

Bilateral Nature of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Trust between individuals is bilateral. At any point in time, we have a balance of trust with every person whom we know. Trust is also directional; I trust you at some level and you trust me as well, but not at the exact same level. In all our daily transactions with others, the trust fluctuates based on what happens, what is said, body language, texts, and even what other people are saying. It is a very complex and dynamic system.

I believe that if the trust in one direction is very different from the reciprocal trust for a long period of time, that relationship will not endure unless it is forced to endure, or unless something happens to resolve the disparity.

Picture the situation between a parent and a child who has a habit of lying to keep out of trouble. The parent has low trust in the child because there is overwhelming evidence that the child does not have integrity. The child may trust the parent at some level even if the relationship is a stormy one. The relationship is usually forced to endure because the child is too young to strike out on his own. Unfortunately with each low trust exchange, a kind of resentment builds up that may take years to resolve, if ever.

At work, we have a trust level with each person based on everything that has happened thus far in the relationship. My trust in you will be different from your trust in me, and it will fluctuate depending on what happens to us during the day. This is normal and not particularly damaging unless the rift becomes a major issue, or the pattern is a prolonged one.

Rebuilding trust is a situational thing, and not every situation calls for the formality offered below. These steps constitute a solid path toward reconciliation for a breach of trust between two people who have previously had a strong relationship that has been severely compromised. The idea is to move swiftly and create an atmosphere of finding 1) the truth, 2) understanding of motives, and 3) a pathway to healing.

Nine tips to rebuild lost trust

1. Act Swiftly

Major trust withdrawals can be devastating, and the trauma needs to be treated as quickly as possible. Just as a severe bodily injury requires immediate emergency care, so does the bleeding of emotional capital need to be stopped after a major letdown. The situation is not going to heal by itself, so both parties need to set aside normal routines in order to focus significant energy on regaining equilibrium.

2. Verify care

Both people should spend some time remembering what the relationship felt like before the problem. In most cases there is a true caring for the other person, even if it is eclipsed by the hurt and anger of the moment. It may be a stretch for some people to mentally set aside the issue, but it would be helpful to do that, if just as an exercise. If the problem had never happened, would these people care about each other? If one person cannot recognize at least the potential for future care, then the remedial process is blocked until that happens.

3. Establish a desire to do something about it

If reparations are to be made, both people must cooperate. If there was high value in the relationship before the breach, then it should be possible to visualize a return to the same level or higher level of trust. It may seem out of reach if the problem was a major let down or ongoing issue, but it is critical that both parties really want the hurt to be resolved.

4. Admit fault and accept blame

The person who made the breach needs to admit what happened to the other person. If there is total denial of what occurred, then no progress can be made. Try to do this without trying to justify the action. Focus on what happened, even if it was an innocent gaffe. Often there is an element of fault on the part of both parties, but even if one person is the only one who did anything wrong, an understanding of fault is needed in this step. Sometimes neither party did anything particularly wrong, but the circumstances led to trust being lost. In addition, the problem may be an act of omission rather than something that was done.

5. Ask for forgiveness

It sounds so simple, but many people find it impossible to verbalize the request for forgiveness, yet a pardon is exactly what has to happen to enable the healing process. The problem is that saying "I forgive you" is easy to say but might hard to do when emotions are raw. The loss of trust may be so severe that the injured party may not believe the person who is asking for forgiveness. True and full forgiveness is not likely

to happen until behavior has changed and the final healing process has occurred. It takes time to rebuild trust.

6. Determine the cause

This is a kind of investigative phase where it is important to know what happened in order to make progress. It is a challenge to remain calm and be as objective with the facts as possible. Normally the main emotion is one of pain, but anger can accompany the pain. Both people need to describe what happened, because the view from one side will be significantly different from the opposite view. Go beyond describing what happened, and discuss how you felt about what happened. Do not cut this discussion off until both parties have exhausted their descriptions of what occurred and how they felt about it. Sometimes it helps in this stage to do some reverse role playing where each person tries to verbalize the situation from the perspective of the other.

7. Develop a positive path forward

The next step is the mutual problem solving process. Often two individuals try to do this without the preparatory work done above, which is more difficult. The thing to ask in this phase is "what would have to happen to restore your trust in me to at least the level where it was before." Here, some creativity can really help. You are looking for a win-win solution where each party feels some real improvement has been made. Do not stop looking for solutions just because they are difficult to find. If you have gotten this far, there is going to be some set of things that can begin the healing process. Develop a path forward together. Realize that it may be difficult to reach a compromise easily. One person may harbor a grudge for a long time, so keep looking for a win-win solution. What new behaviors are you both going to exhibit with each other to start fresh.

8. Agree to take action

There needs to be a formal agreement to take corrective action. Usually this agreement requires modified behaviors on the part of both people. Be as specific as possible about what you and the other person are going to do differently. The only way to verify progress is to have a clear understanding of what will be different.

9. Check back on progress

Keep verifying that the new behaviors are working and modify them, if needed, to make positive steps every day. As the progress continues, it will start getting easier, and the momentum will increase. Make sure to smell the roses along the way. It is important to celebrate progress as it occurs, because that reinforcement will encourage continued progress. If there is another set-back, it is time to cycle back on the steps above and not give up on the relationship just because the healing process is a long one.

This process needs to be taken with a grain of salt and modified to fit the particular situation at hand. Every rift between people is unique, and the ideas here are directional, depending on the situation, rather than literal to be followed without reason. Modify the process to fit your particular application and do not follow a get well plan blindly. If a step seems like overkill or is just not practical, then you can skip it, but for serious breaches, the majority of steps will help.

In many cases, it is possible to restore trust to a higher level than existed before the breach. This method is highly dependent on the sincerity with which each person really does want the benefits of a high trust relationship with the other person. Achieving higher trust than before is really good news, because it allows a significant trust withdrawal to become an opportunity instead of a disaster.



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