

Successful Supervisor Part 22

Foundations to Build Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

We are all aware of things we can do that build higher trust. In my seminars on trust, I ask groups to name some things that build trust, and they quickly create a list of dozens of behaviors in just a few minutes. For example, here are a few of the things typically named that will help to build trust:

- Operate with integrity
- Do what you say
- Use the Golden Rule
- Be respectful of others at all times
- Admit mistakes
- Be as transparent as possible

These actions and hundreds of others like them are needed to build and maintain trust at all levels of management. Each level has a different focus on why these things are important, and at the supervisor level employees look for these behaviors constantly. Because of the span of control, supervisors must be alert to applying these behaviors in a consistent manner to avoid the perception of playing favorites, which is a major trust buster, especially among first level employees.

The conundrum is that while we know numerous things that will build trust within an organization, in most organizations there is still a serious lack of trust. I believe the reason is that there are four conditions that form a foundation on which all of the other trust-building behaviors rest that makes them work. These four conditions provide a deep understanding of the nature of trust in an organization, so they act like the concrete blocks upon which we ultimately construct a lasting building.

This article will name these four conditions and describe why I believe having this foundation underneath the common behaviors gives them much more power to build trust. Then I will explain why these concepts are just as important at the supervisory level as they are at higher management levels.

Condition 1 – The First Law of Trust

Trust is reciprocal. You trust every person you know at some level, and that person also trusts you at some level. The levels are not always the same, and they fluctuate based on the transactions between you and the other person. Any communication between the two of you will impact the trust level for both people. It may be face to face conversation, a phone call, e-mail or texting, or even body language at a meeting that impacts trust either positively or negatively. Trust may go up in one direction but down in the other direction from the same transaction. It is a highly dynamic system.

When you extend more trust to another person, he or she will instinctively respond by showing more trust in you. This “First Law of Trust,” as I call it, is not true 100% of the time, but it is directionally right with such high frequency that it makes a pretty good law of nature. If you want more trust with another person, find ways to show more trust first.

Condition 2 – Values-based Behaviors

When I begin work with new clients, I always ask if they operate from a set of values. Normally the senior leader is able to produce a list of some values that the group has adopted. Sometimes the values are on a plaque on the wall, and other times they are buried somewhere in a desk drawer. I then ask the senior leaders point blank if they **always** follow the values, even when it means making a difficult decision.

The question is usually followed by a pregnant pause and finally someone says, “Well we **try** to follow the values at all times, but sometimes it is impossible.” While the answer is an honest one, it really signals a kind of hypocrisy that leads to organizational dry rot of trust. The correct answer must be “yes” at all times in order to preserve trust.

When leaders adopt values they cannot abide by in all circumstances, they set themselves up for failure. That is why one tempting value: “People are our most important asset” is a dangerous one. If people are really our most important asset, then when there is a downturn in business, we will keep the workforce and sell buildings or other assets to survive. Few companies actually do that, so it is unwise to adopt that phrase as a core value. You simply must abide by the values you advertise or trust becomes a casualty.

The specific values adopted at the supervisor level must mirror the values set at higher levels. There may be some different phrasing to make it apply to first line employees, but the intent needs to add up to the same conclusion or the organization will not be aligned.

Condition 3 – Balanced Accountability

The word accountability has become more popular in recent years. It is a shame that in most organizations accountability takes the form of a “gotcha” mentality where all accountability discussions are negative.

My observation is that most people on most days come to work intent on doing the right things for the right reasons. They need to be held accountable in a positive way for the things they are doing right and in a corrective way for the things that did not get done correctly or on time.

If the accountability discussions were not always focused on missed opportunities, then people would not get the impression that the only time they hear from supervision is when they mess up. I invented the phrase “hold people procountable,” which means that we need to feedback performance that is directionally right as well as the corrective feedback. The nature of the feedback needs to be proportional to the holistic nature of the performance.

This philosophy should be spread across the entire organization, but it is particularly important for the supervisor, who is working at the critical junction between management and the workers. Negative accountability discussions are often the downfall of an inexperienced supervisor.

Condition 4 - Reinforce Candor

This fourth condition I believe has more power to create trust than any other leadership behavior. That is why it is one of the foundational conditions. It consists of creating an environment of **low fear** where people believe it is a good thing to point out areas where the behavior of higher managers is monitored for consistency. If something appears to be inconsistent with our values or ethical standards, employees know they will be rewarded rather than punished for bringing it up.

I believe ***“the absence of fear is the incubator of trust,”*** and the logic holds at all levels of the organization. Supervisors can improve the level of trust by making sure all employees know their observations are valued and appreciated. In practice it is not easy to reward someone who points out that some of your behaviors appear to be hypocritical. Make a special effort to make sure when an employee questions a decision or action on your part that the employee walks away glad that he brought it up.

If the preceding four elements are in place, then I believe the foundation is laid where the other things that create higher trust will be highly effective.

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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