



Successful Supervisor 71 - Building Trust When Your Boss Doesn't

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

In my work with leaders who are trying to build higher trust within their organizations, the most persistent complaint I run into is a supervisor who says, "Your material is excellent. I know this can make a huge difference in our organization, but my boss seems intent on doing things that destroy trust almost daily. How can I be more effective at building trust in my arena when the environment we are in is habitually trashed from above?" This is an interesting conundrum, and yet it is not a hopeless situation. Here are six tips that can help.

First, recognize you are not alone. Nearly every company today is under extreme pressure, and restructuring or other unpopular actions are common. There are ways to build and maintain trust, even in draconian times, but the leaders need to be highly skilled and transparent. Unfortunately, most leaders shoot themselves in the foot when trying to manage in difficult times. They do lasting damage rather than build trust during the struggle.

Second, realize that usually you cannot control what goes on at levels above you. My favorite quote on this is "Never wrestle a pig. You get all muddy and the pig loves it." The best you can do is point out that approaches do exist that can produce a better result. Suggesting your leader get some outside help and learn how to manage the most difficult situations in ways that do not destroy trust will likely backfire. Most managers with low emotional intelligence have a huge blind spot where they simply do not see that they have a problem.

One suggestion is to request that you and some of your peers go to, or bring in, a leadership trust seminar and request the boss come along as a kind of "coach" for the group. Another idea is to start a book review lunch club where your peers and the boss can meet once a week to discuss favorite leadership books. It helps if the boss gets to nominate the first couple books for review. The idea is to get the clueless boss to engage in dialog on topics of leadership and trust as a participant of a group learning

process. If the boss is especially narcissistic, it is helpful to have an outside facilitator help with the interaction. The key flavor here is to not target the boss as the person who needs to be "fixed," rather view the process as growth for everyone. It will promote dialog and better understanding within the team.

Third, avoid whining about the unfair world above you, because that does not help the people below you feel better (it really just reduces your own credibility), and it annoys your superiors as well. When you make a mistake, admit it and make corrections the best you can.

Fourth, operate a high trust operation in the environment that you influence. That means being as transparent as possible and reinforcing people when they bring up frustrations or apparent inconsistencies. This can be tricky because the lack of transparency often takes the form of a gag rule from on high. You may not be able to control transparency as much as you would like.

One idea is to respectfully challenge a gag rule by playing out the scenario with alternate outcomes. The discussion might sound like this, "I understand the need for secrecy here due to the potential risks, but is it really better to keep mum now and have to finesse the situation in two weeks, or would we be better served being open now even though the news is difficult to hear. My observation is that most people respond to difficult news with maturity if they are given information and treated like adults."

If your desire to be more transparent is overruled by the boss, you might ask him or her to tell you the words to use down the line when people ask why they were kept in the dark. Another tactic is to ask how the boss intends to address the inevitable rumors that will spring up if there is a gag rule.

Keep in mind there are three questions every employee asks of others before trusting them: 1) Are you competent?, 2) Do you have integrity?, and 3) Do you care about me?

Fifth, lead by example. Even though you are operating in an environment that is not ideal, you can still do a good job of building trust. It may be tricky, but it can be done. You will be demonstrating that it can be accomplished, which is an effective means to have upper management see and appreciate the benefits of high trust. Tell the boss how you are handling the situation, because that is being transparent with the boss.

Sixth, be patient and keep smiling; a positive attitude is infectious. Many cultures these days are basically down and morose. Groups that enjoy high trust are usually upbeat and positive. That is a much better environment to gain the motivation of everyone in your group.

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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