

Working with Trust

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"Trust in Allah, but hitch your camel to the post." - Arab proverb

Trust is a big word in the workplace. Especially in the face of conflict, many people tend to think of trust as an either/or proposition. Either I trust you or I don't. And if I don't, then that is the end of an easy-going working relationship.

In my work with teams and individuals in conflict, this way of thinking is common, but not helpful. What is helpful is to think of trust as something that can be deposited or withdrawn from an "emotional bank account."

This metaphor changes trust from an either/or equation to something that waxes or wanes depending on the amount of clarity or interpersonal mush in the relationship. We don't give our "whole" trust account away – it is an active process over time, sometimes diminishing, sometimes increasing, depending on the behaviours we engage in together.

One key behaviour that helps build trust is to share your observations, thinking and feeling in the face of conflict. Leadership experts Kouzes & Posner speak about "going first." In conflict resolution speak, it's called "self-disclosure." Gervase Bushe, in his book Clear Leadership, calls it being "transparent."

Going first however is quite challenging when we don't feel trusting. And yet, it is a powerful way to take constructive action in the face of a lack of the trust from the other party. In one conflict I mediated recently, one person was able to express how she felt in the face of the other person's behaviours. Speaking about her feelings made it non-threatening. She wasn't saying the other person was wrong, she was simply revealing a piece of the truth for the other person.

Being transparent is not being "intimate" (sharing your own hurts, for example). Being transparent is also not about sharing your theories (and judgments) about how this person is being, in your opinion. Those are traps that get us into trouble and make us think being transparent "doesn't work."

Being transparent is checking out the behaviours we observe that have been leading us to conclude that this person is untrustworthy.

This was reinforced for me again the other day in another mediation I facilitated. The employee had experienced her supervisor saying something that didn't make sense to her - years before. She didn't check it out for clarification, but did harbour the incident. Went over it in her mind. Shared it with other colleagues, to "get another perspective." With the limited information she had (without the other person's point of view), her listeners reinforced her stories.

Four years later, they ended up in mediation. When they started unpacking things, they discovered that trust started eroding after that incident. The employee finally did share the original observation, and discovered that her supervisor had a completely different meaning attached to that incident. They were coming at it from completely different perspectives. What an eye-opener.

Being transparent is also about expressing our own best intentions when situations get muddled. We know what our own best intentions are – yet usually assume the worst intentions of the other person.

And, the other person often thinks the same way about your intentions.

So start by at least setting things straight with regard to your best intentions (or hopes) in your conflict situations. It's amazingly powerful to simply state what your best intentions are. Full stop. Not expecting anything from the other. Simply being transparent.

Building trust starts with sharing what is going on for us internally (getting curious about our observations, feelings and needs) and sharing that information.

We build trust also by asking the other person about their perspective, when our own observations don't seem to fit for us.

Specific trust-building behaviours have been identified in a survey carried out by a human resource consulting company surveying over 1000 respondents from 57 organizations (managers and employees). They defined five key trust-building behaviours that we can engage in to cultivate trust in a trust-depleted situation:

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. Keeps promises and commitments.
4. Listen to and value what the person says, even though you might not agree.
5. Cooperate with me and look for ways in which we can help each other.

Their top five ranked trust-reducing behaviours:

1. Act more concerned about your own welfare than anything else.
 2. Send mixed messages so that 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-pointing").
- The Human Resource Consulting Company, Development Dimensions International) - (www.ddiworld.com)

Another key way to identify trust-building and busting behaviours is through our bodies. Researcher Carolyn Gratton noticed that people tend to describe trust in physical terms. Breaches of trust are described as: 'stiffness', 'alertness', or 'tenseness'. Trusting is described as 'lightness', 'relaxation', or 'calmness'.

Which one do you feel in your body as you think of your level of trust with another? These bodily signals are your cue to focus in on separating out the stories from the behaviours. And then decided what you want to share and be transparent about the impact of the behaviours on you.

Giving your trust to another person (whatever the balance in the emotional bank account) is your responsibility - no one else does that for you. Hopefully this information adds to your resource base to help you discern who to trust, how much to trust, and what to do to re-establish trust.

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

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