

Reinforce Candor – It Builds Trust and Transparency

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The obliteration of trust in recent years has been alarming. Once lost, trust is difficult to rebuild. Leaders need to learn how to build trust consistently and prevent major trust withdrawals. My model for building trust has three elements:

1. *Table stakes.* These basic building blocks of integrity must be present to kindle trust. In poker, you must ante up *table stakes* to play. Things like being honest, being open, communicating, being consistent, and being ethical simply must be in play as table stakes or the leader has no chance.

2. *Enabling actions.* These actions build trust further once the table stakes are present. Here are some examples: following up, advocating well, being fair, and admitting mistakes. These actions enable the leader to withstand trust withdrawals that happen as a result of ill-advised decisions or unfortunate circumstances. Table stakes and enabling actions are necessary but insufficient conditions for trust to kindle and endure. Without “reinforcing candor”, the table stakes and enabling actions may build trust a little, but their potency is blunted.

3. *Reinforcing candor.* This is the ability to make people glad they expressed a concern with a leader’s inconsistency. Usually, people are punished for expressing a concern with the leader’s actions. When high trust and transparency are present, the leader can set aside his or her ego and reinforce the person who challenges an action. Doing so creates a large trust deposit and allows for future trust-building exchanges. - When candor is not reinforced, people hide their true feelings and do not challenge the leader, so trust is hard to maintain. Leaders who consistently reinforce candor build a culture where trust grows and deepens.

Trust and fear are incompatible, and in a culture that values candor fear is suppressed. If people know they will be reinforced for bringing up scary stuff, they’ll do more of it. When candor is encouraged, it enables a transparent flow of information that leaders can use to understand what is going on.

Trust is built by a series of actions or ratchet “clicks” that occur over time. But, like the ratchet used to pull in the sail on a large sailboat, when the pawl holding the ratchet from rotating backward becomes dislodged, the spool can spin back to zero.

Visualizing the Ratchet Effect

Trust is similar to a bank account. Between two people, there is a current “balance” of trust that is the result of all their transactions to date. When there is interaction (whether online, in a meeting, or with body language) there is a transaction—either a deposit (increasing trust) or a withdrawal (reducing trust). The magnitude of the transaction is determined by its nature.

It is easy for a leader to make small deposits in the trust account with people. Treating people with respect and being fair are two examples of trust builders. While making small deposits is easy, making a large deposit is hard. As a leader, nothing I *say* can make a large deposit in trust. It has to be something I *do*, and it often requires an unusual circumstance, like landing a plane safely in the Hudson River.

Under most circumstances, the trust balance with people is the result of numerous small deposits (clicks of the ratchet) made over an extended period. On the withdrawal side, with one slip of the tongue, an ill-advised e-mail, or a wrong facial expression, a leader can make a huge withdrawal. Because of the ratchet effect, a small withdrawal can become big because the pawl is no longer engaged in the ratchet.

Here is an example of the ratchet effect in a typical conversation: “You know, I have always trusted George. I have worked for him for 15 years, and he has always been straight with me. I have always felt he was on my side when the chips were down, but after what he said in the meeting yesterday, I will never trust him again.” All trust was lost in a single action (and it will take a long time before any new deposits can be made). The trust account went from a positive to a negative balance in a single sentence.

It would be powerful if we could prevent the ratchet from losing all of its progress by reinserting the pawl back into the ratchet during a serious withdrawal so that it only slips one or two teeth. Reinforcing candor inserts the pawl and provides a magic power that has unparalleled ability to build trust.

All leaders make trust withdrawals. Most people don’t feel safe enough to let the leader know when they have been zapped, and so trust plummets. It may even go to zero or a negative balance before it can be corrected (over much time and incredible effort). Contrast this with a scenario where the individual knows it is safe to let the leader know he or she has made a trust withdrawal. The individual may say, “I don’t think you realize how people interpreted your remarks. They are mad at you.” If this candor is rewarded by the leader, he might say, “I blew it this time, Bill. Thanks for leveling with me.” Such an exchange stops the withdrawal in the mind of the employee, and enables the leader to stop the withdrawal for the population.

As a leader, you try to do the right thing (from your perspective) daily. If an employee asks why you are doing something, you tend to become defensive and push back, which becomes a withdrawal. Reinforcing candor requires you to suppress your ego, recognize the trigger point, and modify your behavior to create the desired reaction. This is difficult to do because you usually justify and defend your action.

It takes great restraint and maturity to listen to the input and not clobber the other person. The more you practice, the easier this gets. You can quickly build a culture of trust and multiply the benefits threefold by focusing on your behavior. Once you learn to reinforce candor, something magical happens: you gain greater power to build trust.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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