Trust Rather Than CYA

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of playing CYA at work. There is the potential for something negative happening in the future and we take care to document the problem and give our recommended solution to it. We put the information in an e-mail that we send out to a manager involved in making decisions. The idea is that if the dreaded situation comes up at a later date, we can produce the e-mail and say, "I told them that this would happen and even suggested the fix, but nobody listened to me."

This is just one form of CYA activity, and I offer it as an example to illustrate why this form on one-upmanship hurts an organization because it lowers trust. It is one thing to say what "they should do" about a potential problem. Words are cheap, and one can speculate that we should spend $100K to provide additional reinforcement to the foundation of our building in case of a future earthquake. Putting that information in a note to the manager puts her in a difficult spot. Clearly we do not have $100K lying around with no purpose so we can just shell out the cash. The risk of an earthquake may be pretty low, but it can always happen.

The reason the CYA note lowers trust is because the manager realizes if she does not take the suggested action and there is an earthquake that results in several workers being killed, then she is going to be blamed, but if she does reinforce the walls and there is no earthquake, the money will be spent only for insurance. The manager is in a no-win situation, and that lowers trust in both directions. The manager has less trust in the worker because he is trying to entrap or usurp the leader's judgment. The worker has lower trust in the manager because there is perceived need to document the suggested remedy for future reference.

I have been in a situation where workers wanted me to purchase an entire new facility for close to $1Million because they believed the current one might someday fail. My response was to have the facility thoroughly inspected to determine if there was a real risk and how high that might be. The engineers came back that the risk was real, but I could test for the robustness of the facility each year, and that would detect if things were deteriorating beyond a safe level. Having that inspection was better than nothing, but it was not totally foolproof, so the workers wanted to just scrap the old facility and purchase a new one. That expense was difficult to justify because the product being made was near the end of its life, so a new facility would never pay off.

Caught between a rock and hard place, I asked the workers to understand that the minute risk was made manageable with the yearly inspection and they need not worry, but if anything ever happened in that facility, I knew I would be held accountable, so I tried to find another way to reduce the risk. The engineers said that if we slowed down the equipment it would probably never fail or if it did, the failure would be detectable so nobody would get hurt. I decided to run the operation at a reduced speed as a compromise position, but the workers were not happy with it.

The series of discussions, notes, and meetings did serve to lower the trust that the workers had in me. Their point was that if I truly cared for them as people, I would spend the $950K to upgrade the facility even though there was no economic payback for it. It turned out that we shut down the complex less than a year later because the volume of demand for the product decreased, but the reduction in trust was something I had to live with.

The antidote for this phenomenon is to listen to the whistleblower and not ignore the request. That was my approach in this case, but it was not an easy pathway to a decision. Trying to figure out what to do in a marginal case like this is what keeps managers up all night. Finding the right balance between trust in the system and protection from all forms of potential problems can be a very tricky area for managers.

Spending money to prevent any potential for disaster is a never-ending proposition. It is like buying insurance policies. You can never be fully protected from all hazards, but you can go broke trying. The best approach is to involve the impacted people in all aspects of the business, including protection from possible but highly unlikely scenarios. If the workers realize that any tradeoffs made in the operation have a direct impact on them as well as the business, they can become part of the decision making process. This usually increases the level of trust for two reasons 1) it improves transparency, and 2) it lets people be part of the process so they are aware their managers care about them.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *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