

Successful Supervisor Part 19

Meaning of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I work with supervisors and managers all the time, and one of the things we talk about in depth is the topic of trust, since I believe that is the most powerful positive force in business (and the lack of it is the most negative force). Trust is such a common word that we hear it and say it numerous times every week. If you watch television, whether it be coverage of worldwide events or advertising, you will hear the word trust several times an hour.

It is astounding to me that when I ask a group of supervisors or managers to define what trust is, I get a bunch of blank faces for several moments. Finally someone will say something like, "It means you can count on another person." I think the reason is that there are some words that we know very well but that are hard to define without using the word itself in the definition. Another example of this paradox is the word "time." See if you can define time without using the word time in the definition. It is more difficult than you think, isn't it? I will give one definition at the end of this article.

Back to trust; normally, when we think of trust, we picture the concept between us and another person. We almost always think of trust as a singular concept, I trust you at some level or I do not. In fact, trust takes on numerous forms in our lives that we rarely consider at a conscious level. Here are a few of the categories of trust that you will recognize:

- You have my back – I can count on you.
- You are reliable and do what you say.
- You do what is in my best interest, even if I am not happy about it at the time.
- You are honest and admit mistakes.
- We enjoy a relationship of high esteem.
- It is safe for you to share what you believe without fear of reprisal.
- You depend on another person to keep you safe.
- You have integrity and are not duplicitous.

These are just a few of the categories of trust that go on all the time, but we rarely think of them at a conscious level. It becomes a feeling we have about another person.

Trust not only takes many forms, but it also is manifest in various ways as we interact with our world. Let's take a few examples and examine them consciously to illustrate how ubiquitous trust is in our lives.

People

Trust with people is the most common form of trust as we think of it. We trust every other person we know at some level, and that person trusts us at some level, but the levels are not always the same. Also, the level of trust is changing all the time as a result of the interfaces or transactions going on with the other person.

I can send a text to you that might make your trust in me go down a bit while my trust in you is going up. I can be sitting across from you at a meeting and when you roll your eyes at something the speaker is saying, my trust in you is impacted. I might lose some trust in you by the tone of your voice when you complain about the boss. All through the day, in every interface, the trust in both directions is being impacted: sometimes both in the same direction, and sometimes in opposite directions. Trust between yourself and other people is **dynamic** and does not remain constant.

Products

We must trust the products we use. Most of the time the trust is implied, and we don't even think about it. When you take a pill, you rarely wonder where the ingredients came from or who made the pill. You simply trust that there are systems in place to take care of any potential problem.

When you walk into the bathroom in the morning and flip the light switch, you trust that the lights will go on and you will not somehow get electrocuted. You turn on the spigot and water comes out. You don't think about it unless for some strange reason the water does not come out, or it comes out rusty.

You get into your car and turn the key. You do not think about the fact that thousands of explosions are going on under the hood every minute. When you get to a stop sign, you apply the brake and expect the car to stop.

Systems

Believe it or not, we trust our system of government all day every day. We may not be happy with all the decisions or non decisions our leaders make, but there are thousands of things that the system at local and national levels provide that we just do not think about. If there is an ice storm, you will trust that the salt trucks will be out before you have to go to work.

If you drive over a bridge, you trust that you will not fall into the water (at least on most bridges and overpasses). The mail shows up in your mailbox unless it is a holiday. An interesting example is trust in the media. Right now there is a lot of discussion about whether you can trust anything you hear in the main stream media, yet most of us still listen to it. Trust in the media has been declining rapidly for over a decade. There are many reasons for the lack of trust in the media, some of them are legitimate, and some of them are probably falsehoods.

Organizations

We trust that if there is a disaster, the Red Cross will be there for aid. We trust our military to follow the orders of the chain of command, even if we are skeptical about the sanity of some people in the chain. We trust that if an enemy shoots a missile at us, it will be shot down before it reaches us. We do not consciously think of these protections; we take them for granted every day.

Basically, trust is far more complex and ubiquitous in our lives than we realize. You cannot get up in the morning and go to work without experiencing trust several hundred times. The vast majority of experiences with trust are subconscious, and we just take things for granted unless there is some reason to be doubtful (like a tornado heading for town).

Now imagine taking several hundred people and putting them together in a kind of pressure cooker called an organization, and you have a rather complex situation. This condition is the world in which the supervisor works daily. The cumulative level of trust between people in the entire organization is what gives the entity its power to operate.

Supervisors and leaders provide the environment where this fragile commodity called trust will flourish or be extinguished. I believe more than any other factor, it is the behaviors of the supervisors and leaders that determine the level of trust in an organization. Trust is not dependent on the desires of leaders, their intelligence, or their intentions. All leaders seek high trust. It is their **behaviors** that govern the reactions in people that lead to higher or lower trust.

I firmly believe that if an organization is struggling with performance issues, regardless of the direct causes, the root cause is the inability of the leaders of that organization to create an environment of sustained trust. That is both good news and bad. The bad news is that most leaders do not believe what I just wrote. It is easier to blame others or circumstances. The good news is that there is a way to educate leaders to understand this concept and actually do better. The only difference between the bad news and the good news is getting leaders to recognize that the leverage is created by their behaviors.

My mission in life is to educate as many leaders as possible about these ideas, and by doing that, make a difference in our world, one leader and organization at a time.

Oh yes, back to the definition of time. Try using something like, “a measure of duration.”

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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