

When Trust is Lost

By Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

There is a whole sector of the trust technology that deals with betrayal of trust. The bottom line is that hard-earned trust is easy to lose and very hard to rebuild when the basis for it has been destroyed. If you would like to read a good book on the technology, you can read *Trust and Betrayal* by Dennis and Michelle Reina.

In my work, I use the concept of a trust withdrawal as a trigger point for building trust to a higher level. It takes a lot of work, but it is critical to do because trusting relationships are what drive good performance on every level. Great leaders use withdrawals in the trust account to redefine the relationship quickly if possible. Rather like a marriage, if a leader can take the right steps after an inevitable withdrawal, the relationship can emerge stronger rather than wrecked. Sometimes the stakes are so high and the personal interface time does not allow a rebuilding process to happen.

We were reminded of the conundrum when President Obama accepted the resignation of General Stanley McCrystal as the top commander in Afghanistan. I am not going into the politics of the situation and whether Obama was right or wrong to take the action. Any strong action by a president is going to draw a firestorm of rhetoric from supporters and detractors. The fundamental reason why McCrystal was asked to step down had to do more with trust than talent, capability, or even circumstances. Obama said that he had great admiration for the work of McCrystal over the years and the personal relationship they had, but the actions in giving that interview to Rolling Stone "eroded the trust that is necessary for our team to work together..." In a time when actions every hour of every day hold the fate of American lives and interests, there was just no room for anything less than a trusting relationship among the top leaders. That is why Obama instinctively went to General David Petraeus to fill the void. Trust with McCrystal will need to be rebuilt over time offline and will probably never be whole again.

Every day there are countless decisions made in corporations and families around the world where trust becomes the defining characteristic. It actually seals the fate of organizations and relationships every day. The majority of promotions and marriages are based on trust, while the majority of dismissals and divorces are rooted in lack of trust. In my three books on trust, I outline numerous aspects of trust and how to rebuild damaged relationships. Here are a few ideas that apply to your world and might have led to a different outcome in national drama we witnessed.

If a leader can extend trust when it seems irrational to do so, it is often a huge and lasting deposit in the trust account. The ability to forgive an errant subordinate who was clearly off base can strengthen rather than sever the relationship. The nature of trust is reciprocal. When we are extended trust, even if we do not at the moment deserve it, a chain reaction goes on within us to live up to that commitment far into the future.

The ability to forgive someone who has wronged you, especially in a very public and impactful way flies in the face of conventional wisdom in most organizations. An egregious sin needs to be punished in proportion in order to maintain discipline and respect. An ancient Jew from Nazareth taught the world that forgiveness often leads to higher respect in the long run. Ultimately, greater power is derived from humility, empathy, and love than from command, discipline, and control.

The ability to reinforce candor is another significant way to build trusting relationships. When someone points to something about a situation that is happening that does not seem logical, it is easy for a leader to become defensive and clobber the messenger. Leaders who have a high batting average at reinforcing rather than punishing people who express their concerns take the higher road to building trusting relationships.

Please do not misread me here. I do not want to get into a political debate; I would lose in a heartbeat as I am not a political animal. My objective is to use the McCrystal case as illustrative of lesser decisions we all are called on to make on a daily basis. I do believe Obama made a very difficult call with consideration, maturity, and conviction. It was a defining moment in his presidency, and he passed the test of strength and courage. He also ended a long standing career of excellence and lost a friend, probably for life. History, not I, will determine the wisdom of his decision.

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