

TO BE TRUSTED, TRUST

Trust is critical to the performance of the people you manage, to your own performance, to the performance of a team, and to the overall success of an organization.

Trust is also difficult to define. It seems to be one of those things that no one can define in a sentence or two, but they recognize it when they see it (or experience it).

To define trust in the business world, and to initiate discussion around it, my friend and coach, Frank Greif, developed what he calls The Trust Triangle. With it he identifies the three factors making up trust in the workplace and in working relationships: competence, accountability, and integrity.

Competence: If I know that you have the ability, the competence, to do the tasks you've been asked to do, that builds the trust I have in you.

Accountability: If you do what you say you will do, you're accountable, and I can hold you accountable. And I can trust you.

Integrity: If you do what is "right" – and particularly, what is right to me - then that demonstrates your integrity, and I trust you. Having said that, what's right to me may not be right to you, and vice versa. We all have different views of what integrity is.

Performance Rule: Competence + Accountability + Integrity = Trust.

Let's look at an example. You and I are both senior level executives at a global company with multiple divisions. Through the years you've demonstrated your competence to me in your job by consistently doing it well. You've also shown that you can be accountable, by delivering on what you've promised, consistently. And in all of our dealings to date, we've agreed on issues that involved integrity, ethics and morals.

But then, you've been asked by the company to make a decision, a big decision that could have a personal impact on me. The division of the company that you manage is not doing well, due to changes in technology. What once was a goldmine because of the technical advantage the company's product had has now become a weakness. There are two options: One, completely re-engineer and re-launch the product; or two, close the division down by discontinuing the product, focusing the company's resources instead on a completely different product line. And you've been asked by the CEO to make the decision.

I'm hoping that you decide to go with option one, as that would provide me with new challenges. But deep down inside, even I know that the right thing to do for the company is to shut the division down. The problem with this option is that I will likely lose my job.

To complicate the situation, we've been close friends for almost 5 years, sharing some extremely close feelings with each other, and helping each other in our careers.

One Friday morning I come into my office and see a message telling me to meet with the CEO at 10:00 AM. I immediately call you to see what's going on, but you don't return my call. By 10:05 I'm told by the CEO that the company no longer has a position for me, as it will be closing down the division I've been working for. Basically, I'm out on the street.

And I'm pissed off – at you. I walk into your office and demand to know why you made the decision you did, and tell you how disappointed I am. Most importantly, I tell you how I can no longer trust you, and that I shouldn't have trusted you in the first place. You destroyed my trust in you. You defend yourself by stating all the reasons you made the decision you did, and yet I can't get over the fact that I no longer trust you.

What happened? After many years of friendship, of a strong working relationship, and of strong mutual trust, what went wrong? After all, I trusted you because you're competent in your job, you're accountable for doing what you promise, and you will always do what's best for me... Hey, wait. You didn't do what was right for me. Why? We've proven through the years that we have the same basic set of ethics, we both have similar morals, and we both have integrity in the eyes of the other. And yet, that last side of the trust triangle just went away in one decision. Why?

When I sit back and take myself, and the fact that I've lost my job because of a decision you made, out of the picture, I can see why you made the decision you made. Analytically, it makes the most sense for the company. But, because it hurt me personally, I can't trust you to do what's right for me.

Now, what if... What if you had come to me during the time you were making the decision, and talked to me about the pros and cons, and specifically what they would mean to me? And if you had shared your concerns for me, how you were feeling about me personally, and how difficult this was because of the personal impact your decision would have on me? What difference would that have made?

Likely, even though you made the decision that caused me to lose my job, I would have felt that you had my best interests at heart. In doing so, while I would be disappointed, I would still trust you. In fact, I may even empathize about the difficult situation that you've been put into. Instead, because you did not talk to me, because you did not show support for me, because you didn't seem to care what impact your decision had on me, I lost trust in you.

Trust comes from having all three sides of the triangle in place... surrounded by **communication**. If you demonstrate that you don't have the **competence** to do the job you've been hired to do, I won't trust you, even if you have the other two sides of the triangle covered. Same for **accountability**. And as our example demonstrated, the same is true for **integrity**. With any one side of the triangle compromised, trust is eroded. And without **communication**, the triangle doesn't exist, nor does trust.

My experience tells me that there are two different types of people in the world when it comes to trust. There are those who start off by trusting others, until the other person does something to eliminate that trust. And there are those who start off not trusting others until they've proven they should be trusted. Trust needs to be earned with them.

There are pros and cons to each approach. If you're of the first type, there is the possibility that your trust will get taken advantage of. If you trust everyone from the very beginning – until the other person gives you a reason not to trust them – every now and then you will get hurt. It seems that is simply a matter of odds.

If you're of the second type, the one that starts off by not trusting others until they've proven they deserve it, it may be difficult to build trust. It seems that we can sense when someone

trusts us and when they don't. And when someone doesn't trust us, it's human nature not to trust that person back. It's hard to give trust to someone who doesn't trust us.

So, if you don't trust me, I'm unlikely to trust you, even if I'm the type of person who starts off trusting people. If I sense you don't trust me, I can't help but feel there is something wrong with you since I know that I'm trustworthy. And when I don't give trust back, you're likely to sense that, and have less trust for me. And then... well, you can see that it's a downward spiral.

How many babies pop out of the womb and think, "I can't trust that woman until she's earned it"? Silly thought, right? I believe that we're all born with a certain amount of natural trust in others. Okay, one could argue that there might be some DNA factor involved, that some people have an inborn tendency to be less trusting of others than some other people. But still, I contend that we're all born as the first type of people – the type that starts off by trusting. I suspect that the change to the second type is a gradual process, one influenced by our parents, our friends, our teachers, our acquaintances, our co-workers, our business experiences.

It's too bad that happens, but it does. I guess that if I trusted everyone throughout my childhood, but in doing so bad things happened to me, eventually I would learn that the best way to protect myself is to start off by not trusting others – to be protective. The unfortunate thing is that in the long term that attitude has negative implications. Over time, by not trusting others until others prove they should be trusted, you will miss out on so many great and productive relationships, in business and other areas of life.

I'm not saying that one should go blindly into every relationship, giving away everything about you and anything else. There is a difference between blind faith and trust. If you have no basis for a trust in a person's competence, for their accountability, and for their integrity, it would be blind faith to give them total 100 percent trust from the first moment you met. But to start off by not trusting others until they prove they should be trusted is going to result in you missing out on some valuable relationships.

Performance Rule: To be trusted, trust.

Instead, if you go into a relationship with the Trust Triangle in mind, making mental notes of your trust levels in each of the three sides, I suspect you will build a trusting relationship quickly. And never forget, lack of communication can have the biggest negative impact on trust building than anything else.

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