



Trust and Fear

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Fear and trust are normally incompatible. If you were a bank teller and a robber was pointing a revolver at your head, you would find it impossible to trust him. Likewise in any endeavor of life, from chores at home to important meetings at work, when we are experiencing fear, it is difficult or impossible to trust. You can find exceptions to this rule, but they are rare. The reason is that to trust someone or something, it means we are willing to be vulnerable. There is a risk that the other person will let us down in some way. Get rid of the fear, and we are freed up to trust once again.

Flying in an airplane is a good example to analyze because we all know that occasionally planes do crash, so there is always some element of risk. Some people are afraid of heights or of high speed, so they may be afraid to fly because of those feelings. People get on planes when there is fear present because they recognize that statistically they are safer in an airplane at 30,000 feet than at ground level driving their automobile. The rationale is that if you are afraid to fly you should be much more afraid to drive a car. Statistics show that you are over 100 times more likely to be killed in an automobile than on a plane, per 100 thousand miles traveled.

There is a difference between hope and trust. We hope the plane won't crash, which means we have an expectation of a positive outcome even though there is anxiety, but if we did not trust the entire system, there would be no way most of us would even get on a plane.

At work, many people experience fear on a regular basis because the workplace is often a place of high stress where specific situations cause people to be less than kind to each other. A major fear at work is often expressed as an unwillingness to speak out about our feelings because they may come back to haunt us later. We picture our supervisor as a person who may talk about sharing and being transparent, but we observe that he has a club behind his back that he uses to clobber anyone who expresses a contrary opinion. The boss advocates openness, but models a punishment mentality that perpetuates fear in people.

To experience the benefits of more trust in our lives, we need to examine what is causing our fears and work to eliminate or mitigate them. Only then are we free to take the risk that is implied in any trusting situation. Often our fears are irrational, so we need to deal with our feelings logically to clarify the true risks from the fictional goblins that haunt the corners of our minds.

Conversely, fear at work is often a very rational emotion based on experience and the observed behaviors of the managers. That kind of toxic environment eliminates the possibility of growing real trust. You are faced with a choice to endure the hypocrisy or attempt to flee to greener pastures. Those people who continually seek a better environment may find themselves moving to a different job only to find the conditions there are even worse than what they left.

On my website I have several quotations that come from my writings. One of my favorites is “The absence of fear is the incubator of trust.” I believe trust can kindle spontaneously in an environment where fear is low.

Exercise for you: As you go through your day today, experience your level of trust moment by moment as much as you can. Keep track of your feelings carefully. If you find a pocket of fear, it will likely block your ability to trust. Root out the cause of that fear and see how easy it becomes to trust once again. Make sure to verify the body language of people because fearful people generally do not advertise that condition consciously.

We can all improve the level of trust in our lives by managing our fears. Of course, eliminating fear is often easier said than done. If you are afraid of heights, I cannot talk you out of getting clammy on top of the Empire State Building, so managing our fears down is not always possible, but many of our fears at work can be reduced if we work at it.

In an organization, people are often paralyzed with fear because of the power of their boss to impact their standard of living with a simple decision. Here are a few methods that may work to reduce fear depending on the specific situation:

Look at the situation logically – this is the case with getting on an airplane. Sure it may be a bit scary, but we need to understand when the true level of risk is very low. If there is true hypocrisy, then we need to recognize it and protect our own interests.

Verbalize your fear – by going public with what is causing your angst, you solicit the help of others to identify ways to cope with the fear. In some cases a frank dialog with a superior may help clear the air and allow you to be more candid in the future. In other cases, the admission of fear will be rejected by the boss as unnecessary. That is because the supervisor is mostly blind to the problem he is causing.

Accept it but move on – simply resolve to take the necessary risk even though there is fear. Trust in others usually begets more trust to us in return. In this case you take baby steps to test the level of trust as you try to build up more of it.

Triumph over the fear – refuse to give in to the tendency to think negative thoughts. Simply rise above the fear and let the adrenalin rush give you the needed courage. Replace fear with faith. Obviously, you need to assess the potential that your triumph over fear could lead to unemployment or worse. That is where judgment and maturity are required.

If your organization runs on a steady diet of fear because people are afraid of the consequences of speaking their truth, you are likely to have a toxic, low trust culture. That is a signal that there is an amazing level of productivity increase available if the leaders can change their behaviors to reduce the fear. I recall # 8 of Deming's famous 14 points was "drive out fear." I believe the famous quality guru was right.

The preceding was derived from an episode in "Building Trust," a 30 part video series by Bob Whipple "The Trust Ambassador." To view three short (3 minutes each) examples at no cost go to <http://www.avanoo.com/first3/517>

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