

Successful Supervisor Part 89

Repairing Damaged Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

From time to time, even in the best of situations, trust becomes damaged. This article suggests some ideas about repairing damaged trust and how you can take a bad situation and make it into an opportunity.

Trust is fragile

Since all human beings are fallible creatures who make mistakes, even in the best of circumstances and with the best of intent, you will occasionally suffer a setback in trust either because of something you have done or said or something someone else has done to you. In these times, how you react will have a major influence on whether you can recover to trust as strong or stronger than before the violation.

You need to decide one thing at the outset. Is the relationship completely over due to the severity of the violation? There are some trust lapses that are so severe there is no chance for full redemption. They are rare, but they do occur. Assuming there is at least the potential to regain trust, the following seven steps will give you the best chance at making that happen.

First step: Don't Procrastinate

Regardless of the violation or the direction of the trust loss, the situation is normally very uncomfortable for both people. Discussions to get to the bottom of what happened and generate a positive path forward are awkward at best, and it is tempting to just let things slide, hoping time will heal the wound. That approach is a big mistake.

What you have is a dead fish, and it is going to stink worse tomorrow than it does today. As soon as you are aware of damaged trust, take the initiative to meet with the other party and handle the conversation tenderly. You can often repair the damage rather easily, but if you try to let time heal the problem, it will likely hurt forever.

Second step: Have an Adult Conversation

Rather than take a judgmental stance, admit you are not exactly sure what happened, but you truly value the relationship you had with the other person before the breach. State that you are feeling down because of what transpired and want to work with the other person to regain the benefits of a trusting relationship like you had before. Ask

the other person if he or she is willing to work with you to clarify what happened and rebuild the relationship.

If the answer is “yes,” you have established the intent to work together and verified that both parties truly value the relationship. That is something satisfying that you can build on as you proceed.

Third step: Seek Understanding

Both parties should share their own interpretation of what happened around the violation. This must be non-judgmental but accurate in terms of what happened. Often this step will reveal a simple misunderstanding of what happened, and the violation can be repaired rather easily.

When the reason is a misunderstanding, it helps to discuss how the disconnect can be prevented in the future so both people do not have to suffer a temporary letdown of trust. If there was a violation by one or both parties, make that clear without fixing blame or ill intent.

Fourth step: Demonstrate Care

Exercise care for the other person. Keep pointing out that while there is a real issue, the reason you are having the discussion is to get back to a solid feeling between you both. Continue to point out you care about the other person as a trusted friend.

Fifth step: Seek Redemption

If it is clear that one party did something wrong or overstepped a boundary, this is the time for a sincere apology. Point out that the intent was not to create ill will and that you wish to make things right as best you can in the future. If an apology is offered, it is critical for the other party to accept the apology.

Sixth step: Create a Positive Path Forward

Here the question to ask is, “What would have to happen in the future for you to regain full trust in me?” Make special note of what the other party says and test for reality. If the other person is asking you to become a perfect person for the rest of your life, you can point out that while you will try, every human being is subject to being fallible on occasion.

In this step it is a good idea to establish a future discussion to check on progress. Say something like, “Let’s get back together in a month to see how we are doing and if I am living up to my part of the bargain.”

Seventh step: Follow Up

Keep checking with the other person periodically to see if the relationship is heading back toward full trust. If both parties are satisfied that good progress is being made, then there is a good prognosis for full redemption.

Healing a breach of trust takes work, but the good news is that if you follow the steps outlined above, you have the opportunity to end up with a relationship that is stronger than before the breach. That is well worth the effort it takes.

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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