able to communicate who they are, what their goals are, and that they can be trusted. A leader needs to communicate their values. This will expose what motivates a leader to perform and what will keep them going in difficult situations. Followers need to see their leader for who they are to begin to understand them and trust them. Once a leader takes the bold step to show themselves openly, followers will often do the same. Mutual trust is built between leaders and followers. Communicating openly and building trust starts with the leader going first.

Benefits of Communicating Trust First

Achieving and communicating trust amongst team members will allow for true collaboration on new products, ideas, and clients. Trust will tear down internal competitive barriers that divide so many organizations today. When trust is first earned and communicated by a leader and then accepted and reciprocated by the followers, then the team is free to focus on achieving a particular vision. Competitive energy is focused on those who are outside of the team and not inside where it could create havoc. By focusing on trust first, a leader creates a path that a vision can be introduced and actually have a chance of succeeding.

Andy Stanley in *Making Vision Stick* states that “it is the leader’s responsibility to ensure that people understand and embrace the vision of the organization.” Clear articulation of a vision takes skill but is easily accomplished. The hard part is to get people to embrace it and make it their own. Achieving trust and communicating from a position of trust is a leader’s primary path to getting others to embrace a vision. Going back to Governor Northam, his story and path becomes a lot harder now that the majority of people have lost their trust in him.

Will you be a leader that focuses on trust first? Will you be open enough so that others can learn about you and begin to trust you? Will you do the hard work to delay the release of a vision until your organization achieves trust? Are you willing and able to change the way you think about implementing and communicating a vision across and organization by starting with trust first?

For More Information

Craven, A. (2004). People a priority at HP. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, 18(2), 19-21. doi:10.1108/14777280410519608

Dungy, T. (2007). *Quiet strength: the principles, practices and priorities of a winning life*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publications, Inc.

Jackson, P., & Harris, L. (2003). E-business and organizational change: Reconciling traditional values with business transformation. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 16(5), 497-511. doi:10.1108/09534810310494900

Lencioni, P. (2000). *The four obsessions of an extraordinary executive: a leadership fable*. (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Stanley, A. (2007). *Making vision stick*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.