



## **Rebuilding Lost Trust**

### **by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

I believe trust between people is like a bank account. The balance is what determines the level of trust at any point in time, and it is directional. I might trust you today more than you trust me. We make deposits and withdrawals in the trust account nearly every day with the things we say and do. Usually the deposits are made in small steps that add up to a large balance over time. Unfortunately, withdrawals can be massive due to what I call "The Ratchet Effect." All prior trust may be wiped out quickly. Nobody is happy when trust is lost.

I believe trust withdrawals can lead to a long term higher level of trust if they are handled well. Just as in a marriage when there is a major falling out, if the situation is handled well by both parties in a cooperative spirit, the problem can lead to an even stronger relationship in the long term. Let's investigate some steps that can allow the speedy rebuilding of trust.

#### **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.

#### **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.

## **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, but it is critical that both parties really want the hurt to be resolved.

## **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.

## **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. True and full forgiveness is not likely to happen until the final healing process has occurred.

## **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.

## **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 it is difficult to find them. 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. What new behaviors are you both going to exhibit with each other to start fresh.

### **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 hold each other accountable for progress is to have a clear understanding of what will be different.

### **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 a 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.

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. That outcome is really good news because it allows a significant trust withdrawal to become an opportunity instead of a disaster.



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