



Reinforcing Candor: The Key to Building Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Whenever I hired a new manager in my organization, the very first conversation I had with that individual was about “reinforcing candor.” Over a period of about 30 years I’ve discovered that reinforcing candor is the single most powerful way to create trust within an organization.

For leaders, it is imperative for them to understand what this means and be able to practice it. The idea is, when an employee comes forward with a concern about something that the leader has said or done, rather than punishing the employee, the leader makes the person glad to have brought up the issue.

This behavior is not easy to do, because the leader does not see a problem with what was being done. In essence, everyone in the organization, including the leader, wears a button saying, “I AM RIGHT.” If an employee challenges an action, then it’s only human for a leader to become defensive and punish the person in some way for bringing it up.

It takes superhuman effort on the part of leaders to consistently reinforce candor, but the impact on the organization is so great that those leaders who can understand the wisdom of this technique have a huge advantage in terms of building trust.

Without reinforcing candor, all of the other actions to build trust are somewhat blunted. They work a little bit but they are not very powerful. Once the leader understands how to reinforce candor, a whole new world opens up, and all of the other actions to build trust work like magic.

Exercise for You: In your organization, work to reinforce candor the next time someone tells you something that you did not want to hear, but has some truth to it. You will find it difficult at first, but the more you practice this technique, the easier it becomes, and soon you can change your entire pattern of behavior when you’re challenged.

The ability to reinforce candor is the most powerful method of creating trust, because it allows a safe environment where employees know they will not be punished when they bring up scary stuff. I call this skill the key for building trust.

What if you are not the top leader but wish to be a positive influence on that person? If you can get the top leader in an organization to reinforce candor more, trust will spread rapidly throughout the entire population. The challenge is how to get the leader to develop the skill and patience to reinforce candor when he or she may not see the need to do so.

Here are six ideas that can help encourage a leader to practice reinforcing candor. Try to use these in the spirit of helpfulness rather than manipulation. The idea is to help shape behavior over time, so if any of these ideas are creating tension, back off and go slower.

1. Start by planting a seed in the leader's mind that there is a potential for a much better culture if higher trust can be generated. Point out that trust grows when people are made to feel glad when they bring up their concerns.
2. All leaders want higher trust, so the opportunity to make things better by some changes in their behavior should be appealing.
3. Start small. The goal is for the leader to see the benefits of reinforcing candor and try to be less defensive when people push back on actions or statements.
4. Model the principle of reinforcing candor yourself when working with the leader.
5. Talk openly about how you are using the skill and ask how the leader is responding to it.
6. Catch the leader applying these techniques and praise the effort. Also make note of the positive response on the part of the person who was reinforced for being candid.

No leader will ever get to 100% perfection at reinforcing candor, but if the percentage can go from 5% (which is about what most leaders typically achieve) to something like 70% of the time, the culture will make a seismic shift toward higher trust in short order.

You can help shape the behavior of your leader toward the benefits of reinforcing candor. It may take a while for the concept to gain traction, but once the leader experiences the forward progress, he or she will be anxious to do more of it.

The preceding was derived from an episode in "Building Trust," a 30 part video series by Bob Whipple "The Trust Ambassador." To view three short (3 minutes each) examples at no cost go to <http://www.avanoo.com/first3/517>

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