



Earn Trust

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

I start out all my trust seminars by asking the audience to define trust. I enjoy watching the faces of the people as they wrestle with the challenge. Clearly, trust is a word that we all use on a daily basis. We all know what it means, in general, but we have not stopped to try to come up with a precise definition. It's kind of like what Justice Potter Stewart once said about hard-core pornography, "It's hard to define, but I know it when I see it."

Just because someone will look it up if I don't, Webster has numerous definitions for trust, the first one is about "assured reliance."

Ultimately, after a few awkward moments, people start to spill out various definitions. I frequently get 15 or 20 different definitions from the group. We then explore the idea that trust, while the phenomenon is well known to us all, is far more complex and ubiquitous than we realized before the exercise.

Clearly there are several kinds of trust. Let me share just 10 examples:

1. **Count on** – You have my back and have integrity.
2. **Consistency** – You do what you say.
3. **Reliance** – You do what is in my best interest.
4. **Values** – We share common values.
5. **Safety** – It is safe to voice a concern.
6. **Vulnerability** – You are willing to admit mistakes.
7. **Humility** – You do not need to always be right.
8. **Dependability** – I need you to keep me safe.

9. **Mutual** – I trust you because you trust me.

10. **Equality** – You are fair.

One concept that usually comes up early in the seminar is that trust is something that is earned. In this article, I would like to kick around the concept of earning trust because there are situations where trust is not earned but granted anyway.

Suppose you walk by an ice cream vendor on a street corner. You purchase an ice cream bar and begin to eat it. It would be impossible to eat the ice cream without trusting the vendor in numerous ways. Yet the vendor did nothing before you bought the ice cream to earn your trust. In reality, you are trusting the local authorities to have some rules in place that force the vendor to have a license to sell food etc., but the vendor did nothing to directly earn your trust, except perhaps put on a clean apron.

We can think of many situations where we trust someone else, but that trust is simply given without being earned. In the long run, it is true that we will test others to identify if they are trustworthy. That is a kind of slippery slope, because no person is 100% perfect. Every individual has some ability to mess up or behave in an untrustworthy manner at some point. Yet we put our faith in the individual and take the risk we will not get hurt.

What we are really doing is playing the odds. If a person convinces us through numerous actions and appearances that he is to be trusted, we have a kind of equity build up where we feel the risk of a betrayal is very low. In this case, we grant trust because the person has earned it. We know it is not 100% safe; that is the nature of trust, and it is why no trust can ever be at the 100% level. There is always some risk being taken when we extend trust.

If we want to earn trust from other people, we need to convince them of a number of things quickly. I say there are five C's that people look for before they will trust us. This is a simplistic view, of course, there are many more variables to consider, but these five are all important.

1. **Care** - Do you really care about me in a way I can recognize?
2. **Character** - Are you a person who has high integrity?
3. **Congeniality** - Are you the type of person whom I like?
4. **Competence** - Do you have the ability to deliver?
5. **Consistency** - Can I count on you to do what you say?

If you can convince me that you have the five C's, then I will likely trust you until you give me a reason not to. I believe it is possible to demonstrate the five C's rather quickly when meeting a new person. Actually, I think it can be done in only a few seconds. The most difficult one is to demonstrate consistency. After all, to be consistent means doing the same thing time after time over a long period of time. Yet I believe it is possible to convey that you are the type of person who is consistent rather quickly.

For example, if we are meeting at a convention and I tell you that I will send you a copy of an article, then follow up with, "can you give me your contact information," that demonstrates a kind of consistency that I will follow up on my promise.

The Five C's are far from an exhaustive list of ways to build trust. In reality there are several hundred things a person can do to earn trust. They all contribute in various ways to the formation of a relationship based on trust. One of the key factors is whether I show trust in you. If you believe that I trust you, that will be a huge enabler of you trusting me. Reason: Trust is usually reciprocal.

I think the process of earning trust is an infinitely fascinating topic. There are so many variables involved, and trust, in any setting, is a very fragile commodity. One thing is for sure, before you can sell anything to anyone, that person must trust you.

Recently, Seth Godin put out a blog on the topic of earning trust. He ended the blog with, "Earn trust, earn trust, earn trust. Then you can worry about the rest."

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