



Changing the Trajectory of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In most organizations the level of trust is something that needs improvement at all levels. As a consultant, I am rarely called into an organization where the CEO tells me, "We are in excellent shape here. I can think of no area where any improvement is needed." Usually there is a rather long list of things that are broken, and the top leaders want me to reach into my medicine bag and pluck out a miracle that can be applied in a two hour workshop for the supervisors and managers that will produce a remarkable cure.

The dilemma for me is not in finding out what is wrong, but in getting the top brass to recognize their role in creating the problems they sincerely want me to fix. It is a rare CEO who will tell me, "Things are in very bad shape here and you are looking at the source of most of these problems." I have actually met a few leaders who are smart enough to think that way, but they are definitely in the minority. Most leaders have a view that if you can only get "them" to do better then most problems will vanish. In 98% of the cases "them" does not include "me."

When trying to build a culture of higher trust, one analogy I like to use is trying to change the trajectory of a comet. The comet is made up of millions of particles that travel in a pattern so that it becomes recognizable. We could change the trajectory of the comet to a higher orbit by changing the position of each particle in the tail.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize that changing the trajectory of the comet's head is a far more efficient route to a better orbit. Future particle movement will follow any alteration to the movement of the head. So it is in any organization, it is the behaviors of the leaders that ultimately determine the level of trust throughout the entire organization.

The most effective combination I have found is where the top leaders insist on participating in the culture improvement effort rather than directing it to be done solely by an external consultant. There is a role for the consultant in enabling the process, but

it is a support role. The top leaders need to invest the time as teachers of a better culture of their own invention. The consultant has the time and experience to suggest certain tools that work and also allow the leaders to be participants in the learning process along with everybody else.

As the culture change takes hold, if the top leaders continue to reinforce higher trust actions and practice them daily, the momentum starts to change quickly. Once people see a genuine change starting at the top, they gladly participate in any training efforts to spread the trust-building tools throughout the organization.

You can actually observe the process accelerating as the percent of advocates grows. Once the head of the comet is heading for a higher orbit of trust the pace of change picks up dramatically and before long the entire comet has been moved.

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