



The First Law of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Are you dissatisfied with the level of trust within your organization? If so, recognize that you are not alone. Few organizations have achieved a state where they are delighted with the trust that exists. Part of the reason is that trust is a bit like money; no matter how much we have, we usually want more of it. Most of the organizations I see have a significant deficiency of trust that shows up in all kinds of performance issues including apathy, shaky teamwork, poor attitudes, negative morale, low productivity, high turnover, absenteeism, and even revolt or sabotage.

Leaders of the organization point to the symptoms and declare that the employees are at fault for the low trust. The leaders are expending high energy to communicate the vision and values, they are making expectations crystal clear, they are attempting to hold people accountable for performance lapses, they are making sure everyone gets paid on time, so the problem of low trust must be with the employees or first line supervisors, right? Not necessarily!

One critical nature of trust is that it is reciprocal. When you extend more trust, it reflects back to you in nearly all cases. It is the same phenomenon we often hear about with people participating in any activity: "You get out of it in proportion to what you put in."

I have coined what I call the "First Law of Trust." If you are a leader, and are unhappy with the level of trust in your organization, the first thing to do is find ways to show more trust in your employees. There are numerous other things that are important to do, which I have written about in other articles, but the first thing is to extend more trust to others. It seems impossible to some leaders who complain, "But how can I trust them when they prove daily that they cannot be trusted." That attitude is at the core of why there is low trust to begin with. It is a vicious cycle.

To break the cycle, leaders need to find ways, even small ways at first, to demonstrate higher trust in employees. This will seem unnatural to both the leader and the employees at first because of the history of behaviors and reactions in the past.

Leaders feel like extending any kind of trust is stupid until the workers start behaving in trustworthy ways, and workers believe the leader must be up to some kind of trick to force them into more work.

I discovered the reciprocal nature of trust many years ago when my daughter was very young. She often wanted me to "twirl" her, which involved grabbing her wrists and carefully spinning around backward (gently at first to not pull her arms out of the sockets). She would fly out horizontal, hair flying in the wind, just loving it. When I would put her down, there was always the familiar refrain "AGAIN." So I would twirl her again, this time longer and farther.

Upon remembering the numerous times I twirled her, I realized that I had never dropped her. The reason is that her unconditional trust in me required me to reciprocate in a way that kept her safe during the process. So it is with everyone, if we extend trust to them, they will be inclined to show more trust in us.

The way to break down a dysfunctional culture of low trust is not to put the screws to people with additional demands and rules. Try the other approach of extending kindness and trust and see if the positive reaction you get is well worth the risk of extending more trust. If that works, then you will be encouraged to add more trust to others, and you will reap more back toward you.

A common question I get is, "How do I go about showing more trust in them, especially when they do not deserve it?" The answer is to be creative and find little ways to begin to show more trust. These small gestures may seem dangerous, or trivial, but they usually work to grab people's attention. Here are a few examples of typical actions a leader might employ to demonstrate higher trust.

- Change the coffee money fund from a locked box to an open container.
- Stop walking around the shop floor five minutes before quitting time.
- Let the employees select the menu for the picnic.
- Stop micromanaging and let people use their initiative.
- Remove a needless restriction on a dress code.
- Publicly eliminate a procedure that is no longer useful.
- Cancel a report that nobody reads.
- Quit requiring proof of purchase for small petty cash items.
- Unlock the supply cabinet.

These are just a few examples of actions that could be taken to extend more trust in people. I am sure that if you think creatively, you can identify dozens of other ways to show more trust, and many of them will not involve a high risk of loss. If you try this technique, you will generally get very positive results. In some instances, the prior

practices may have the population so jaded that they will be out for revenge at any opportunity, so it may take more creativity and time to develop new patterns.

Remember the first law of trust. It is up to leaders to break the cycle of tyranny and develop a culture where trust goes both ways and grows more robust with time. It takes some courage to change old ways, but the payoff is immense.



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