Consistency can help leaders prevent lack of trust

VIEWPOINT
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With a year of major corporate scandals behind us, the business community has suffered its largest loss of credibility in history. While high-profile cases focus on a breach of trust with external stakeholders, an equally dangerous trend is the decline of trust within businesses of all sizes.

Every day, in hundreds of situations, the actions of leaders at all levels create or destroy trust.

The battle for viability, even survival, is conducted in the trenches of everyday interactions. When there is a shortage of trust between levels of a business, people's best efforts are wasted.

It is up to leaders to prevent this. Imagine the impact if you could reduce or eliminate distractions like rumors, political infighting, lack of focus and conflict. In organizations of high trust, problems like these fade into the background as people focus more energy on serving customers and beating the competition. Satisfaction and inspiration replace drudgery and hostility.

Organizations that accomplish this have a sustainable competitive advantage; those that do not risk losses or even defeat. Fortunately, there are effective and inexpensive ways to improve the level of trust in organizations.

Historically, building an environment of trust has been given little emphasis in executive education. There have been some courses on management ethics and high-level visionary work, but specific methods of obtaining maximum trust between organizational layers have seldom been taught.

My study of this topic over the past three decades has led to ideas that help bridge the gap. Both personal learning in various leadership roles at a major corporation and a thorough study of historical and contemporary theory pointed to a simple fact: The way to build trust is through consistency.

Leaders interact with many people and build trust-based relationships with each of them. Trust between people can be compared to a bank account, where actions consistent with shared values represent deposits and inconsistent actions repre

sent withdrawals. Every action, word or decision between individuals either adds to or subtracts from the balance. It is a very sensitive system that can be affected even by thoughts or small gestures. Making small or medium deposits is easy, but large deposits are rare.

Unfortunately, withdrawals can be large and devastating. The entire balance can be wiped out with a single action. As a leader, you need to prevent this by having all your actions consistent with what employees hear you say.

A problem arises when people interpret actions of leaders as incongruent. In most organizations, people are somehow punished if they bring up an inconsistency. In an organization of high trust, leaders reward people for pointing out gaffs because it allows correction or clarification, but, more importantly, it fosters additional growth in trust by encouraging open dialogue in the future.

That sounds simple but it rarely occurs. Usually leaders hate to admit mistakes. They believe it weakens their ability to lead and become defensive when employees push back. This normally backfires and reduces trust in the leader.

Building trust in steps

Start by laying a firm foundation with your team. Identify the values of your business along with a clear vision, behavior expectations and a strategic plan.

Encourage people to tell you any time they believe your actions are not consistent with your foundation.

Reinforce them every time they do it, no matter how challenging that is. Make them glad they told you about it.

Take appropriate corrective action, or help people think through the apparent paradox. This method works because it uses what I call the "I am right" theory.

Each of us has a set of beliefs based on everything we have experienced in life. We "own" these views and truly believe they are right. When another person observes a situation and comes away with a judgment different from ours, we think they must be wrong.

For example, as a leader, I see my consistency batting average as 100 percent because "I am right." I believe everything done or said is justified and consistent with the vision. If not, I would do something else.

The trouble arises when we add another person. In that person's eyes, my batting average is far from 100 percent. With extreme care, I might be able to achieve 60 percent to 70 percent, but inevitably I will do something viewed as inconsistent.

One of two things can now occur.

First, the other person can say or do nothing. This reaction would normally seem the safer one.

Why would someone remain silent in the face of an inconsistency? It is out of insecurity and fear. There have been previous opportunities to voice a contrary opinion where this person has felt punished rather than reinforced for voicing a dissenting opinion. It is just not safe to do it. We used to call such episodes "CTOs," short for career-threatening opportunities. Unfortunately they occur frequently.

What happens to trust in this situation? It goes down! The person has less trust in me because I appear hypocritical, acting in a manner inconsistent with our mutual values, behaviors or vision. My trust in the person also goes down because my subconscious knows something is wrong but the other person is silent. If the issue is a substantial one, trust goes down dramatically.

Contrast that with a scenario where the other person verbalizes the problem immediately because it is safe to voice a contrary opinion. This is possible because an environment of trust has been built over a period of time. People know this kind of input is welcome.

Here the outlook is much brighter. We can have meaningful dialogue on the inconsistency. I can reverse my action

with a statement like, "You're right, I didn't think of it that way. I'll reverse my decision. Thanks for pointing out my mistake."

Another response could be, "I really appreciate your pointing out the conflict. I still believe my decision was correct and can't reverse it. However, thank you for having the courage to speak up. Now I know there is an issue. If someone like you has a problem with it, others may as well. Let me explain further why I can't reverse the decision."

Either way the trust level goes up in the minds of each of us. I have been listening. The other person knows he has been heard and his opinions respected. I know the other person is leveling with me.

With this approach, you have a powerful correcting force when people believe things aren't right. If something is out of line, they will tell you, enabling change before much damage is done.

Now you have an environment where honest feelings are shared and there are no large trust issues. People in your organization will work with you gladly, spending less time fretting and more energy pursuing the vision. There is also less gossip and fewer rumors.

People's beliefs constitute their reality, so leaders are forced to deal with the negative impacts of rumors as though some draconian action (never even considered) had actually occurred. All that waste of effort is avoided in an atmosphere of trust.

The rumor mill will still be there but will be shut down before it has a draining effect on productivity. You will also see fewer Dilbert cartoons posted on the bulletin boards. The culture has a sustainable competitive advantage. Success is easier.

Developing a true environment of trust is rare because the way to achieve it goes against the grain of most people in leadership positions. It requires leaders to set aside their egos and be willing to be told they are wrong frequently.

This takes a significant retraining of the mind and usually requires some help from a coach or consultant. Those leaders who can make the shift to this kind of environment will lead the most profitable and hassle-free businesses in the end.

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