



The Leader's Role in Building Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Over a period of several decades, I have observed how the trust level in any organization is influenced the most by one single factor. The behaviors of *the senior leaders* in any organization will have more impact on trust than anything else. Therefore, if the trust in an organization is not as high as needed, the senior leaders need to take a good long look in the mirror.

It is the behaviors of the senior leaders that are almost always the root cause of a trust problem in an organization. Please do not misunderstand, there will be trust issues evident at all levels of the organization, and often severe untrustworthy behaviors exist at the operational level. The cold reality is that in most organizations nearly all employees will perform in a trustworthy manner if they are properly led.

Many leaders reject their culpability indicating that it is the workers who are not being trustworthy that account for low trust. Upon closer examination, I find that it is almost always the behavior of the senior leaders that causes employees at various levels to act in a non-trustworthy manner.

The culture of any organization is established from the top. Certainly there are many levels in any organization and there can be trust issues at any level, but the tone of the environment is created by the behaviors and policies set out by the most senior leader.

Trying to get leaders to step up to this responsibility is one of the most difficult challenges I face in my consulting business. They would much rather blame others, or circumstances, or customers, or the economy, or anything other than themselves as being the cause of the difficulties they face.

Exercise for leaders: Today, ask yourself what behaviors you would need to change in order to begin a new culture within your organization. Think about your role as a leader in establishing the environment in which all employees work. That environment is the creator of either excellence or difficulties in trust.

I rarely meet an executive who will say, “there is a lack of trust in the organization, and since I am the leader here, it must be originating with me.” Occasionally I will run into someone who thinks that way, but it is pretty rare. The more we can convince leaders of their responsibility in terms of creating the right culture, the more trust we can create in the world.

Here are four “foundational behaviors” leaders can exhibit that will move the culture to one of higher trust along with my favorite quote on each one:

1. **Reinforce Candor** – make people unafraid to bring up issues. “The absence of fear is the incubator of trust.”
2. **Hold people accountable in a balanced way**, not just when they have messed up. “Hold people ‘procountable’ rather than accountable.”
3. **Extend more trust** in the people within the organization. “The First Law of trust: If you want to see more trust, then extend more trust.”
4. **Have firm values and demonstrate those values every single day**. “Stated values that are not demonstrated by leaders act like nuclear missiles to the fragile trust ecosystem.”

Once leaders can do these four things consistently, then there are hundreds of other behaviors that will take root and begin to accelerate the pace of building trust. I will mention just a few of the behaviors here for the sake of brevity:

1. Do what you say
2. Treat people well
3. Tell the truth
4. Demonstrate respect
5. Be transparent
6. Use Golden Rule
7. Stick up for people
8. Be ethical
9. Admit mistakes
10. Care for other person
11. Adhere to values
12. Listen well

13. Reinforce good behavior
14. Practice humility
15. Be consistent
16. Right wrongs

If you are a leader, step up to your role as the primary force that is creating the culture in your organization. If there are problems, then it is up to you to change the culture to eliminate them. If you are not the leader, print out this article and put it on the desk of that person. It may have an impact.

The preceding was derived from an episode in “Building Trust,” a 30 part video series by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.” To view three short (3 minutes each) examples at no cost go to <http://www.avanoo.com/first3/517>

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763**

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