

Faux Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I get a lot of gift catalogs and always chuckle when they advertise the "faux plants." Why they do not call them "fake plants" is pretty obvious. Nobody would want to buy something fake, so they give the items a fancy name as if that is really going to fool anyone. They keep doing it, so the method must be working for them.

I work in the arena of trust, and I think the notion of "faux trust" is one worth exploring. Stephen M.R. Covey dealt with the topic of faux trust behaviors very well in his first book, *The Speed of Trust*. Stephen identified 13 key trust behaviors and then identified the opposite behavior and also what he called the "counterfeit" behavior: one that looks real but is not genuine. Here is the list from Stephen's book.

Trust Behavior	Opposite	Counterfeit
1. Talk straight	Lie or deceive	Withholding information
2. Demonstrate respect	Not respect	Faking respect
3. Create transparency	Cover up	Hidden agendas
4. Right wrongs	Justify wrongs	Covering up or hiding
5. Show loyalty	Take credit yourself	Being two-faced
6. Deliver results	Perform poorly	Doing busywork
7. Get better	Deteriorate	Eternal student
8. Confront reality	Ignore reality	Evade reality
9. Clarify expectations	Leave undefined	Guessing
10. Practice accountability	Not taking responsibility	Blaming others
11. Listen first	Speak first	False listening
12. Keep commitments	Violate promises	Overpromising
13. Extend trust	Withhold trust	Extend false trust

In this article, I will pick up where Stephen's list leaves off. I want to explore the issue of false trust and see what it looks like. If you look at a faux potted plant very closely, you can determine that it is plastic rather than real leaves and stems. Often the one thing that gives away the ruse is that the "Faux plant" is too perfect. Real plants have some

imperfections or dead parts that show up under close examination. So it is with faux trust; the appearance is too perfect for the real world, and that becomes one of the telltale ways we can identify the fake. Let's look at 10 examples:

1. **The issue of risk.** Real trust involves a willingness to take some calculated risks. Actually, that is one of the ways trust is defined. If I really do trust a person, then I do not need to see whether he is sneaking behind my back. When Ronald Reagan uttered the words "Trust but verify," he was revealing a kind of faux trust toward the Russians. It sounded too perfect, and it was.
2. **The issue of safety.** True trust means the absence of fear. If I trust my boss not to clobber me when I have a contrarian opinion, that means I believe he will not find some way to get back at me. Too often leaders indicate that it is safe to challenge the boss, but end up punishing people when they do it. People quickly learn the plea for openness is really a smoke screen, and they clam up.
3. **The issue of hypocrisy.** Real trust means the leader always does what he says he will do. It is easy to spot the faux variety of trust when the boss rationalizes why he is bending the rules in his favor. It is always possible to explain away the situation, but the damage done to trust will remain like the smell of a skunk long after the animal has left the area.
4. **The issue of favorites.** Trust is built on a sense of fairness where people recognize why things are being done a certain way. Ironically, it does *not* rely on treating everyone the same way. In fact, the late John Wooden, former basketball coach for UCLA, made a remarkable statement about favorites. He said, "The surest way for a coach to play favorites is to treat every player the same way." That sounds like doubletalk until you realize that each player has unique needs, so treating each player the same as every other one will inevitably advantage one player over another.
5. **The issue of the Golden Rule.** Faux trust relies on treating people the way you would like to be treated. Some people like to use the "Platinum Rule," which states "treat other people the way they would like to be treated," but that one does not work either. The true trust relies on treating every individual the right way, not always how you or they would like to be treated.
6. **The issue of accountability.** Faux trust means holding people accountable when they do something wrong. True trust means giving feedback when an employee does something right as well as when she does something wrong.
7. **The issue of sustainability.** Faux trust means giving lip service to the environment and doing so to be politically correct. Genuine trust means always displaying a deep respect for the implications of one's actions on the planet and acting that way always.
8. **The issue of values.** True trust means actually living the values each day and explaining to people why certain actions are consistent with those values. Faux

trust means there is a set of values on the wall, but we really do not act consistent with them in some cases.

9. **The issue of care.** Faux trust means leaders talk a good game about really caring for employees, but tolerate huge multiples of more than 500 times between their salary and those of the workers. Real trust means not giving lip service to the issue of caring for others.
10. **The issue of admitting mistakes.** Faux trust means finding ways to hide the mistakes, pretend they did not happen, blame them on circumstances or other people, and find ways to understate their significance. True trust behavior readily admits mistakes because the leader recognizes that to admit a mistake makes her more human and therefore nearly always increases respect and trust.

I could go on with dozens of additional examples of faux trust versus the real thing. People in any workforce pick up on any inconsistency on the part of leaders. Their eyes are well trained to spot the plastic trust. Once they see the shrub as a fake plant, then from that point on, they will see the decoration for what it is. True, they do not need to water and tend the plant and it will always look reasonable, just as people in a low trust organization will dutifully comply with whatever rules the boss mandates.

The true test of leadership is to have the courage and strength to deliver genuine trust in every case. Let the competition deal with the faux variety of trust.

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