

BUILDING TRUST

The Secret Key to
**Unlocking
Leadership
Excellence**



SPECIALIZED
SERVICES
FOR
BUSINESS
LEADERSHIP

Without the **key**, the **treasure** remains locked away.

In leadership roles, there is no shortage of advice for us to follow. No matter which management theory has our attention at the moment, there will no doubt be a new theory soon to fix the things we left out with the last one. One question remains: Is there a single leadership formula that works for all people, all industries, and all situations? The answer to that question is: Yes!

Although this formula is very simple, it is not easy to implement. It takes considerable time and effort, but the rewards are sizeable and guaranteed. What could this formula be? Simply put, it's: Build Trust.

Wait a minute, you say. That's not a formula! How can it possibly solve the problems of leaders today? How can such a simple concept be the answer to the highly complex problems of our hi-tech, information age?

Reflect on all the issues you've had in your leadership career. Think about how many of those issues involved other people. They probably all did. How many of those issues involved people not doing what they said they would do? Maybe they didn't complete the task to your expectations, to your standards, or to your timeline. Maybe they didn't do it at all. Perhaps the members of your team couldn't get along and the effort required to manage the conflict was significant. Possibly, a big change-initiative you tried to implement failed because your team simply refused to get on board and see past the short-term pain to the long-term gain.

If you examine every problem that you have had as a leader, you will likely discover that the root cause was a weak, low-trust relationship with another person. This is true for both major catastrophes and minor incidents alike.

At the core of each success and each failure is a relationship—good or bad, strong or weak. In order to ensure a higher rate of success, the smart leader will make certain that relationships are strong and healthy.

When we talk about strong relationships, we are talking about relationships founded in, and maintained by, high levels of trust. As a leader, the greatest skill you can possess is the ability to earn, build, and maintain trust. This is the golden key to leadership because everything else you do will only work if you have a strong foundation of trust to support it. Other leadership philosophies and techniques all have merit—if you can make them work. The wisdom of other experts is available to you—if you can find a way to make their techniques fit your style. Trust is the key that unlocks the door to leadership excellence and reveals all the potential on the other side.

What is trust?

Trust is a confident and positive belief in another person. It is the ability to rely and depend upon someone. It is present in all healthy, strong relationships and it is lacking in all weak and diseased ones.

Trust is a natural law. In relationships, it cannot be broken or violated without dire consequences. You can't cheat it or take shortcuts. If you try to, the results are far-reaching and long-lasting.

Trust takes time to earn. There is no shortcut and no quick fix. Having said that, understand that the most important dynamic associated with building trust is not time, but action. The more action you apply, the less time it takes to build trust between people. Conversely, the less action you take, the longer it takes. To be successful at building trust, it is critical to understand that trust is associated more closely with action than with time. You will not earn the trust of anyone unless you *do* something to earn it.

A major element of trust is competence.

A major element of trust is competence. A leader can be nice, friendly, and likeable, but if they have no skill and don't know what they're doing, their judgment, decisions, and actions won't be trusted. So, task-oriented competence is critical, even if the task is defined generically as 'leadership.'

Benefits

What will you gain if you take the time to develop and nurture high levels of trust in your organization? There is a direct correlation between the level of trust and the strength of the bottom line. In other words: trust increases profits.

Anywhere productivity needs to be improved, trust levels must be increased. If you have a low-trust environment, you will find you need detailed rulebooks and multi-volume policy and procedure manuals to regulate and police behaviours. High-trust environments, with engaged and committed employees, are much better at self-regulating and team-policing. A natural outflow of that is higher productivity and higher-performing teams.

Trust increases profits.

When teams perform better, customer service levels increase. This drives up customer satisfaction and ultimately customer loyalty. Any business model can benefit from increased customer loyalty.

While it's important to increase revenue, it's equally important to manage costs—particularly employee-related costs. Costs such as turnover. Some turnover is healthy, but excessive turnover can cost you dearly in terms of downtime while positions are empty, training costs, reduced service levels, and increased stress on the remaining co-workers. These costs can quickly drain any productivity gains you have worked hard to get. In a high-trust environment, these costs are often more easily maintained.

Trust increases employee commitment and leads to satisfaction and engagement at work.

In low-trust environments, interdepartmental fighting and monstrous silo walls affect communication at all levels, ultimately impacting the customer. By increasing

trust levels within your organization you can create an environment where people are talking directly to each other rather than going up and down the chain of command.

Resistance to change can choke the life out of a new initiative and, in worse situations, low morale can lead to sabotage. If your company is one that values change and process-improvement, you must have a trusting culture to enable those things. In a high-trust environment, people feel safe enough to take risks. This leads to true innovation as creative juices flow freely—not only to create new and exciting products and services, but also to upgrade and improve existing ones. Exploring new markets, new industries and new technologies all involves change and risk, and courage is needed to make it successful.

Trust increases employee commitment and leads to satisfaction and engagement at work. Engagement is something that everyone wants, many claim to have, but few actually have. An engaged employee is one who brings their head, their hands, and their heart to work every day. Trusted employees have drive, passion, and the desire to produce excellence.

Bottom line: a high-trust environment gives you more of what you want: increased productivity, better customer service, higher employee retention, clearer communication, more engagement, enhanced creativity. It gives you less

of what you don't want: absenteeism, theft, resistance to change, turnover, apathy, sabotage, and silos. A high-trust environment allows high-performance teams to achieve their potential, and is a necessary precursor to loyalty.

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So, what are the actions that build the maximum amount of trust in the shortest amount of time? Let's explore.

Care about people

When we genuinely care about the well-being of others, we naturally treat them differently. The most important thing this achieves is an attitude of kindness and thoughtfulness that transfers to all other areas of our relationships. When people know and believe we care about them, they will follow us—even when times are bad. When we care, they care, and the seed of mutual trust is planted.

*When we care,
they care.*

One highly effective way to show people how much you care is to listen to them. Although listening takes only minor outward effort on our part, it takes tremendous internal courage, energy, and skill to do it well.

As a leader, you must learn to listen first. It's a vital part of caring because the most important aspect of great listening is ensuring the speaker *feels* heard. That's where the required energy is needed because that's the hard part. To have someone truly feel heard we must be able to understand their opinions and all contributing factors associated with them such as emotions and reasons—from their perspective. There is great wisdom in the words, "A man would rather you heard his story than grant his request." Walls come tumbling down when people truly listen to each other, and it paves the way for an open and honest relationship powerfully grounded in trust.

Improve your listening skills by getting into the habit of asking questions, listening deeply to the answers, and reserving your opinions and judgments until the end. That way, you'll refrain from prejudicing people's opinions or suppressing those that differ, and you'll find yourself hearing things you may not have otherwise heard.

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Listen with more than an intention to respond. Listen with the intention of discovering what motivates them. What do they passionately care about? What excites them? What infuriates them? Truly get to know about the major factors in their lives. Knowing what motivates people on a personal level is a powerful piece of information. People will work harder for rewards for which they hold a greater perceived value, even if they come with a lower price tag. When you can customize perks, people really believe you care about them as people, not merely as cogs in a corporate wheel. When they know you care about them, they will care deeply and passionately about you and the results you are trying to achieve.

Be open and honest

All people want to know what's going on around them, and you need to be able to tell them. Unless you have a valid legal or moral reason for not opening up fully, do so. Give them all of it—the good, the bad and the ugly. They can handle it. At different levels of an organization, there are different concerns about different types of information. Barring those considerations, you'll always do well if you lay it all on the table.

Openness is a two-way street when it comes to building trust. Leaders must be willing to share information in effective ways. Effective sharing of information means the message was received as intended, and this requires more than sending an email or two. If your organization relies heavily on email as a communication tool, then you likely have a huge gap at all levels when it comes to trust. The large volume of email people typically receive precludes meaningful retention levels. Research tells us we only retain 10% of what we read, and that statistic explains much of the trouble with email communication strategies. Other studies tell us it takes up to seven hits (same message in seven formats, not same message sent seven times) for a message to be fully understood. Over-communicating the important stuff should be the standard operating procedure at all levels of leadership in any organization.

Openness also means you must have open ears, eyes, heart and door when it comes to listening to others. Be willing to let people speak their minds without fear of repercussion. An open-door policy has nothing to do with the door—it's an attitude, not a physical barrier. Be approachable when your people come to talk to you. Forward your phone to voicemail, close your laptop, and put down your pen. Then you'll be ready to listen.

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Abraham Lincoln was right when he said, "Honesty is the best policy." Spinning the truth may seem like the right thing to do at times, but in the long run it damages trust. People may already know the truth, or they will soon discover it, and the result will be the same as for the little boy who cried 'wolf' too many times in the fable: if you always spin, people will expect you're spinning, even when you're not.

Let's also be clear that there is a difference between telling the truth and being brutally honest. Hard truths must always be told from the right place in the heart and when you are in the right frame of mind. When you have a reputation for kind honesty, you'll find people will want to hear what you have to say, even when they know it might hurt. When you get this kind of a reputation, you know you've become a trusted and powerful leader.

Establish clear expectations

When expectations are clearly outlined and well articulated, there will be a mutual understanding of what needs to be done. A common mistake is to make behavioural expectations very general, vague and open to a multitude of interpretations. Often, what is perceived as poor performance is simply a matter of undefined, misunderstood or misaligned expectations. The problem, as it relates to trust, occurs when our employees do what they *think* we want them to do and it doesn't meet our expectations. We are then in a position to deliver negative feedback. Many leaders aren't comfortable delivering tough messages, so they put it off repeatedly until the molehill of a problem turns into a mountain that will require drastic measures. It then frequently becomes a battle of wills, each person trying to prove that the other was the cause of the communication breakdown. The result is major damage to trust levels.

To build trust, set clear expectations about what the end result should be. Communication must be crystal clear and without assumptions. Articulate in specific and behavioural terms not only what the end result must be, but also any non-negotiables where the process is concerned. Finally—and most importantly—check for understanding. Ask them to recap the mutual agreements as they see them, and from their perspective. Ask them *what* they understand instead of *if* they understand. By doing this, misunderstandings will be discovered early and trust can be built in the process.

Treat people fairly

The definition of fairness can vary from person to person, but the bottom line is that if people believe you're giving an unfair or unwarranted advantage to someone else, trust is negatively affected. Playing favourites among the people on your team is different from rewarding top performers with pet projects or plum assignments. The former destroys trust, the latter builds it.

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To succeed at being fair, you must combine it with openness and honesty. Any time you treat people differently you must be certain that people understand why you are doing that. Each of us has a core definition of fairness that can be linked to our in-born **personality preferences*.

(*For more information on personality preferences, visit www.dawnfrail.com or call 519-927-1730)

To some people, fairness means we each get the same size piece of pie. To others, fairness means one person gets a piece of pie and another person gets a piece of cake, because one likes pie and the other likes cake. If you have a project team that needs to split an implementation bonus, some team members might think it would be fair to split it equally, and for other team members apportioning dollars based on individual efforts and results would be seen as fair.

Consistency is important. People need to know that your behaviour is predictable and not irrational, unreasonable, or based on emotional likes and dislikes. You will find that fair treatment builds trust between you and your team, and among the team members themselves.

Manage your time well

It takes time to get people to trust you. It also takes action on your part, which demonstrates to others that you have the right to ask for—and you deserve—their trust. Time is your most precious resource. How you spend it, invest it, or waste it will have an impact on the level of trust others grant you.

Time management is a critical leadership skill. It's also a critical life skill and people will frequently judge you based on what you deem important enough to spend your time on.

Even leaders with the best of intentions can fall short because as their responsibilities increase, their available time decreases. They no longer have as much time to do all the things—often small things—that are required to build and maintain high levels of trust. If you don't have time to spend with people, trust will be more difficult to build.

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If nothing else, work on your time management skills because, as a leader, it is one skill on which your overall competence will be judged.

The hard truth is that there will always be too much to do and too little time to do it. You'll have to make some tough decisions, so be sure to prioritize based on importance. The only way to get yourself out of the vicious cycle of fighting fire after fire is to force yourself to take the time to do some fire prevention. It may be the only way to get back on track.

Pitfalls to avoid

Knowing what *not* to do is often just as important as knowing what *to* do, and this is particularly true when it comes to building trust.

Some key *don'ts* when it comes to trust are:

- Don't sacrifice face-time for technology, convenience, or cost.

Many leaders today find themselves with 'virtual' teams. Team members may be in different buildings, different cities, or even different countries. While geographical challenges are a reality for many, the fact is: you need face time to build strong relationships. The investment you make in bringing your team together is guaranteed to pay high dividends.

- Don't refuse to admit your mistakes, or take too long to decide to do so.

We have seen many high profile people in the news declare their innocence when they stand accused. They even make bold statements about their certain vindication, only to be proven guilty in due time. When you know you're wrong, admit it quickly and begin to rebuild. If you waver, it's less likely you'll be given a second chance.

- Don't unexpectedly break with tradition without explaining your actions.

Traditions are those things that we hold onto when all else around us seems so chaotic. They're comforting because they're familiar, accepted by many, and give us a sense of belonging. If you take away that security blanket without ample warning, you will ruffle the feathers of even your most trusted performers. Well-managed change can help build trust. Poorly managed change can destroy it in the blink of an eye.

- Don't let yourself get fatigued. Physical and mental exhaustion will hamper your ability to act with integrity.

Maintaining our integrity is easy when the seas are calm and it's smooth sailing. The moment of truth comes when the storm appears. When we are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy, making the right decisions and taking appropriate actions is much easier. When we're stressed and worn down, even the slightest pressure can lead us to do things we'll regret later.

Rebuild trust

It's one thing to start with a clean slate with people and build trust from scratch, but the circumstances are different if you have already destroyed the trust in the relationship and it must be rebuilt. So, what do you do when you're in that situation?

The first thing is to do is to fess up and come clean. Be honest and tell the truth. If you've made a mistake, admit it and apologize. An apology ultimately paves the way for them to forgive you and start over. Without an apology, there will always be a nagging thorn in the side of the relationship. The injury may partially heal, but you never know when it will fester and cause a major problem.

Trust is more dependent on action than it is on time.

Once you've come clean and humbled yourself, give some explanation for your actions. An explanation is not a defence or a justification; it's simply a statement of the facts as you saw them at the time.

Ask people what information you missed or misunderstood. Look at it as a learning experience and let others help you discover the valuable lessons you need to learn. This will engage them in the process, get them off the adversarial side, and put them on your side.

Once you've decided how you'll correct the situation, or you have agreed on how to make restitution, check back later with the other person to find out how you're doing. Ask them—don't wait for them to approach you.

Remember, trust requires more action than time. If you have a relationship that needs rebuilding with one person—or even your whole team—take heart, it can be done. It will require the most effort from you as the leader, and a true leader will have the courage to take the first step.

Trust requires maintenance

Once you've established high levels of trust, don't rest on your laurels or get lazy. Trust is something that needs constant attention. Like a muscle, you must exercise it or it atrophies and becomes weak.

The more you work it, the stronger it gets. The stronger and healthier it is, the more able it is to sustain an injury or excess strain. The same is true with relationships and the strength of the trust they stand on. People, being people, will sometimes disappoint even their best friends. When trust is high, the relationship can weather the storm and survive. When it is low, the relationship can capsize.

When trust is high, the relationship can weather the storm.

Try not. Do.

The philosophy of Yoda, the great Jedi master, is that we must commit whole-heartedly to succeeding at a task—otherwise we will fail. When young Luke Skywalker was considering a daunting task that lay before him, he promised Yoda that he would *try*. Yoda shared with him the wisdom that many leaders need today: “Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try.” Building trust can seem as difficult to us as lifting a spaceship out of the swamp seemed to Luke. We must also draw on our inner ‘force’ to make it happen.

When it comes to building trust, giving it the old college try is not nearly enough. If there is one responsibility that comes with leadership at any level, it is the responsibility of building trust between you and your followers. If you can’t build trust, you don’t have anything. If you have people working for you without trusting you, you have robots—not followers. And if you don’t have any followers, then you aren’t really a leader.

Begin to use your newfound key

Now that you know how to build trust, where will you start? Will you start with a broken relationship that needs repair, or with a good relationship that needs to be even better? Regardless of where you choose to start, remember that building trust is an ongoing process. We must all continue to work on it, daily, weekly, monthly. When we do, we will achieve tremendous results in our lives and in our businesses because we will have unlocked the key to leadership excellence.

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