



The Virality of Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I wrote an article a while ago about whether trust can scale. My conclusion was that trust does scale because it is measurable and has properties where it can grow or shrink.

The ensuing discussions between two of my good friends brought out an important nuance. Both Bob Vanourek and Fred Dewey came back with the concept that while trust can expand and contract based on what is going on, it is not linear at all. A small increase in trust due to an action will tend to grow exponentially as the news spreads through cyberspace. Actions that build trust will become more powerful as a result of the viral nature of information.

Of course, the same phenomenon happens on the negative side. If a leader does something that has a damping effect on trust, that negative impact will become more hurtful as the information spreads virally.

So while the nature of trust is that it does scale, we need to be constantly aware of a “hockey-stick” situation, where one small misstep magnifies in time and in space. I think this observation has always been true, but as we trend toward a greater percentage of information being conveyed virtually, the leverage increases.

There is an opportunity to intervene that may be helpful. When something unfortunate is done, and it is picked up on the social networks, the person who committed the sin is usually aware of the bad press. It is a kind of moment of truth where the damage is either made much worse or can be muted somewhat. This public relations problem can make or break a person’s reputation.

Let’s take a case as an example and dissect the likely outcomes. Suppose a CEO puts out a note to the senior managers that refers to some problem (unnamed) employees as “knuckleheads.” One of the managers gets a chuckle out of the wording and elects to pass it along to a couple underlings as a joke. One of the underlings is familiar with a person who has been under scrutiny for some attendance problems. He writes a note to

that person attaching the CEO's message and asks "Wonder if you are one of the knuckleheads?" That individual sends it out to everybody in his group, and the cascade is on. Within an hour, the entire organization knows the CEO considers some of the employees to be "knuckleheads."

The CEO will quickly become aware, through feedback, that his note is out all over the plant. Let's look at a few possible approaches for the CEO:

1. He can call a quick meeting with his senior managers to try to find out who leaked the information. That "Witch hunt" reaction is unfortunately pretty common, when the real witch was actually the CEO.
2. He can ignore the situation and let people calm down over time. That "head in the sand" approach is also a common ploy that only feeds the rumors of clueless leaders.
3. A better approach might be a humble apology where he admits to what is already obvious and indicates that his choice of words was inappropriate. Rather than try to justify what is already known (like... "we are under extreme pressure right now"), he indicates sincere regret and a desire to not repeat it.

You be the judge of the outcomes under these scenarios. Perhaps you can think of other methods of handling the situation. Undoubtedly the best cure would be prevention where the CEO would not send a note like that in the first place.

Of course this example was a small situation that was contained within one specific organization. Many times people get into trouble when they communicate inappropriate things about people outside the organization, like customers, insurance companies, the government, law enforcement, or any number of other situations. These lapses can lead to embarrassment, loss of one's job, jail time, or worse. When people compromise trust in any type of communication, there is no telling how much damage will ensue.

With the growing percentage of communication happening in the online environment, it is time to redouble efforts to phrase things correctly at the start and avoid embarrassing slips.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

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