

How to Build Trust in the Workplace

By Andrew Rahaman, Ed.D.

A sound argument can be made that a leader's influence depends on employees' trust. But how should leaders increase trust?

Stephen Covey answers this by noting that behaviors speak louder than words. Leadership behaviors that convey competence and character foster trust-based working relationships. Additionally, trust is born of one's ability to connect with people. Affective bonds rest on and strengthen with trust.

Demonstrate Competence, Display Character and Make Connections

In a nutshell, competence can be defined as actually being able to do the things you say you can do. Competent workplace leaders display technical, operational and influence competency. That is, they know the work that needs to be done, know how to apply their technical competence in cooperation with others to carry out the work and know how to influence others to organize a team to accomplish tasks and actualize individual team members' own competencies.

Turning to character as a leader, this can be understood as doing the things one says he or she will do with positive intent. Here, "positive intent" means acting on admirable personal values and in accord with organizational values. Of course, personal and organizational values should be aligned.

I like to think of values as our operating system and fundamental guidance system. They make us who we are and greatly influence our actions with family, friendships and co-workers. Acting on strong and shared values makes achieving a mission in cooperation with other people easier, in no small part because people are inclined to trust competent leaders who value the same things they do.

Competence and character also set the foundation for connecting with employees. In her 2013 *Harvard Business Review* article "Connect,



Then Lead," Amy Cuddy posits that leaders need to embody a combination of warmth and competency to be successful. This theory is built off of style leadership, which is the idea that task and relationship behaviors are both needed for a healthy working relationship. Warm and competent leaders who clearly articulate and live out their values increase organization productivity, which benefits the bottom line.

Focus on Connecting

Most workplace leaders have already demonstrated their technical competence; otherwise, they would not have risen to a leadership position. What too many leaders neglect are relationship behaviors. When a leader fails to connect or minimizes efforts to build relationships, he or she actually holds back employees and, potentially, harms the organization.

Emphasizing competency above all else leads to focusing on staff members' weaknesses rather than individuals' potential. A competency-first leader may even unconsciously seek out examples that reinforce perceived incompetence in a narrow range of tasks instead of viewing an employee as a well-rounded individual who possesses a variety of skills. Once a leader becomes fixated on flaws, he or she may start to restrict autonomy, move away from

shared decision-making and subject an employee to excessive scrutiny.

This will make the employee feel micro-managed and untrustworthy, which causes dissatisfaction and stress. As trust and communication between the leader and the employee break down, the cycle easily becomes self-perpetuating, leading to further deterioration.

Failing to establish trusting relationships can also lead some staff members to misread the leader's signals and become alienated. This results in the formation of an in-group of employees who maintain close ties to each other and the leader, as well as an out-group.

Members of the in-group receive information first and stay involved in important conversations. Employees in the out-group justifiably do not feel included and withdraw even further. Leaders—understandably, but not productively—may end up being biased against employees in the out-group and begin treating them differently. This further demotivates a proportion of workers and prompts those people to lose interest in their jobs or to look for work elsewhere.

A lack of trust can spiral to create deeper problems that cost an organization a lot in the long term. Think about your own agency. Can it reach

As a Leader, How Do You Extend Trust to Others?

- Give trust until you have a reason not to
- Be willing to share
- Praise
- Let them work autonomously
- Don't micromanage
- Listen
- Ask questions
- Get to know them
- Do what you say you will do
- Provide guidance
- Be reliable; do what I say I will do
- Open to others' ideas
- Be honest about what I can and will do
- Give them a chance to prove themselves
- Stretch assignments
- Limit the number of reviews
- Underwrite honest mistakes
- Delegate project responsibility
- Delegate authority
- Solicit input for major decisions
- Let them brief above the team
- Share leadership and act in your place
- Coaching and mentoring for performance
- Ask for feedback
- Team building activities
- Provide autonomy
- Be consistent
- Delegate responsibilities
- Provide high-visibility projects

maximum potential without both task-related behaviors and empathetic, relationship behaviors that create connections between leaders and your colleagues?

10 Trust-Building Activities

Employees take behavioral cues from workplace leaders. A leader who shows up most days positive and optimistic about work creates what I call a "leadership mood" that is contagious. Numerous research studies have demonstrated that so-called happy hormones oxytocin and dopamine get released in the brains of people who interact with those they trust.

So, again, which leadership behaviors build trust? I have asked leaders this question numerous times. Their answers appear in the above chart.

The leaders' responses can be distilled into the following 10 Trust-Building Activities.

1. **Extend trust.** Be willing to trust others at the appropriate level. Extending trust does not mean abdicating your responsibility as a leader.
2. **Be accountable.** Own your part of issues that arise. Even if you bear no responsibility, ensure each

vital issue gets discussed and addressed.

3. **Be real.** Be you. It is OK to not know everything: Employees are not looking for a know-it-all. Rather, they need someone who has common sense, expertise in the field and a willingness to put a vision into action.
4. **Give people discretion and trust their judgment.** Employees feel more engaged when they exercise control over projects.
5. **Craft jobs.** Allow employees to create responsibilities. When employees have a say in what they do and how they do it, they become more invested in the outcomes, which, in turn, makes them take more responsible and accountable for their actions.
6. **Develop your people, and you develop your organization.** Leaders can help employees expand their technical skills by encouraging their individual and professional growth. This includes achieving better work-life balance.
7. **Keep staff in the loop.** Be transparent, and staff will feel like they have a stake in the happenings of the company.

8. **Build relationships.** Reach out to others and create connections with employees as unique individuals.
9. **Challenge employees.** Give staff members room to grow by creating conditions that allow them to stretch and learn with a safety net. Doing this is especially important when people work together because teamwork improves as team members gain experience collaborating with one another.
10. **Recognize and praise good work.** Call out employees' effort and contributions publicly to bolster self-confidence and push co-workers to strive to be the best they can be.

Leaders who demonstrate their competence, display their character and connect with staff will build trust, which is the glue that holds teams together and creates the conditions for individual and organizational performance.

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