

Leading Up by Example

By Robert T. Whipple MBA, CPLP

My business is helping to grow leaders with a focus on building higher trust within their organizations. When I work with leaders at every layer except the highest level, they typically get very excited at the potential of working on trust within their area. After some education on the impacts of trust in numerous dimensions occurring simultaneously, they salivate over the improvement opportunities that are ripe for the picking. As we discuss the behavioral changes needed for leaders to foster rather than destroy trust I can see light bulbs going on in their heads.

Then, I often see a kind of sick look come across their faces as reality sets in. After a while some brave soul will offer, “This is great stuff, Bob, but the boss does not believe in this kind of “soft skills” training. He thinks it is a waste of time and money. So we are going nowhere with trust in our organization until we can get a new CEO.” This is wrong thinking because trust can be improved at any level of an organization. Sure, it is infinitely better if the example is set from the top, but if that does not happen, we do not have to wait until a retirement, replacement, death, or murder to start building a culture of trust.

The trick is to start a cell of excellence at your own level and work downward. Nearly all leaders can improve the level of trust in their sphere of influence by changing their behaviors. After a while (and it does not take very long) the improvement in performance will shine like a beacon from a lighthouse.

As the productivity and enthusiasm shout out from your corner of the organization, eventually even the most encrusted manager above you will start asking what the heck is going on in your playpen. Then, you have earned the right to explain that your investment to get some education on building trust for you and the managers working for you has changed the whole paradigm.

The higher in space you look, the more brilliant your shining star will appear to upper management, especially if there are some black holes between you and the top layers. They will be grateful for the bottom line improvement and maybe even willing to endorse that an improved culture really does have the highest ROI of any potential project.

The impact of trust on organizations is a well documented fact. Stephen M.R. Covey states in his book *The Speed of Trust* that trust is not some squishy, soft variable but a hard-edged measure that has direct and profound impact on organizational performance. In the 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer, Richard Edelman noted a direct correlation between US trust in business and the S&P 500 Index: “*Trust, absolutely, is now a*

product for companies to pursue and pursue avidly. Why? Because it enables company performance and stock price to prosper. We see an interlinking of share price and trust.”

In my own books, I give several examples of the causal relationship between trust and productivity.

No executive would disagree that trust within an organization is an important component that enables excellence. It is unbelievable that so few top executives actively seek out specific training for themselves and other senior leaders on how to build and maintain trust. It is like they have it all figured out already. But if they know how to act in ways that truly build trust, why is the level of trust within the majority of corporations typically below the 50% level? Either top leadership does not truly acknowledge the relationship or they are blind to the countless trust-busting things they do daily. Were it not for these behaviors, Scott Adams wouldn't have invented the Dilbert series and might be a plumber today.

The good news is that you can and should create a cell of excellence in building trust at your own level regardless of the attitudes of those above you. Jim Collins, author of *Built to Last*, *Good to Great*, and *How the Mighty Have Fallen* offers a ten point list of things every leader should do to reach his or her full potential. Number one on his list is “Build a Pocket of Excellence.” It means that you have more power than you think you have, and it is a simple matter of leading the boss from below. Rather than trying to convince the boss to spend money on training for improved trust, just show the incredible result, and then admit that you forgot to ask permission to train your managers in the first place. The boss will forgive you and might even be more willing to consider some training at the upper levels.

Another way to think about it was offered by the retired head coach of the Indianapolis Colts, Tony Dungy. His advice is to “Focus on what you can control and do not dwell on what you cannot change.” That advice applies to leading from below as well. If the boss is not convinced of the payoff of improving the culture through training, go ahead and do it anyway in the area you manage. Don't try to reeducate or convince the boss. Remember the old adage, “Never wrestle a pig, you get all muddy and the pig loves it!” If the boss forbids any such nonsense as culture training, find a clandestine way to accomplish it. Buy some books or DVDs and have managers in your area experience them and get together once a week for a lunch discussion.

There are countless ways you can change the culture in your organization by making small investments of time, and at low cost. If your boss has a negative attitude on investing in people skills for managers, you are not dead in the water. Take the initiative to get involved with someone who can help you on the journey, and you will see amazing benefits in not only performance but in knowing that you are helping everyone in your organization lead a better life.

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