

Article Series for Managers and Supervisors

Trust You Can Bank On

by Julia Menard, B.A., Certificate in Conflict Resolution

Trust is a big word in the workplace. Often, and especially in the face of conflict, many people think of trust in either-or terms: “Either I trust you or I don’t. And if I don’t, then that is the end of our easygoing working relationship.”

This way of thinking is common, but not helpful. It is more useful to think of the trust others have in you as a bank account. Like an account, others trust in you can grow or shrink depending on what you contribute to or withdraw from your workplace relationships. Some behaviour can deteriorate your account, but there are many others that will help you retain a healthy balance sheet.

Help build others’ trust in you by sharing your observations, thoughts and feelings in the face of conflict.

Leadership experts James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner call this self disclosure going first.

Going first, however, is quite challenging if you don’t trust others; yet, it is a powerful way to take constructive action, especially if you think others don’t trust you. In one conflict I mediated recently, a woman was able to build trust by expressing how another person’s behaviours made her feel. She didn’t say the other person was wrong, she simply revealed a piece of the truth. The other person’s body language relaxed and she was able to empathize (in words as well as in body language) almost immediately. It was a turning point in their conversation and in their level of trust.

Seek clarification when you’re not sure what the other person means.

In his book, *Clear Leadership*, Gervase Bushe calls it being transparent. Being transparent is not being intimate, sharing your own hurts or sharing your theories and judgments about another person. Those are traps that get us into trouble. It’s about clarifying what you perceive the intentions and meanings are behind another person’s behaviour.

No one can read minds, so unless you clarify, you will probably come to the wrong conclusion, just like a woman involved in a mediation I facilitated the other day. Years before, her supervisor said something that didn’t make sense to her. Instead of checking it out with the supervisor, she harboured the incident, went over it in her mind and

shared it with other colleagues to “get another perspective.” It’s not surprising to know that trust between the two eroded after that incident. In mediation—four years later—the employee finally shared her original observation and discovered her supervisor had meant something completely different. What an eye-opener.

Being transparent is also about expressing your best intentions when situations get muddled. We know our own intentions are good, yet usually assume the worst from the other person. The other person thinks the same way about you and your intentions.

So, start or interrupt any conflict situation by stating your best intentions.

Don’t expect them to respond in kind. That’s their responsibility. Instead, ask the other person about their perspective to help provide you with insight on their position.

Listen to your body.

Researcher Carolyn Gratton noticed that people tend to describe trust in physical terms. People described breaches of trust as: stiffness, alertness or tenseness. They characterized trusting as lightness, relaxation or calmness.

Which descriptions do you feel as you think of your level of trust with another? These bodily signals are your cue to what you’re truly feeling. Decide what you want to share, and be transparent about what impacts other behaviours have on you.

Giving your trust to another person is your responsibility. No one else does that for you. Hopefully this information adds to your resource base to help you discern how much trust others have in you and what to do to re-establish that trust to replenish your bank account.

Five best and worst behaviours to build or erode trust

Human resource consulting company [Dimensions International](#) surveyed more than 1,000 respondents from 57 organizations and identified five behaviours that cultivate trust:

Behaviours to Build Trust

1. Communicate openly and honestly, without distorting any information.
2. Show confidence in the person’s abilities by treating them as a skilled, competent associate.
3. Keep promises and commitments.
4. Listen to and value what the person says, even though you might not agree.
5. Cooperate and look for ways to can help each other.

Behaviours to Erode Trust

1. Act more concerned about your own welfare than anything else.
2. Send mixed messages so the person never knows where they stand.
3. Avoid taking responsibility for action ("pass the buck" or "drop the ball").
4. Jump to conclusions without checking the facts first.
5. Make excuses or blame others when things don't work out ("finger-point").

“Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great.” ... Ralph Waldo Emerson

Julia Menard specializes in helping middle-level managers and executives navigate difficult conversations and debrief 360s. She also publishes a regular monthly ezine and can be reached through her Web site at www.makeandbelieve.com.