



## Building Trust

# The Critical Link to a High-Involvement, High-Energy Workplace Begins with a Common Language

Trust has taken a hit lately in all facets of our lives. Chalk it up to the combined effects of the economic meltdown, financial mismanagement, and an increasing sense that, in business at least, everyone seems to be in it only for themselves. The result has been dwindling levels of trust in organizations. In fact, a poll by Maritz indicates that only seven percent of workers strongly agree that they trust their senior leaders to look out for their best interest. And a survey by MasteryWorks indicated that a lack of trust correlated highly to employee turnover.

Trust is a primary factor in how people work together, listen to one another, and build effective relationships. Yet many people are unaware of the actions that influence trust. Trust is a critical link to all good relationships, both personal and professional.

Studies show that productivity, income, and profits are positively or negatively impacted depending on the level of trust in the work environment. Trust can be created or destroyed through personal perceptions and behaviors. Trust means different things to different people. It's predicated on who we are and how we were raised and is shaped by our experiences and perceptions of others' behavior.

Restoring trust has become a top priority for companies that are looking to break out of the negativity that has become pervasive in many organizations. A self-centered “What’s in it for me” attitude robs an organization of the best that employees have to offer. When employees perceive that an organization—or its leaders—are less than forthcoming, employees become unwilling to contribute any discretionary energy or make any commitments to their organization’s well-being beyond the absolute minimum.

Lack of trust creates cynicism, doubt, and anxiety which leads people to waste valuable work time. When people don’t trust their leaders, they don’t come toward something; they pull back and withdraw instead. They doubt rather than cooperate.

The result: Because they need a paycheck, employees will often stay with the organization and do their job, but not much more. It becomes purely a transactional relationship with employees asking themselves, “If the organization does not do right by me, why should I do right by them?” Sometimes employees will even leave an organization where trust is lacking. Blanchard’s research with more than 1,000 leaders reinforces this point. Fifty-nine percent of respondents indicated they had left an organization due to trust issues, citing lack of communication and dishonesty as key contributing factors.

### The Four Elements of Trust

There are four key elements that leaders need to be aware of when they are looking at building or restoring trust with the people they lead. The four elements are Able, Believable, Connected, and Dependable—the Building Trust Model. By using the Building Trust Model, individuals can create action plans to increase the level of trust in relationships or repair damaged relationships where trust has been broken.

- 1. Able is about demonstrating competence.** Do the leaders know how to get the job done? Are they able to produce results? Do they have the skills to make things happen—including knowing the organization and equipping people with the resources and information they need to get their job done?
- 2. Believable means acting with integrity.** Leaders have to be honest in their dealings with people. In practical terms, this means creating and following fair processes. People need to feel that they are being treated equitably. It doesn’t necessarily mean that everyone has to be treated the same way in all circumstances, but it does mean that people are being treated appropriately and justly based on their unique circumstances. Believability is also about acting in a consistent, values-driven manner that reassures employees that they can rely on their leaders.
- 3. Connected is about demonstrating care and concern for other people.** It means focusing on people and identifying their needs. It is supported by good communication skills. Leaders need to openly share information about the organization and about themselves. This allows the leader to be seen as more of a real person whom a direct report can identify with. When people share a little bit of information about themselves, it creates a sense of connection.

### The High Cost of Low Trust

- Low morale
- Lower productivity
- People “quit but stay”
- Increased turnover

### The Four Elements of Trust

- Able
- Believable
- Connected
- Dependable

4. **Dependable is about honoring commitments by following through on what the leaders say they are going to do.** It means being accountable for their actions and being responsive to the needs of others. If leaders promise something, they must follow through. It also requires being organized and predictable so that people can see that the leaders have things in order and are able to follow through on their promises.

## The Leadership Challenge

When people believe they are working for trustworthy leaders, they are willing to invest their time and talents in making a difference in an organization. People who feel more connected will invest more of themselves in their work. High trust levels lead to a greater sense of self-responsibility, greater interpersonal insight, and more collective action toward achieving common goals.

Trustworthy leaders are rewarded by employees who stretch, push their limits, and volunteer to go above and beyond. When leaders create a high-trust environment that is consistent over time, collaboration increases and organizations leap forward.

For leaders looking to turn things around in their organization, Blanchard recommends they take a hard look in the mirror and examine their own behaviors. Are they being trustworthy? Is there transparency and honesty with people at all levels of the organization?

Leaders must think about the four core elements represented in the Building Trust Model and how people in their organization would rate them in these four areas. If they find themselves lacking in a particular area, they need to tackle this head-on. In addition, leaders need to take the time to assess current trust levels in their organizations and if they find trust is lacking, immediately begin a process to resolve the issues.

The key is to exhibit the behaviors that people look for in their leaders. This is critical, because people need to see trust in action more than they need to hear about it.

## The Transparency Challenge

Everyone agrees that leaders should be open and candid in sharing information. But knowing this and acting upon it can be two different things. The challenge with transparency is to identify the behaviors that clearly define the concept. It's important to remember that trust is in the eyes of the beholder. What does transparency mean in your organization? Should employees be getting all of the information? Who should be included in meetings? And if you have been a very tight-lipped organization in the past, you are going to have to be open and candid about what you are going to do to become more transparent in that transition before people are really going to trust the new behaviors.

## Trust Eroders

- Lack of communication
- Dishonesty
- Breaking confidentiality
- Taking credit for others' work

## Elements of TRUST

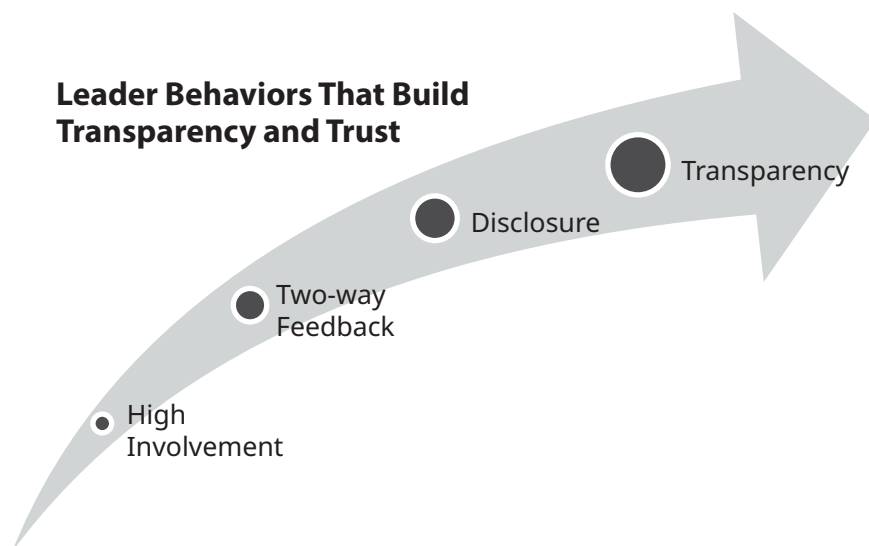
- Give Credit
- Listen
- Set Clear Goals
- Be Honest
- Follow Through

## Building Leadership Transparency

- Be accessible
- Acknowledge people's concerns
- Follow through

For leaders looking to be more up-front and authentic, three behaviors will help them get started.

- 1. Be accessible.** As a leader, particularly during tumultuous times, it's important to be out in front of the organization, sharing plans for the future. Don't hide behind closed doors or delegate the important task of communicating to others. As a leader, employees look to you for information on what's going on. That means you have to be very clear about what the plan is. "What are we going to do?", "When does it start?", and "How does it get implemented?" are all questions that will have to be answered.
- 2. Acknowledge that people have concerns.** Once you've communicated the vision for the organization, you also need to take the time to listen for concerns and anxieties that people might have. Create opportunities for dialogue. This doesn't mean coddling people, but it does mean making sure that you are listening.
- 3. Follow through.** If you don't know the answer to a question immediately and say that you will get back to the employee, make sure that you do so in the promised amount of time. Keeping your word on small things demonstrates dependability and reliability that people can count on when it comes to big things. It builds credibility that you, the leader, will continue to do what you say you will.



### The Ripple Effect

Leaders demonstrating trustworthy behaviors set an example for others to follow. Employees who experience this concern for their well-being have an example of how they should be treating others. This creates a ripple effect of trust throughout the organization.

One additional benefit of taking the time to define trust in behavioral terms, such as within the Building Trust Model components, is that it allows everyone to talk about this potentially sensitive subject openly. Now, instead of pointing out people as "untrustworthy," we can point to the behaviors that are leading to this conclusion instead.

People need to understand how to communicate about the issues of trust, and the only way to do that is by understanding what trust means to each of us individually. That's where having an understanding of the behaviors that build trust can be helpful.

Great leaders personify trust. Knowing the behaviors that generate trustworthy feelings in others can help leaders crack that code to building trust. Once they do, they can begin to make sure they are acting in ways that are consistent with trustworthiness. The result is an organization where people assume the best of each other, which, in turn, creates a more trusting atmosphere and ultimately greater performance and satisfaction at work.

## **Eight Things Your Organization Can Do to Improve Trust**

If your organization is looking for ways to evaluate the internal levels of trust, or is thinking about how to enhance the trust between people in your company, here are eight places to begin.

- 1. *Demonstrating Trust***—If you want to create a trusting work environment, you have to begin by demonstrating trust. Establishing rules, policies, and procedures to protect against a few bad apples sends the wrong message to the vast majority of people in your organization who need and deserve to be trusted.
- 2. *Sharing Information***—Information is power. One of the best ways to build a sense of trust in people is by sharing information. Sharing information sometimes means disclosing information that is considered privileged, including sensitive and important topics such as the competition's activities, future business plans and strategies, financial data, industry issues or problem areas, competitors' best practices, the way group activities contribute to organizational goals, and performance feedback. Providing people with more complete information communicates trust and a sense of "we're in this together." It helps people think more broadly about the organization and the interrelationships of various groups, resources, and goals.
- 3. *Telling It Straight***—Study after study have indicated that the number-one quality people want in a leader is integrity. People want to follow someone they trust. Business leaders who tell it straight, who are open and honest even about bad news, develop the trust essential for strong, long-term relationships—inside and outside the company.
- 4. *Providing Opportunities for Everyone to Win***—Do you want your people to work together or to compete against each other? When people within an organization are forced to compete against one another, you lose everyone's trust. Now all people are concerned about is looking out for number one.
- 5. *Providing Feedback***—Make sure leaders schedule and hold regular progress-check meetings with their direct reports. This will allow managers to catch problems before they become major issues and significantly increase the chances that a direct report's performance will meet expectations when it's time for their performance review.



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6. **Resolving Concerns Head-On**—Resolve concerns head-on by putting challenges on the table and giving people an opportunity to influence the process. When leaders expand people’s involvement and influence, there is more buy-in because people are less likely to feel they are being controlled. This builds trust and increases the credibility of the leader.
7. **Admitting Mistakes**—An apology can be an effective way to correct a mistake and restore the trust needed for a good relationship. But in many organizations, employees and managers are conditioned to hide mistakes because it’s not acceptable to make them. And that leads to bigger problems. Leaders who admit mistakes when they are wrong are not seen as weak—they are seen as having integrity and being trustworthy.
8. **Walking the Talk**—A leader, above all, has to be a walking example of the vision and values of the organization. The key to leadership is being able to develop a trusting relationship with others. Without trust, it is impossible for an organization to function effectively. Trust between leaders and the people they lead is essential for working together. If leaders say one thing and do another, people will question their trustworthiness.

## Conclusion

Trust in both personal and professional relationships is delicate. Trust must be treated as being precious, highly valued, and a treasured organizational trait. It must be viewed as if it were an egg that could shatter if treated roughly.

Building trust is the foundation of all solid and healthy relationships. Actions speak louder than words. Trust can take a long time to build, but can be destroyed by a single action or misconception.

Trust is an extremely important commodity to any relationship, personally or organizationally. The good news is that if trust has been broken, your professional or personal relationship can recover. It takes hard work to build trust, especially after it has been betrayed, but it can be done. By being aware and using the Building Trust Model and using the guidelines presented in this paper, organizations and individuals can watch for signs that trust is eroding, analyze where the breakdowns are occurring, and work to rebuild high levels of trust.

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