



CHAPTER 8

Building Trust

The evening news shows footage of the most recent earthquake. Stunned crowds are wandering through the streets. The security and safety they had once depended on is gone. The house that protected them is not trustworthy. They are sleeping in the streets, fearful that another tremor will bring the house down.

Maybe you have known that feeling of freefall when you discover that someone you counted on has broken your trust. The earth has shifted under your feet. You may have spent months or years developing a solid relationship, and suddenly the things you counted on before you can't count on anymore. You are left wondering, *Where do we go from here? This changes everything.* You become protective, and put up a wall to keep from being hurt again. You become more cautious and circumspect. You find yourself looking over your shoulder, checking with others to make sense of what has happened, and anxiously wondering what might happen in the next day or week or month or year.

The Components of Trust

Many authors have created models for understanding the dimensions of trust as they exist in the workplace. Dennis S. Reina and Michelle L. Reina, in their book *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace*, describe three components of transactional trust: contractual trust, communication trust, and competence trust.¹ In *The Thin Book of Trust*, Charles Feltman divides trust into four components: sincerity, reliability, competence, and caring.² Whatever system we use, thinking about trust in terms of its various categories can help us understand better what builds trust and what wrecks trust. And when we commit to rebuilding trust, the discussion is more productive when we can describe the past destructive behavior by putting it into a category, rather than making a flat statement like, “I don’t trust you.” In this chapter, I discuss three categories of trust—reliability, competence, and caring—first showing how they relate to trust, then considering how to wreck trust and how to build trust.

Reliability

Reliability as a trust component is about keeping commitments. Building reliability begins with clarity: being clear about the commitments you are making, and being clear about what you expect of others. The circle of reliability is completed by following through—by keeping those commitments you make.

Warning! Dates on the calendar are closer than they appear.

Reliability also includes *not* making commitments you can’t keep. Saying, “I’ll have that report to you by Friday” assumes that you can get the information you need from another department by Thursday. Sometimes it is easy to make one commitment on top of another, without realizing there is simply not enough time in the day, the week, or the month to keep all of them. Before making a commitment, check the practical realities of fulfilling your commitment.

I speak here about the commitments *you* make. In building trust within the team, however, you also need to be clear about the commit-

ments that staff makes to you. Those questions that are the journalist's friend are also useful for managers and employees.

- ▶ *Who?* Who needs the requested item? Who is responsible for getting it done?
- ▶ *What?* As specifically as possible, what is expected? What is requested?
- ▶ *When?* Every request, every project, every assignment needs a due date. Let people know when you expect an answer or a deliverable.
- ▶ *How?* Do people have the resources to complete the assignment? Are there special concerns and requests that need to be met?
- ▶ *Why?* Having an explanation of why the task needs to be done can motivate a person to get the job done. It also demonstrates respect for another's competence to provide information about how his or her contribution fits into the wider effort.

Reliability also refers to consistency in general mood and demeanor. Employees look to the boss to provide stability. Being able to count on that person being on an even keel increases their level of trust. In truth, managers sometimes do not realize the effect their outbursts of anger have on people's sense of trust. She screams. He picks up a paperweight and throws it against the wall. She bangs her fist on the table and storms out. He slams the door to his office. Afterwards, their reactions are: "Get over it; it's just the way I am." What they don't realize is the long-term effect this behavior can have on others. The flare-ups can be for dramatic effect but they also can create a climate in which others become wary, uneasy, and anxious about when they may happen again. Trust erodes.

How do you deal with differences and disagreements among people? How do you handle yourself under stress? As was stated in Chapter 5, when your responses shift dramatically between calm and stormy, the people around you are confused, surprised, shocked, or hurt.³ And then they become distrustful. The behavior leaves others wondering when it will happen again, and where and how.

Competence

Competence with regard to trust refers to the ability to do the task at hand. Generally in the workplace, we assume that people can meet the established standards of performance. A person is hired based on her knowledge, skills, and ability to take on a set of job responsibilities.

Sometimes a person is hired for one set of responsibilities and has the requisite technical expertise to do that job well. He does the job so well, in fact, that he is then promoted to a supervisor's position. The technical skills that served so well at the staff level are not nearly so important in the supervisor role. Rather, what is needed at this level of responsibility is people skills: the ability to provide leadership to motivate effort, the ability to work with people to keep them productive, and the ability to provide guidance and feedback when people need direction. For a new manager or supervisor, this is a completely new skill set. The wise new supervisor or manager recognizes the differences in position, and acknowledges the need to develop new abilities. Then he finds within the organization or outside the organization the tools and education necessary to be effective in this new role. Demonstrating competence in this new role builds trust among staff that the manager has the needed leadership skills to handle the task.

Caring

As a component of trust, care refers to having concern for the needs and interests of others. Caring may be the most important component of trust. If employees know that their needs and interests are important to the manager, they will trust that manager to take action, to do what needs to be done. In this way, managers need to demonstrate interest in the work the staff is doing, their career development beyond their immediate jobs, and to some extent their personal lives. Even when the manager has to make hard decisions that may directly affect the staff's work or schedule or personal life, if employees trust that the manager cares, they are much more willing and able to go along with those decisions.

Care in this trust context applies to the team and its work, as well as to individuals. The manager who builds trust in this dimension is aware of the priorities of the team and protects those priorities from the bar-

rage of requests that may come from other departments or from external customers. Having their backs in the face of conflicting demands is a powerful trust builder.

Consider This

- ☑ Observe others you work with. Whom do you trust?
- ☑ Why do you trust them? What actions do they take, what do they say, and what do they do that makes them trustworthy?

How to Wreck Trust

Let's see how you can wreck trust, turning those three components of trust upside down. In terms of *reliability*, you can lie. You can withhold the truth. You can break your word. So what if you are late for the meeting? They'll wait for you. Don't bother making certain that you can get something done before you promise to do it. Nobody's perfect, right?

You can surprise them. It always pays to keep them guessing—they'll never know what to expect or when. You can make vague commitments. Then, when you fail to keep them, you can claim they just didn't understand you. And, you don't have to follow through. Maybe they'll forget—after all, you know how easy forgetting is, you do it all the time. And you can lose your temper. You can blow up when things get tough—they'll get over it. You are who you are. That's not *your* problem, right?

As for *competence*, you can wreck trust by accepting assignments that you don't know how to do—but don't tell anybody you need help. Fake it until you make it, right?

And as for *caring*, remember to gossip. Information is power, after all. Having the scoop, the latest skinny on someone else, being in the know, gives you power. And you can look better by making others look worse. Talk behind people's backs. Spend your lunch hour talking about other people in the office. What do they know? You'll be a lot more popular when they see how much you can dish.

Then there are some other ways to wreck trust. For example, you can use other people's work to get ahead. No need to give them credit for

what they have done—you take the credit, take *all* the credit. Sure, it was a team effort. Everyone on the staff pulled together to get the job done. But you are the boss, so, ultimately, you are responsible. If it went well, it's because you did such a good job of keeping them all on task. And don't ever listen to your staff. Don't spend the time getting to know them. All they need is their next assignment. Give it to them as quickly as possible and move on to the next task.

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I learned a lesson in high school. There were three girls standing in the hall, arms loaded with books, waiting for the next class. Vicki told Paula, "That is a pretty dress you're wearing." When Paula walked off, Vicki turned to me and said, "That dress was really tacky. I just wanted to see what she would say." As I turned to walk on to my class, I wondered what Vicki would be saying about me once my back was turned. In the workplace, this scenario plays out again and again.

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How to Build Trust

On the other hand, maybe you'd like to try using those same three categories to build greater trust. Building trust takes energy, effort, and attention, but the effort you put into building trust will be repaid many times over when conflicts arise—which they will. With trust established, it will be much easier to communicate honestly, to seek solutions, and to know that you can count on others to keep their commitments.

Reliability

By demonstrating your reliability, you, as a manager, can establish and build a trusting relationship with your staff.

► **Be honest.** Even in the best of times, as a manager you may need to change course based on changing circumstances. If you have demonstrated over time that you are as honest as you can be, when these

changes happen, people are much more likely to believe you and accept your best intentions.

▶ **Keep commitments.** Do what you say you are going to do when you say you are going to do it. Even in the small things. If you will be late for the meeting, let someone know. If you are bringing someone else with you, let them know that, too.

Commitments can be tricky things. When you, as supervisor, say, “Sure, I think we can do that,” others are likely to hear, “Yes. You’ve got my word on that. I’ll make it happen.” Don’t give your word if you cannot *keep* it. To protect others’ trust in you, promise to recommend, then check with your own boss before making any final commitments.

▶ **Avoid surprises.** For every move you make—even surprises you think will be pleasant for your staff—tip them off first, particularly when trust is low. When they are not sure they can trust you, your every move and motive can be suspect. “What does she mean I can have the afternoon off? What is she going to do while I am gone?”

▶ **Be consistent also with your mood.** Not many people are bright and chipper all the time every day. But if your mood swings wildly from day to day, others will be tiptoeing into the office, wondering what kind of mood the boss might be in today.

HOW TO BUILD TRUST

- ▶ Be honest.
- ▶ Keep your word.
- ▶ Avoid surprises.
- ▶ Be consistent.
- ▶ Do your best.
- ▶ Demonstrate respect.
- ▶ Listen, listen, listen.
- ▶ Communicate.
- ▶ Speak with positive intent.
- ▶ Admit mistakes.
- ▶ Be willing to hear feedback.

- ▶ Maintain confidences.
- ▶ Get to know others.
- ▶ Practice empathy.
- ▶ Seek their input.
- ▶ Say “thank you.”

Competence

Trust in others is built on recognition of their competence to do the job at hand. Your employees will trust you to do your job competently if you remember the following:

- ▶ **Do your best.** If you have been given an assignment that is beyond your ability, admit it. Talk it over with the person who gave you the assignment. Then *get help*. Look around for the resources that surround you. Find others you respect for their knowledge and expertise. Ask for their advice.

It often takes courage to admit that you don't know everything there is to know. Hold on to the confidence of knowing that you do have valuable skills and abilities. You were assigned this project because they believed you were able to do it. To build your competence, look for other resources as well: books, classes, online information.

- ▶ **Learn new leadership skills.** Building trust as a manager with your staff depends as much on your ability to motivate and support employees as it does on your technical skills.

Caring

Expressions of caring about others are critical to all relationships, but as a manager there are particular things you can do to show you care for the staff, thereby building trust:

- ▶ **Respect the other person even when your views differ.** Consider that others think their views are well grounded, they want to do the “right thing,” they can see things that you miss and miss things

you can see, and they recognize that you may have different information than they do.

Demonstrate respect for who they are, what they know, and where they have been. Respect comes through the words you use and your tone of voice, as well as your body language as you talk and as you listen.

► **Listen, listen, listen.** One of the most powerful skills you can cultivate is the ability to listen well. (There is more information on how to listen in Chapter 14.) Put aside your own thinking in order to hear what is going on with someone else—whether it’s your own higher-ups, or a peer, or someone you supervise. Take the time, expend the energy, focus your attention on what they are saying, and that will speak volumes to them about the value you put on your relationship.

► **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** As a manager or supervisor, there are times when you have information that you cannot share. That is a given, and one of the challenges of being a manager. When you hear something from above of a sensitive nature that will have a direct effect on your employees, talk to your higher-ups about what you can discuss and what needs to be held closely. That said, there is a lot of information you *can* give to people. In the busyness of your day, stop to consider how people are kept informed, who is getting what information and how they are getting it. Is everyone on the staff receiving the same information? The more you can communicate in a timely way, the more each of them will feel that they can trust you.

As Dale Carnegie famously said years ago, first you tell them what you are going to tell them, then you tell them, then you tell them what you told them. Find as many ways as possible to keep the information flowing: e-mails, staff meetings, and one-on-one conversations. I can hear the groans when I suggest another meeting, but telling people face to face and to as many as possible at the same time give people a sense that they know what is going on, of feeling included, and that they are important enough to know what is afoot. Use the variety of electronic tools at your fingertips: e-mails, voicemail, Facebook, and Twitter. (In Chapter 16, I discuss some dos and don’ts of effective electronic communication.)

► **Speak with positive intent.** This is the opposite of talking

behind people's backs. When you talk about others in the office, present or not, find ways to acknowledge their contributions and skills.

▶ **Admit mistakes. Nobody is perfect.** You get credit for trying. And being able to admit your mistakes goes a long way to being trustworthy.

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The conference program had gone to print. Finally, we were ready to drop it in the mail to our mailing list of 5,000. I opened my copy one more time and realized to my horror that the conference fees were wrong. This financial section may have been the most important piece of the printed program. My heart sank. I called my boss. The last thing I wanted to do was to admit that I had not caught this huge misprint earlier. The first thing that I needed to do was to tell him about it so we could strategize some solution. I felt embarrassed and foolish. Months later he told me, "One thing I really like about you, Susan, is that I can count on you to tell me when things are going wrong." It's a good thing he valued that, because I was in a new position with lots of responsibility but little experience, and I made more mistakes than I want to remember.

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▶ **Be willing to hear feedback.** Listen to others without interrupting, without launching a counterattack, without becoming defensive. Talk about a hard criticism—this one is a real challenge! (I'll talk about it more in Chapter 14.)

▶ **Maintain confidentiality.** As a supervisor, you have additional responsibilities regarding confidentiality. Sometimes someone may say "keep this confidential" and when they start talking, you realize you can't keep *that* confidential. It is better to avoid promising confidentiality until you know more about the content. You might list general topics about which you cannot promise confidentiality. If you realize the information you have heard is something you must tell someone else, explain your decision and your concern—and strategize with the person about how you will share that information and with whom you will share it.

▶ **Get to know others as people.** Let them get to know you, as

well. Maybe nothing demonstrates that you care as much as taking the time to express a personal interest in employees and co-workers. Managers and supervisors are generally strapped for time, so when you read this, you may protest. I am not suggesting that you have lengthy conversations with staff about the ins and outs of their lives. But if you spend time finding out what their hopes and dreams and aspirations are, as well as what they may be struggling to juggle inside and outside of work, you can instill loyalty in them that will be well worth your investment of time.

- ▶ **Be consistent.** Treat all the people you supervise with equanimity and fairness. It is inevitable that there are some people you will get along with better than others. They speak your language. You feel comfortable around them. You like their style, maybe because of the skills they bring to the job, maybe for other intangible qualities. Know that other employees are keenly, maybe jealously, watching the time you spend with each of them. You don't have to be perfectly balanced in some mechanical clockwork fashion. You do, however, need to be conscious of creating some balance of your attention among those with whom you work. You can be friendly without being friends.

- ▶ **Practice empathy.** Try to understand the situation from their point of view.

- ▶ **Seek their input.** Provide ways for them to develop and learn new skills.

- ▶ **Say thank you.** Thank people privately and publicly for a job well done, an effort made even if it wasn't successful. Sincerity is important here—they must believe that you really mean it. And be specific with your thanks: “Thanks for the extra hours you put into the Houston project.” “I appreciate your response to that difficult caller yesterday.” “We really needed the research you provided for that proposal. Thanks.” A vague “Great job, Harry” leaves Harry wondering what you are talking about or why you are saying it. And work hard to be inclusive—to acknowledge positive contributions from each employee.

Here are a few extra ways to say thanks:

1. Acknowledge hard work during staff meetings.

2. Catch people doing good. Sometimes we put more energy into finding the mistakes and correcting them. Look for opportunities to appreciate their efforts.
3. Keep a stack of note cards in your desk and make a habit of writing thank-you notes each week to deserving staff members.
4. Leave a sticky note on someone's desk saying thank you—be specific.
5. Send thank-you e-mails—be specific. Consider copying your boss on the message.
6. Create a “wall of thanks” in the office where you can post notes for jobs well done.

How to Rebuild Trust

Rebuilding trust is a challenging task, but it is not impossible. Remember that rebuilding trust will take demonstrated commitment over time. Here are some steps to take if someone else has broken your trust:

1. Before approaching the other person, ask yourself a few critical questions: Am I willing to have a conversation about what has happened? What might I lose if I don't? What might I gain if I do? What might I lose if I do?
2. Identify the specifics of what happened. Did the person miss an important deadline? Does he or she miss deadlines frequently? Did the individual make a commitment and not keep it? Did you expect the person to have the skill to complete the project and yet that person didn't meet the standards you expected? Did he or she talk to you disrespectfully in a meeting? Is this a matter of reliability, or competence, or caring?
3. Set up a time to talk about it. Make sure that both of you have adequate time to give the conversation your full attention.
4. Be clear before you get into a discussion about the nuts and bolts of your concern and why being able to trust the other person is important to you.
5. Talk about the incident or incidents that concern you. Be specific.

Identify one or more of the components of trust—reliability, competence, or caring—that has become a problem. It is much more productive to talk about one of these components: “I didn’t get your last three reports until I called and reminded you to get them in each time. I am concerned about your reliability,” than it is to say: “I don’t trust you.” Maintain a calm, businesslike, factual approach with the focus on behaviors, not characterizations.

6. Listen. Ask, “What happened?” Give the person time to think about what you have said and to respond. He or she may have an explanation that clarifies what has happened. The person may apologize.
7. Describe specifically what the person can do to improve the situation.

If you have broken another’s trust and want to rebuild it:

1. As soon as possible, set up a time to talk about this particular issue. Again, make sure that both of you have adequate time to give this conversation your full attention.
2. Express your concern for the importance of the relationship and your positive intention for the conversation.
3. Ask if the person has concerns and then listen. Give the person time and space to think and to talk. Avoid becoming defensive. If the person is able to express concerns, all you need to do is say, “Thank you for telling me.”
4. Apologize. Take responsibility for your part in the situation. You may want to take some time to think about what you have heard before you respond. (The next chapter, “Apology and Forgiveness,” discusses this further.)
5. Explain what steps you plan to follow so that what has happened won’t be repeated.

Consider This

- How trustworthy are you?
 1. *Sincerity*: Do you explain to people what values and principles are important to you? Do you demonstrate your commitment to those values and principles in your actions?

2. *Reliability*: Do you keep the commitments that you make? What do you do when you realize you have made a commitment you can't keep? Do you clarify commitments and promises so that others know what you expect of them? How? Do you clarify commitments and promises so that you know what others expect from you? How?
3. *Competence*: Make a list of the areas where you feel you are competent. How do you demonstrate to those you work with, manage, or report to that you have the competence to handle job requirements? How do you ask for help or training when you are given a job that exceeds your experience or competence?
4. *Caring*: How would the people you manage finish this statement: "I know my boss really cares about the team because ..."? Do team members know that you support their efforts and are working for the good of the team? How? If there is a problem in the workplace, are people willing to raise the issue? If not, why not? If so, how do you know? Are you comfortable receiving help from others?

Review your responses to these questions. What steps will you take to improve your trustworthiness among your subordinates?

Notes

1. Dennis S. Reina and Michelle L. Reina, *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace: Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999).
2. Charles Feltman, *The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work* (Bend, Ore.: Thin Book Publishing, 2009).
3. Ron Kraybill, *Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Riverhouse, 2005), p. 12.