



## Trust Keeps Leaders off the Slippery Slope

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

Great leaders have the ability to build a culture of high trust. They consistently work to nurture an environment where people know it is safe to bring up difficult topics because they will be rewarded for doing so. This atmosphere is hard to find in most organizations, but where it does exist, the entity has numerous sustainable competitive advantages. Let's examine ten of the more obvious ones:

**1. Lower risk of ethical debacles** - When people know they will be rewarded for speaking their truth, a remarkable thing occurs. They will tell you if an action is not the right thing to be doing. You may be saying "we would never be guilty of doing anything unethical." Well, most likely you would be wrong. Reason: The number of potentially unethical activities that are on the margin are legion. Any leader will unintentionally step over the ethical line from time to time and not even realize he or she is doing it. That is how most ethical messes, like Enron, get started. At first, it might be just a cosmetic, and perfectly legal, change in reporting transactions to improve clarity. Then, if it is OK to do that today, tomorrow we can do a little more. The day after that someone else is involved, and we slowly but surely head in a direction where everyone would agree we are in an ethical quagmire. It may have started out innocently, but in the end it was clearly illegal. In a culture of high trust, all employees are the watchdogs who let leaders know if they are in danger of heading toward eventual problems, long before anything illegal or dumb has transpired. In high trust organizations, whistleblowers are a blessing rather than a problem.

**2. Higher productivity** - It is pretty simple, really; turned-on people produce more. Because there is less bickering and selfishness in high trust groups, people tend to pay attention to the true mission and goals. They motivate themselves to do excellent quality work rather than what we see in most organizations where management is constantly trying to figure out more attractive carrots to dangle before workers in a desperate, often pathetic, attempt to "motivate them."

**3. Lower costs** - This occurs because people are engaged in the business rather than in outdoing each other. Stephen M.R. Covey, in his book *The Speed of Trust*, highlights that when trust is high costs go down because speed goes up. It is axiomatic. If something can be accomplished faster, it will take fewer resources of all kinds, so it will be provided at lower cost.

**4. Less conflict** - The most significant sources of conflict in any workplace are the little things that people do which annoy one another. One of my favorite behavioral rules for teams is "We will remember that we are all adults and try to act that way most of the time." Low trust encourages people to squabble with each other, often acting like children. In high trust environments, there are still petty differences, but they are usually resolved by open dialog long before a public food fight begins.

**5. Focus on the vision** - Trust lets groups work side by side in harmony, free to focus on the critical vision rather than build fences of doubt or fear. When trust is low, people focus on the negative side of everything and spend much time trying to protect their parochial interests. Silo thinking is the result. Actually, this is a good test for the level of trust in an organization. Just keep track of the ratio of negative to positive statements you hear in an average day. If the ratio is over 50% negative (for whatever reason) you can be sure the environment is one of low trust.

**6. Trust is evident to customers** - When people walk into a business where there is low trust, they get a creepy feeling almost instantly. Human beings are quick to pick up small clues in the body language or tone of voice of the people serving them. People instinctively seek to do more business with an outfit that has high trust.

**7. Focus on development of people** - High trust organizations spend more energy developing people because it breeds satisfaction and is just smart business. Learning organizations with great bench strength have lower turnover and more dedicated employees. Low trust groups are so consumed with stamping out problems of their own making there is little time or energy to put into developing people.

**8. Improved communication** - In employee satisfaction surveys, the issue of communication is habitually mentioned as the most significant problem. Reason: In low trust environments, communication is often viewed as manipulative. People sense a degree of spin or even lies, and the leaders lose credibility. There is communication in low trust groups, but most of it is from the "back channel" of rumors and gossip. In high trust groups, communication is credible and believable. The news may not always be good, but people respect their leaders for telling them the truth.

**9. Better reinforcement** - When leaders in high trust groups reinforce the workers, it feels good to them. Whatever form it takes, (verbal praise, special recognition awards, small bonuses, theater tickets, parties, etc.) people appreciate the sincere effort to recognize great performance. When trust is low, efforts to reinforce workers are often met with skepticism. Reason: People are used to being manipulated, so the reinforcement appears to be part of a ploy to squeeze the last drop of productivity out of an overworked group of people.

**10. More efficient problem solving** - When trust is low, solving a problem is like wrestling an octopus. As you work on one part of the problem, another tentacle having to do with personal interaction starts winding around your neck. In high trust groups, solving problems is efficient because the only thing to resolve is the problem itself, not a myriad of other gremlins hiding under the surface.

These are just ten ways a high trust organization has a huge advantage over a group with low trust. There are probably dozens of other advantages one could name. The point is that if you are running or

involved with an organization of low trust, you cannot possibly hope to compete long term. Seek to build trust and maintain it in every action every day. The payoff is huge.

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