



The Synapse of Trust

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

Trust is the glue that holds any organization together. Trust can exist at all levels because it is fundamentally a kind of synapse between two people. In the body, the synapse enables life by transmitting electrical signals between nerve cells. A similar pattern exists within organizations where trust facilitates quasi electrical interactions between people. Where the synapse does not happen, trust is thwarted, and fruitful interaction is blocked. This barren condition is common, and it results in people "playing games" with each other in an effort to gain political traction for their own agendas.

I visualize trust as existing in the "white spaces" between thoughts and activities. Trust enables the flow of ideas and concepts in an environment free of fear. That condition is vital to creativity in any group endeavor. One of my favorite sayings is that the absence of fear is the incubator of trust. Lack of fear is not the only condition for trust to grow, but I believe it is a necessary precursor.

The benefits of trust have been well documented by many authors and researchers. For example, Stephen M.R. Covey's book, *The Speed of Trust* stresses that as trust increases costs go down and things move faster. Dennis and Michelle Reina's book, *Trust and Betrayal*, shares research on the process of healing broken trust relationships. In my own books, I seek to highlight the nature of trust and how to achieve it every day.

My thesis is that the heart of building trust is making people feel safe enough to share uncomfortable thoughts without fear of retribution. This atmosphere is accomplished when leaders praise people for being honest and open, even when the message is difficult to hear. I call this technique, "reinforcing candor," and I believe it is one important way leaders build trust.

Warren Bennis is a true master of leadership and trust. He has written numerous insightful books on the importance of trust and how to help it grow. In, *On Becoming a Leader*, Bennis wrote, "It became clear that *the ability to inspire trust, not charisma*, is what enables leaders to recruit others to a cause." In a recent article for *Leadership Excellence Magazine*, Bennis recalls the lesson given by Jim Burke, CEO of Johnson &

Johnson, who, in 1982, boldly recalled \$100 million of Tylenol because some tainted pills had been discovered. His candor by personally going on national television to announce the recall was unprecedented, and it is at least partly responsible for saving the entire brand equity.

Candor is not always a pleasant experience because the truth is sometimes repulsive to behold. Individual differences allow one person to think a situation is perfectly acceptable while another individual may see it as intolerable. Revealing the truth about an issue leaves one vulnerable to scorn if there is a disconnect with the perceptions of another. The ability to withstand differences of perspective and still maintain respect is what makes trust so precious. The synapse of real trust is enabled by honesty and candor. In the void between souls, these quasi electrical connections allow a strong bond of mutual care and support.

Raw candor is not always the best approach, as we must apply it with judgment, tact, and care. We all know situations where it is wise to avoid blurting out our unvarnished thoughts. Within an organization, our reactions to activities or situations begin as private thoughts. They are not malicious or offensive; they are simply our beliefs. The ability to share this information with leaders in a constructive dialog is important.

If we feel stifled out of fear of retribution, then our private information will remain hidden. The withheld information is lost to the organization, and we suffer frustration and loss of morale by feeling muted. Conversely, if we know it is safe to express our thoughts in a mature and helpful way and that leaders will listen, we feel more attachment to our work, and the organization benefits from our viewpoint. It is up to the leaders to enable this flow of information through the behavior of reinforcing candor. Further, it is essential that leaders hear and understand the input and be willing to consider it seriously through dialog and actions.

We must teach leaders the power of this fundamental law: without trust, little real progress is made in any society. Candor is the enabler of trust. Leaders need to embrace and reinforce candor as much as possible. This behavior is not easy, as it is much more comfortable to become defensive or aggressive when facing a contrary opinion. The best leaders make people glad when they bring up difficult discussions because it enables the synapse of trust to flow.

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