

## Trust: The Building Block of Leadership

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No relationship can last without it. When lost, it is not easily found. And it requires regular maintenance. What is it? Trust. If you want to be an effective and respected leader you must strive to earn and maintain the highest level of trust within your organization.

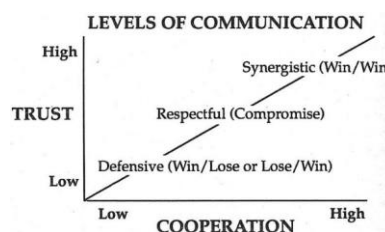
So, what exactly is trust? Simply stated it is the confidence one places in the ability, character, and truth of a person.

Just because one holds a leadership title doesn't mean it comes with a certificate of trust. Trust is something you earn over time and is granted by others. You can't buy it. You can't rush it. You can't demand it. And it can't be faked. It is usually earned in small doses, although sometimes it can be reinforced by some significant, selfless action. There are no public announcements when you gain it, but you will know when you have achieved it – or lost it. It manifests itself in a palpable synergy between two people or within a team. Productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness rise. People feel better about themselves and teamwork flourishes. It's the secret sauce of a strong relationship – any relationship.

Trust is action based – you can't talk your way into a trusting relationship; you must “walk it like you talk it”. The dynamics of trust can be different depending on who grants the trust, although the way you gain it has common components. Trust in a marriage involves fidelity between husband and wife – that's different than the trust between a leader and his or her organization. However, in both situations mere talk does not ensure trust.

Demonstrations of commitment, honesty, empathy, faith, and truth are common ingredients in any trust recipe. You can't just want trust without putting in the work. You can't just demonstrate it when it is convenient for you or to meet some personal objective, and trust must be unconditional. Sincerity is key, since most people, over time, will see straight through an insincere or self-serving effort to gain trust. They may also feel deceived. Once you have lost their trust people are very reluctant to give it again without serious and genuine attempts on your part to rebuild the relationship.

Motivational leader Stephen Covey states the following in his national bestseller book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: “Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people. But it takes time and patience.” Covey illustrates the relationship between trust and various levels of communication in the following diagram, demonstrating that as trust increases, so does synergy.



Covey also uses a bank account analogy to explain how two people build trust and use it to weather challenging periods. As the relationship begins, each person starts making deposits into the other's

emotional bank account. To Covey “personal integrity generates trust and is the basis of many kinds of deposits”. He further states that “lack of integrity can undermine almost any other effort to create high trust accounts.” As the relationship grows, so does each bank account balance. Openness flourishes, integrity shines, and truthfulness reigns. Then, when a crisis develops within the relationship the high account balance covers the major withdrawal. However, if deposits have not been regularly made, then there will be insufficient funds and the relationship suffers. Sometimes the damage is irreparable. What is the message here? To build trust in each of our relationships we must work hard at making emotional deposits, no matter how small, into the accounts of others.

Trust is a two-way street – not only must you earn the trust of others, you must also reciprocate and demonstrate trust in them. This is especially true for leaders who must depend on an atmosphere of trust and openness to motivate others and build self-satisfaction. Without trust you cannot lead.<sup>1</sup>

Before a relationship is formed, leaders must sometimes take a leap of faith that the person they are leading is capable and competent. This is also true when leading teams. Major General Perry M. Smith, USAF Retired, in his book *Rules & Tools for Leaders* states “Without trust and other elements of mutual respect among leaders and their associates, an organization will often suffer a combination of low performance and poor morale.” In relationships void of trust, people start acting for themselves, rather than the good of others. But, when trust is earned and granted by both parties, synergies and collaboration develop. Then, barriers to success quickly evaporate.

In his book *Why Dream Teams Fail*, Geoffrey Colvin states “Trust is the most fundamental element of a winning team. If people think their teammates are lying, withholding information, plotting to knife them, or just plain incompetent, nothing valuable will get done. The team doesn’t create synergy. It creates ‘dysnergy’ – two plus two equals three, with luck.”<sup>2</sup>

So, how do you start to build trust. James Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of *The Leadership Challenge*, believe leaders go first; thus, as a leader you must be the first to trust. In other words, you must demonstrate “your” trust before seeking the trust of others. This requires self-confidence, which some may find difficult. But the rewards are great, and a contagion of trust will develop. Let others know who you are. Vocalize your aspirations and what you stand for. Share your values and the principles you follow in life. Be open and demonstrate candor. People are always judging your intentions, so help shape the perception by others by taking the lead in building a trustworthy relationship.

The following are some of the ways you can begin to demonstrate trust and then maintain it:

- If you make a promise, keep it
- Do what you say you will do
- Keep your word and honor your commitments
- Be consistent
- Play fair
- Be there when people need you
- Treat others with respect and dignity
- Follow the golden rule
- When someone speaks with you, listen intently
- Make eye contact during conversations

- Be open to other viewpoints
- Don't talk about someone behind their back
- Keep appointments and arrive on time
- Always maintain confidentiality
- Demonstrate faith in others and in their abilities
- Don't be afraid to be wrong
- Apologize when you hurt someone
- Demonstrate genuine forgiveness
- Be a team player; don't be self-serving
- Praise in public; criticize in private
- Be sensitive to the needs and interests of others
- Share information and promote transparency

<sup>1</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, [The Leadership Challenge](#), (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2007), p. 224

<sup>2</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, [The Leadership Challenge](#), (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2007), p. 225