Feature Story

Confronting Workplace Realities to Build an Environment of Trust

By Cynthia Olmstead President , TrustWorks Group, Inc. 2009

Workplace relationships are just that—Relationships with a capital R

Managers, whether they like it or not, are in relationships with their employees. And when these relationships are successful, there are good results, happier employees and a more positive working environment. Yet, many managers do not see their role as being relationship cultivators. They feel this makes them soft, and that they will be perceived as not being driven by hard business practices. Yet, the dichotomy is tat these relationships are always built on the foundation of trust. Why, then, is trust such a critical component within the workplace, today more than ever?

According to Peter Drucker, "Trust has to be built on the conviction that this conductor, this coordinator, this executive creates a partnership—and then you have trust." Managers that neglect their relationships with their employees will continue behaviors that leave their staff feeling uninformed and unappreciated, stunting their performance. This in turn causes behaviors to emerge that can retaliate and undermine their managers, leaving managers feeling betrayed—and a perpetual cycle of distrust begins.

Some stats you can trust

According to a recent survey by Watson Wyatt, only 39% of US employees trust their senior leadership. This is complemented by a survey conducted by Development Dimensions International, which discovered that 99% of employees believe that trust in the workplace is a vital need within their organization; yet only 29% reported a high level of trust within their current organization.

These stats clearly demonstrate an awareness of the lack of trust in the workplace. However, little is being done to address the issue, which, unattended, can have devastating consequences.

Trust and productivity—a symbiotic relationship

Where there is a lack of distrust, there is a *lack of efficiency*. For example, managers/bosses will set up unnecessary policies or procedures that require work to be double or triple-checked, frequently second guessing employees' decisions resulting in a lack of employee commitment and motivation. Feeling that one is "micromanaged" generally breeds seeds of resentment thus weakening trust.

An *information vacuum* can cause lack of trust. A common complaint among employees in many organizations is that they lack information. Without adequate data, employees assume the worst, filling the information void with their fears and negative perceptions. Reacting defensively they may spread false rumors, go around their managers to communicate with upper management. Or and spend unnecessary time getting others involved in the tried and true, "ain't it awful" blame game. This is totally destructive and toxic to an organization.

On the flip side, when trust is high, employees are motivated, offer ideas and input willingly, know they are valued and feel they are making a difference in their work place. Their work is driven by the quality of their output. Seeing that their efforts are adding necessary significance can be a tremendous motivator, more than just working for dollar compensation.

Turnover—a costly business

An outcome from low trust is turnover. Anyone involved in running a successful organization knows how difficult it is to find employees with the desired competencies and commitment. So losing good performers is expensive at multiple levels. Plus, there are always significant costs involved in replacing an employee, particularly first-rate ones. Excessive turnover instills low morale for those that have to take on additional workloads until the position is filled, halts productivity as precious time is taken to recruit, interview and train replacements, customer loyalty is risked by potential reduced levels of services, and the list goes on and on.

So what role does the manager or boss play in this scenario? A Gallup survey of 2 million workers at 700 companies concluded that the length of an employee's stay is largely determined by his or her relationships with their immediate boss. Another survey conducted by Mastery Works indicated that while pay and benefits are motivators for leaving, the main factor affecting turnover is whether or not the manager had developed a trusting relationship with the employee.

People quit managers, not companies.

It's the little things that kill

The everyday, mundane issues weaken employee relationships the most. Generally it is not one specific behavior that impacts trust but series of on going, every day actions that tend to accumulate and create the perceptions that cause employees to think or say, "I don't trust him/her." Managers can build trust by being aware and making the little things count. For instance: Do managers keep their promises? Do managers set clear expectations and goals? Do managers create monitoring systems so individuals can track their own performance efforts? Do managers take the time to ask how someone's day is going? Do managers reward and recognize good performing employees, or make the age-old error of recognizing all performers, therefore breeding mediocrity? It's the day-to-day words and actions that build trust, or destroy it.

*Taking trust head on

The good news is, in most cases, trust can be restored, even under the most extra-ordinary circumstances. The first step towards restoring trust is establishing a practical, common language for addressing issues. One proven approach used by Fortune 500 companies and small to mid-sized businesses is called the **ABCD's of Trust**. This simple, yet effective, model for discussing trust issues defines four core characteristics or behaviors of individuals and groups, such as:

- **Able** (*Demonstrates competence*): shows expertise, experience, and capability getting the desired results
- **Believable** (*Acts with integrity*): walks the talk of a core set of values, demonstrates honesty and use of fair practices
- **Connected** (*Cares about others*): interacts with staff, uses good people skills, communicates and shares information, provides praise and gives recognition
- **Dependable** (*Maintains reliability*): performs consistently, takes accountability for actions, and is organized and consistent with follow-up

These basic guide points help managers and employees identify where they are strong in trust building practices and where they need to improve. From there, work can begin on creating an action plan to develop trusting relationships that yield the highest performance.

For example, a salesperson fails to meet his/her quota, which would demonstrate the area of not being able to achieve results, under the A (Able) category. Or perhaps the salesperson inflated his/her numbers, which would demonstrate tampering with the numbers. This is dishonest and would fall under the B (Believable) category. Or, if the salesperson is performing well, bringing in new accounts and continually making goals, yet his or her manager doesn't take the time to recognize or award these efforts, the manager would have a low C (Connected). Finally, any employee making promises and not following through when asked to complete a task indicates a low D (Dependable).

Discussing Trust

Opening the door for discussing trust issues may seem like a daunting task at first, but with practice, this common language approach can give individual manager/employee relationships or struggling teams a much needed shot in the arm. By enabling people to address trust issues directly without attacking individuals, trust can be uncovered, discussed, resolved and ultimately restored within an organization.

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