

Successful Supervisor Part 25

Healing Damaged Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Building trust with employees takes constant diligence. It takes effort and skill on the part of the supervisor. Repairing damaged trust is equally vital, and it takes an extra measure of effort to do it well. I liken trust with other people to a bank account, where we can make deposits or withdrawals in the account, and it is the current balance that determines the level of trust.

Note: since this series is about creating more successful supervisors, the points in this article will be made from the supervisor's point of view rather than from the employee's perspective. Recognize that there are always two dynamics going on whenever we are addressing interpersonal trust.

There are two main ways trust can be damaged: 1) trust lost because of an employee issue, or 2) trust lost because of an action by the supervisor. I will discuss these separately because the actions required to restore trust are not the same.

Trust loss because of an action (or non-action) by the employee

This is a pretty common form of trust problem. You trusted the employee to act in a certain way and were let down. In this case, the employee made a withdrawal to the trust account.

The first order of business is to assess the severity or magnitude of the withdrawal. An example of a small withdrawal might be making a lame excuse for not setting a process up according to procedure. A large trust withdrawal might be stealing material or tools from the workplace and lying about it when confronted later.

Some trust withdrawals can be grounds for immediate termination of the employee. An example of this would be if the employee was acting in a threatening manner to you or other employees and pulled out a weapon. While these situations are rare, they do happen and need to be dealt with urgently.

Assuming the employee's withdrawal is major but not grounds for immediate dismissal, the path forward involves punitive action and documentation. The first point is to avoid procrastinating on taking action. Once the facts are known, you must meet with the employee

as soon as possible. Start by stating your understanding of what happened and ask the employee if that is accurate. If the employee denies the action (this is often the case) then you must produce the evidence. The employee now has a chance to refute the evidence or admit the action.

If the evidence is refuted, then it is best to engage some neutral party to investigate the case more carefully. A typical person to do this would be an ombudsman.

If the employee finally admits the action, then you should assess an appropriate penalty to fit the situation. At this point you should stress that there are two issues to deal with. First is the original action and second is the failure of the employee to fess up when the action was discovered. It is a good idea to keep HR informed of your actions, so in case of any escalation you already have a head start.

If the problem is simply a minor slip, then you need to figure out what form of coaching is the right way to handle this particular situation. The employee needs to understand the consequences of any future repeats of this kind of action. One minor trust withdrawal can be erased eventually by excellent performance, but a pattern of minor withdrawals adds up to a permanent loss of trust.

Recognize that although the discussion will be between yourself and the employee, others in the area will be observing what is going on, so you may want to have a brief meeting to discuss the situation with the whole team before the rumor mill takes over and blows the event up to be more than it was.

Trust loss because of an action (or non action) by the supervisor

There are two major categories and hundreds of sub categories in this aspect. The first category is the ongoing behaviors of the supervisor and the second one is a single event or situation that is outside the normal pattern. Let's take them one at a time.

Ongoing behaviors

Basically, any action or even body language, that works against building trust is some form of withdrawal. I have written many [articles](#) about how the behaviors of leaders are the most significant contributor to the level of trust in any organization. I believe this phenomenon is true at all levels and is particularly evident for supervisors.

It may not be an overt action at all; it could be the attitude of the supervisor toward the workers that causes a loss of trust. The supervisor is usually **not even aware** of the damage she is doing, yet it goes on daily. The problem may also be the ambient culture of the entire organization that is causing the supervisor to behave in ways that cause constant trust

withdrawals. If the culture from above is toxic, it is effectively impossible for a supervisor to maintain high trust within her group. Hence, one conclusion for the cause of low trust is the behaviors of the senior-most leaders in the organization. Culture starts at the top and cascades down.

A single event or situation outside the normal pattern

In this case, you have done something that undermines your credibility, and the employee (or usually group of employees) will immediately lose respect for you. The problem may have been major or minor, inadvertent or intentional.

For example, a major trust withdrawal made by you would be lying to employees when asked about an impending layoff. This is sometimes advocated by nervous executives who fear some kind of sabotage if the truth gets out early, so they put on a “gag order” on the information. This is a very bad decision, because people are going to find out eventually anyway. Then you have lost the ball game. The best you can do is explain that the decision was made at a higher level, and you were powerless to go against it.

A minor trust withdrawal might be when you simply forgot to get back to an employee who made a request. Once the gaff is realized, you need to immediately meet with the employee and apologize. You might explain that you deal with hundreds of issues every day and occasionally reach an overload situation. As long as the situation does not repeat, you will probably be forgiven. If you get a reputation as a person who does not follow up on promises, then your ability to lead the group will be severely compromised.

Repairing damaged trust is a skill that needs to be learned through conscious effort. Compromised trust should never be ignored, because it can begin a form of organizational dry rot that will threaten the ability of the team to perform and ultimately lead to your removal as a supervisor.

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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