

Learning and Trust

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

One of my leadership students asked me a good question a while ago. She wanted to know the relationship between trust and learning. On the surface, the two words seem to have a tenuous relationship at best. However, after thinking about it, the question became much more interesting to me. The analysis can go in many directions. In this brief article, I will describe three different perspectives and offer a few typical examples to illustrate them. The perspectives include:

1. Why learning from someone you trust is easier than from someone you do not trust.
2. What types of things you are likely to learn from someone you do not trust.
3. Why your retention of the learned material is much better if you have a trusting relationship with the teacher.

As a CPLP (Certified Professional in Learning and Performance) with the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), I do not recall any instruction in my certification training on the link between learning and trust, so I did some research of my own. If you Google the two words, you will find numerous pages on how we learn to trust, but not much information on how trust enables learning. It seems pretty obvious, but actually it is a little more tricky than it first appears.

For the first perspective, I should make a clear distinction that I am not stipulating whether you *like* the trainer or not, only whether you *trust* the person. For example, take the case of a drill sergeant who is abusive and likes to push people's buttons. You may really hate this person, yet you trust him because he has the demonstrated knowledge based on his experience, and though abrasive, he does exhibit high integrity and equality for all. In this case you would probably learn well from the drill sergeant even though you cannot stand him. If you later get another trainer that you like as well as trust, the learning would come even easier.

The second perspective is a tricky one. Is it possible to learn something from someone you do not trust? Of course it is. For one thing you can learn how to avoid doing things that lower trust. By watching the mistakes of someone you do not trust, you can learn all kinds of lessons you can use to improve your life and your effectiveness. In this case, you are learning what not to do.

For example, I once worked for a duplicitous boss. He would tell people what he thought they wanted to hear, and shade the truth in order to make his life easier. I know this because I witnessed him telling two different versions of the same story to two different people on the same day. Word got around that this leader could not be trusted to tell the truth when confronted by a difficult situation. This leader obtained marginal compliance from people but not true loyalty. The concept I learned from that experience that it is important to have only one version of an event, whether it is popular or not.

Actually, it is fairly common for leaders to hide the real truth when faced with a difficult situation. Richard Edelman, in his 2013 Trust Barometer, determined that only about 20% of informed publics worldwide believe their leader will tell the truth when faced with a difficult question. The number in the USA is even lower than that. Richard called this statistic a "crisis in leadership."

For the third case, if you wish to learn a positive lesson or new skill, it is a big advantage if you trust the teacher. Reason: someone you trust has your best interest at heart and will stick with the teaching process until the full information has been transferred. Your faith in the instructor is what allows you to process the learning without hesitation, so the knowledge transfer and retention is much more efficient.

You do not need to worry about ulterior motives with someone you trust. You are not playing games, so that puts you in a much more receptive frame of mind, which also aids the learning process.

My conclusion is that most of the time it is easier to learn something from a person you trust, but you can learn something to avoid doing from a person whom you do not trust. It is easy to extrapolate that you can either learn to trust another individual or learn to not trust that person based on his or her demonstrated behaviors.

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