

Ten Hallmarks of a High Trust Organization

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The advantages of working in a high trust environment are evident to everyone from the CEO to the shop floor, from suppliers to customers, and even the competition. Building and maintaining trust within any organization pays off with many benefits.

Unfortunately, very few organizations have been able to create an environment of high trust. The few that have enjoy an incredible sustainable advantage. To understand why, we can contrast high trust environments with lower trust areas along many dimensions.

Solving Problems

In organizations of high trust, problems are dealt with easily and efficiently. In low trust organizations, problems become huge obstacles as leaders work to unscramble the mess to find out who said what or who caused the problem to spiral out of control. Often feelings are hurt or long term damage in relationships occurs.

While problems exist in any environment, they take many times longer to resolve if there is low trust. That is wasted time.

Focused Energy

People in organizations with high trust do not need to be defensive. They focus energy on accomplishing the Vision and Mission of the organization. Their energy is directed toward the customer and against the competition. In low trust organizations, people waste energy due to infighting and politics. Their focus is on internal squabbles and destructive turf battles. Bad blood between people creates a litany of issues that distract supervision from the pursuit of excellence. Instead, they play referee all day.

Efficient Communication

When trust is high, the communication process is efficient as leaders freely share valuable insights about business conditions and strategy. In low trust organizations, rumors and gossip zap around the organization like laser beams in a hall of mirrors. Before long, leaders are blinded with problems coming from every direction. Trying to control the zapping information takes energy away from the mission and strategy.

High trust organizations rely on solid, believable communication, while the atmosphere in low trust groups is usually one of damage control and minimizing employee unrest. Since people's reality is what they believe rather than what is objectively happening, the need for damage control in low trust groups is often a huge burden.

Retaining Customers

Workers in high trust organizations have a passion for their work that is obvious to customers. When trust is lacking, workers often display apathy toward the company that is transparent to customers. This undermines top line growth as customers turn to more upbeat groups for their services. All it takes is the roll of eyes or some shoddy body language to send valuable customers looking for alternatives.

A “Real” Environment

People who work in high trust environments describe the atmosphere as being “real.” They are not playing games with one another in a futile attempt to outdo or embarrass the other person. Rather, they are aligned under a common goal that permeates all activities. When something is real, people know it and respond positively. When trust is high, people might not always like each other, but they have great respect for each other. That means, they work to support and reinforce the good deeds done by fellow workers rather than try to find sarcastic or belittling remarks to

make about them. The reduction of infighting creates hours of extra time spent achieving business goals.

Saving Time and Reducing Costs

High trust organizations get things done more quickly because there are fewer distractions. There is no need to double check everything because people generally do things right. In areas of low trust there is a constant need to spin things to be acceptable and then to explain what the spin means. This takes time, which drives costs up.

Perfection not Required

A culture of high trust relieves leaders from the need to be perfect. Where trust is high, people will understand the intent of a communication even if the words were phrased poorly. In low trust groups, the leader must be perfect because people are poised to spring on every misstep to prove the leader is not trustworthy. Without trust, speaking to groups of people is like walking on egg shells.

More Development and Growth

In low trust organizations, people stagnate because there is little emphasis placed on growth. All of the energy is spent jousting between individuals and groups. High trust groups emphasize development, so there is a constant focus on personal and organizational growth.

Better Reinforcement

When trust is high, positive reinforcement works because it is sincere and well executed. In low trust organizations, reinforcement is often considered phony, manipulative, or duplicitous which lowers morale. Without trust, attempts to improve motivation through reinforcement programs often backfire.

A Positive Atmosphere

The atmosphere in high trust organizations is refreshing and light. People enjoy coming to work because they have fun and enjoy their coworkers. They are also more than twice as productive as their counterparts in lower trust areas. In groups with low trust, the atmosphere is oppressive. People describe their work as a hopeless string of sapping activities foisted upon them by the clueless morons who run the place.

These are just ten contrasts describing the difference between high trust and low trust organizations. There are many more distinctions, some of them very subtle. No list of contrasts could be complete. If you have an organization where trust is low, you are operating under such a huge disadvantage to your counterpart with high trust you cannot hope to survive.

Most top leaders understand all of the above. The conundrum is, they sincerely want to build an environment of high trust, but they consistently do things that take them in the wrong direction. Many leaders end up hiring expensive consultants to help create a better environment within their organization. This rarely works because the leader does not realize the problem cannot be fixed by an outsider. To fix the problem of low trust the leader needs to say, “The atmosphere around here stinks, and it must be my fault because I am the one in charge. How can I change *my own behavior* in order to turn the tide toward an environment of higher trust”?

With that attitude, there is a real possibility an outside coach or consultant can help the organization. Unfortunately most leaders have a blind spot on their own contribution to low trust, so in those groups there is little hope of a lasting change.

*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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