



## Cracking the Code of Higher Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Yesterday, I was involved in a fascinating conference call with seven other leadership authors. The group was discussing how to write a white paper on the business case for building higher trust in organizations.

The fact that higher trust organizations outperform their lower trust counterparts has been documented by all eight of us authors and countless others. The evidence for the link between trust and higher performance is simply overwhelming, yet there are still executives who doubt it or feel powerless to capitalize on it.

The phone conversation gravitated toward the role of the senior leaders in creating higher organizational trust. I have never met a CEO, or other top executive, who does not desire higher trust within his or her organization. Perhaps there is one out there, but I have never found that person. The enigma is that while the quest for higher trust is nearly universal, often the senior leader does not recognize that the power to accomplish it is within herself. I have written about this phenomenon several times, as I believe that once we can accomplish wider recognition of the role of the senior leader in creating higher trust, we will have "cracked the code" that will enable the attainment in a significantly higher percentage of cases.

In my consulting work, I am often called in by senior executives (CEO, COO, or VPHR) to help them improve trust within the organization. The conversation usually starts out with some form of description of a dysfunctional organization at the shop floor level or with the sales force or customer service, etc.. Often the lower level managers and supervisors are singled out as the culprits, and the top officers are asking me to come in and "fix them."

This is a dilemma for me because if I say something like, "Have you considered what your contribution is to the problem?" I find myself out in the street on my butt. If I do take the challenge to go in and "fix" the lower ranks, it is inevitable that these lower managers will tell me the main source of the problem is the senior leaders. I want to offer some ideas on the cause of this disconnect, because I believe it contains the seeds of a cure.

The CEO is ultimately responsible for everything that happens in an organization, but there is often great frustration because, while the top leader has set out a vision and tries to communicate it often, the rank and file keep accusing him of not communicating well. Several studies have revealed that employees most often state "lack of communication" as either the number one or number two reason for employee dissatisfaction (Wiedmer, 2009). This is extremely frustrating to many top leaders, because they are sincerely working hard to communicate every day. Given a choice between their own inadequate "mouth," and the employees' defective "ears," most leaders would rather focus blame on the employees.

In most cases, the root cause of the frustration is neither defective outgoing communication nor listening prowess. It is a lack of trust. There is a cultural schism between organizational levels that is based more on fear than on lack of communication. Workers do not often verbalize the fear because, well, they are afraid. So the issues get reported as communication problems.

Top leaders are frustrated because they understand their own objectives clearly and are fully justified in their own mind for every action they take. Reason: it is next to impossible for a sane person to take an action different from what he or she believes is the best one at the moment. If there was a better choice, that would be the one selected. So the CEO is doing the "right" thing in all cases in his or her own opinion. If people interpret the CEOs actions as inconsistent with the values, then they must be wrong. Here is where we crack the code. ***It is the inability of leaders to make workers feel good when they verbalize the inconsistencies that blocks the building of trust.***

If top leaders can understand that last point, things can change rather quickly, and higher trust can be developed in nearly every organization. The top leaders really do hold the key, yet they often do not recognize it. In the song "Already Gone," The Eagles had a great lyric that applies here:

*"Well I know it wasn't you who held me down  
Heaven knows it wasn't you who set me free  
So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains  
And we never even know we have the key"*

Cracking the code for the development of higher trust in any organization means enlightening the leaders that they hold the key. It is as simple and as profound as that. Let me clarify what that key is again and associate it with a phrase: "reinforcing candor." The key is for leaders to make people feel glad when they bring up what appear to be inconsistencies. People may think an accounting practice is too near the ethical edge, they may think that a decision is not consistent with stated values, or they may believe a

leader is shading the truth to get out of a tight spot. These are just a few examples of the countless apparent inconsistencies people see happening every day at the senior levels yet are afraid to voice.

Top leaders need to reinforce employees when they have the courage to be candid about what seem to be wrong actions. By reinforcing candor, leaders enable people to voice their concerns openly and know they will be rewarded, not punished. This practice forms a kind of mirror surface where the leader can actually see himself through the eyes of the people who work for him. What an amazing blessing that is! Imagine actually being able to see yourself the way others do.

Having the mirror to see one's own actions accurately prevents leaders from getting on a slippery slope that ultimately leads to lower trust. In most cases unethical or otherwise wrong behavior occurs because of a slow erosion of standards. The top leaders allow a slight timing adjustment in inventory valuation that is perfectly legal and it helps performance look better. There is nothing wrong with this, except if we can do it this month we can do that plus just a bit more the next month and still feel right about it. Before too many months go by, we have walked ourselves into believing that unethical actions are okay. That is how Enron and so many other organizations got in trouble.

When people are reinforced for their candor, if you have 100 employees, you have 100 people who will call you if the decisions are not really right. That keeps you from getting on the slippery slope, and trust is built on a consistent basis.

Cracking the code of helping top leaders build higher trust involves getting them to see that they have the key in their hand every day. The key is to foster an environment where people know it is safe to bring up scary stuff and know that will be rewarded rather than punished.

For a great compendium of articles on trust see *Trust Inc.: Strategies for Building Your Company's Most Valuable Asset*, by Barbara Brooks Kimmel of Trust Across America: Trust Around the World.

#### Reference:

Wiedmer, Stacey M. (2009). "An examination of Factors Affecting Employee Satisfaction." Missouri Western State University

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