

Building and Rebuilding Trust at Work

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The issue of trust – and lack of it – is a common topic in our current culture. Comments can be found in any news medium and frequently in personal conversations. “I don’t trust him.” “They aren’t trustworthy.” “Big organizations can’t be trusted.”

The reasons why there seems to be an epidemic of lack of trust is a complicated discussion, in and of itself. Partly, because many people and organizations have shown themselves not to be trustworthy. First, we must understand what trust really is, then we can consider and respond correctly to relevant situations.

It is Not as Simple as “Trust” vs “Don’t Trust”

Trust is not a global entity – although we talk like it is (“I just don’t trust her”). In actuality, *trust is situation-specific*. We trust someone to be able to do a specific task. For example, if you were to trust me to fix your car, your trust would be misplaced because I have virtually no mechanical abilities. However, if you believed that I could type your paper for you relatively quickly, (assuming I had the time) that would be a good situation in which to trust me.

The reason it's important to understand that trust is situation-specific is because we then have a pathway to build or rebuild low levels of trust. If we just say, "They aren't trustworthy," there is nothing the other party can do to remedy the situation. It is a personal judgment you have made and that is that.

Also, vague statements like, "I don't trust them," absolve the person making the statement of any personal responsibility. It's like saying, "He's a jerk." A judgment is made, there is nothing the speaker needs to do. This isn't typically helpful in building relationships. When we believe the other person is the source of the problem, and that the issue will only be resolved when *they* change, very little growth can happen.

Creating Situations of Trust

When we understand that trust is situation-specific, then a relationship can move beyond the "all or nothing impasse" (she's trustworthy/not trustworthy). I can now say, "I trust John to drive me to the airport and get me there on time," even though I may not trust him to manage my personal finances. So, when we're having difficulty trusting someone for a certain task, it can be helpful to identify situations or tasks for which you *can* trust them and proceed in that area. This is especially helpful when dealing with new colleagues or those who are still learning their job – give them a task that you believe they can do.

The 3 C's of Trust

Besides recognizing that trust is situation-specific, it's helpful to grasp three foundational components of trust: competence, consistency, and character. They are like the legs on a three-legged stool; without all three being present, the stool falls over.

Competence

If a person or business doesn't have the ability to do the task you desire, it is foolish to trust them to do so. Having the knowledge, ability, resources and capacity to complete a task is at the foundation of trust. This is why testimonials, references and endorsements from prior customers are so important – they provide external evidence to the claims of the service provider or manufacturer.

Consistency

A person or an organization may have the competence to complete the task; have the skills, talent, and expertise to do what is expected. But if their products are of inconsistent quality, if they cannot consistently get the product to you in time, or if they, as a service provider, don't show up, it doesn't do you much good. In many service sectors, there are plenty of competent technicians, but if you don't know if (or when) they will come to do the work, you are not able to depend on them.

Character

In this context, character primarily refers to honesty, integrity, and the belief that the other person is considerate of your needs as well as their own. Trust in business dealings (especially complex ones) often relies on the parties' willingness to trust that the information being given is true, there is nothing important being hidden or left out, and that the other party is not just wanting to "make a fast buck," but that they actually will deliver the goods or services they are promising.

Generally speaking, it is acceptable for an individual or a company to look out for their own interests (they have to make money to stay in business). However, you want to know that they are not only looking out for themselves, but are considering your needs and desires as well.

Steps to Take When Trust Is in Doubt

If you are having difficulty trusting someone else:

1. Try to specify, as much as you can, what action you are having trouble trusting them with. Why? What have they done (or not done) to cause this?
2. Which of the "3 C's" (competence, consistency, character) is related to your lack of trust in this situation?
3. Identify situations or actions for which you are willing to trust them. When possible, let them affirm their trustworthiness in these situations.
4. In the situations for which you are having difficulty trusting them, determine one or more of the following:
 - a) What could they do that would shore up your trust of them in this situation?
 - b) Are there certain conditions and parameters under which you would be willing to trust them to do this action (e.g. under someone's supervision, within certain financial parameters)?

If someone is having difficulty trusting you:

1. Ask them directly if there is something that you have done that has undermined their trust of you. If so, take appropriate actions (apologizing, making reparations) to address this event.
2. Affirm your desire to be trusted by them and assert your willingness to do what is required to earn or rebuild their trust.

3.Be willing to take initial actions to demonstrate your trustworthiness, either in other situations or under specifically defined parameters.

4.Be sure to follow through and make evident your competence, consistency, and character, and that you are considering their interests as well as your own.

Trust in relationships is foundational to living life cooperatively in a community. Use these tips to aid you in building deeper and broader trust with those around you, and the quality of your life will improve!

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