

The Importance of Trust, and How to Get There



By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

"You can never make someone trust you son...you just can't *force* someone to have faith in your actions...you have to earn it...one person at a time". This is what my dad told me one afternoon as we were driving from the field back to the farm. He lived this wisdom, and I can't recall a single time where either demanded trust from someone, or acted inauthentically in order to obtain someone else's trust.

In my opinion, the topic of trust is at the root of many of today's organizational communication challenges. Leadership author Stephen Covey (1989) said that social effectiveness partially derives from the developed trust and social capital between people. This capital goes by many names; including how full is your bucket, trust accounts, but Covey referred to it as the Emotional Bank Account.

As in a traditional bank account, as deposits are made, the account gets higher thus allowing for more cushion in spending. As withdrawals are made, the account becomes very sensitive to any and all spending. With emotional bank accounts, as we make relationship deposits to others' accounts in the form of keeping commitments, courtesy, kindness, etc., we build a

higher balance and greater degrees of trust. We see the fruits of trust in the form of communication. When accounts are large, communication is easy, effortless, and even in cases where mistakes are made, people still get your meaning – simply due to the amount of trust that has been generated.

In the case of small trust accounts, large or continuous withdrawals can result in small mistakes becoming very sensitive. Examples include overreacting, threatening, ignoring, not committing to promises, discourtesy, disrespect, and unkindness which eventually lead to low or even overdrawn emotional accounts. When it comes to communication, low or overdrawn accounts feel as if you are walking on egg shells and you measure every word carefully. Even when you are clear in your communication – it still doesn't work, as small things become blown out of proportion.

I think this is a very elegant description of what is really happening in many organizations. Leaders and employees are walking around with low trust accounts with one another, and resort to petty behaviors in attempt to manifest commitment, when all they are really getting is compliance. Further, as the trust diminishes, groups begin to silo, protect, preserve, react, and simply move into survival mode.

I recently observed a “forced trust” situation where a group of leaders went through their annual off-site trust building training. I was told that this year the training was extremely significant and upon their return, their trust for one another was at an all-time high. Keep in mind the same team goes through an off-site trust building training every other year, with no meaningful or lasting results. But this year was to be different, and the employees of the company were guaranteed to see the results of their new trust.

To demonstrate their new-found trust with one another, upon returning the leaders held standing circle meetings in open spaces spread throughout the building. For 10-minutes, the leaders visited in public for one reason and one reason only – to demonstrate to the company employees that they can communicate effectively, they are visible, and that *they can be trusted*.

The entire act reminded me of my father’s wisdom, “you can never make someone trust you...you have to earn it.” By holding an informal meeting in the open to prove that you are communicating and can be trusted – did more damage than good. Employees quickly saw their strategy as nothing more than another inauthentic tactic. Our country’s workplaces are desperate for quality leaders, and trust gimmicks do more damage than good. If companies can’t get past corporate gamesmanship, we will continue to make withdrawals from one another’s trust account, leaving us exhausted and disengaged.

In the *Speed of Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey (2006) outlined the trust ingredients of character and competence. Character is a stable moral quality; modeling integrity, motive, and positive intent with people. Competence is the ability to do something successfully or efficiently; displaying skills, quality results and a winning track record.

This is an easy thought exercise to play with; consider someone you know that demonstrates character, but lacks the competence to do the work – even though you respect them as a solid person, you strategically work around them because they cannot perform to expectations. Conversely, consider someone you know that demonstrates the competence to do quality work, but lack character – you proceed very carefully because they lack moral integrity. The combination of character and competence are key ingredients to setting the stage for trust.

These are highly valuable in understanding trust, but in my line of business, we are in changing behaviors. Assuming that a person has developed strong leadership principles, trust follow-through comes

from *simple behavioral practices*. Following, I outline the three behavioral practices that can be used in any social context to achieve greater degrees of trust.

Practice 1 – Being There & Making Touch Points

Being physically, mentally, and emotionally available to team members creates greater degrees of trust, connection, and partnership. Being present and available is a demonstration that you *care* about the activities of the team. Even though life in the organization is busy, there are ample opportunities to be present with your team. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman suggests there are over 20,000 individual moments in any given day. Even though each moment is brief they can have tremendous effect on those around you. With so many potential opportunities, there are no excuses to make yourself available to others.

A simple example of ‘being-there’ is the touch point; a moment where you come into contact with a team member and *make it count*. This is different than simply being in contact with someone else – a touch-point is a conscious activity of connecting with another human being for even just a brief moment. It is the transition from being transactional with a person to being transformational. The touch-point is given greater energy when focused awareness is activated; it’s about being-there physically, mentally, and emotionally. Example touch points in the workplace may include walking the floor and having informal conversations with your teams, team huddles to go over daily expectations and news, and even emails to highlight work progress, feedback, and interesting articles.

Practice 2 – Taking Perspective & Standing in their Shoes

Traditionally organizations treat each employee the same regarding feedback, expectations, decision making, evaluation, training and even daily conversation. The problem with treating everyone the same is that it ignores the reality that everyone is very different. A good explanation for the temptation to treat everyone the same comes from Stephen Covey’s (1989) description of a paradigm. According to Covey, a paradigm is a pattern, model, or map in your mind build around assumptions for the way things are in the world. Paradigms derive from each person’s unique background and experiences. *People are not actually seeing objective reality* – instead they are seeing the world *subjectively through their unique lens of the world*. When we listen, we filter the world through our paradigm, when we speak, we speak from our assumptions for the way things are in the world.

We communicate through our filtered paradigms.

Highly effective and high performing leaders *recognize and honor their own unique paradigms*, but have the *maturity and energy* to see and respect the paradigms of those around them. It is really about *seeing the world from another's paradigm*. Effective leaders know how to stand in others' shoes. And to gain even deeper understanding, great leaders "*pull the string*." This refers to asking non-judgmental follow-up questions, allowing for deeper and more meaningful discovery of another's paradigm.

Practice 3 – Shared Dialogue & Playing Catch

Playing catch is allowing for the dialogue to *flow smoothly back and forth between two parties*. When we communicate with another person and they don't play catch we tend not to trust them. The back and forth *reciprocal* movement is a natural trust supporting behavior. Using the "catch" analogy, *when you have the ball, the world is waiting for your voice with courage and assertiveness. When you don't have the ball, the world is expecting you to listen with consideration and cooperation.*

Another nuance to dialogue is *how* the conversation flows. When we communicate with another person and they are overly direct, or overly sensitive, we may lose trust in them. The *force* in how we play catch is very essential in building trust. When we throw the ball *too hard to someone who is expecting soft toss we may create a fight/flight response*. If we throw the ball *too softly we may create disinterest*. The secret is to be aware of how the other likes to play catch and throw accordingly.

As Covey (1989) says, slow is fast and fast is slow when it comes to relationships; trust takes time to develop. But when we make the effort to build the trust account with those around us, we set the foundation for effective business outcomes. From my personal experience, when team members can learn to (1) make frequent touch points, (2) can stand in another person's shoes, and (3) play catch with their dialogue, they are subconsciously creating psychological safety with another person. When there is psychological safety, there is creativity, confidence, and space for a person to develop to their potential.

As my father said, "you can't make someone trust you... you have to earn it;" so set the intention and make the effort to create strong relationships through authentic trust building and reap the reward of extraordinary performance.

Covey, S.R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Schuster

Covey, S.M.R. (2006). *The Speed of Trust*. New York: Free Press.

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