

## DESTROYERS OF TRUST

Trust is fragile. The most difficult thing to build in an organization is trust. It takes years to build trust but only moments to break it. Once broken, trust takes a long time to be repaired, rebuilt and reconstituted.

Nobody will deny that trust is critical. Research studies have demonstrated the link between trust and corporate performance. Writers Robert Galford and Anne Drapeau conclude, “If people trust their leaders and each other, they will be able to work through disagreements. They take smarter risks. They’ll work harder, stay with the company longer, and contribute better ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

But trust is a rare commodity. And many leaders do not spend time to think about building trust or making effort to sustain it. What will break trust?

### 1. Lack of Leadership Integrity

Integrity is one of the biggest challenges in business today. It comes from the same root word as “integral”, which means wholeness, completeness or consistency. In other words, there is a “connect” between attitude and behavior, saying and doing, external and internal. It is having everything together.

So, when leaders don’t keep their promises, they break trust. For example, they may promise a last lay off, but it turns out not to be so. Worse still, when they don’t own their mistakes and try to wrangle their way out, trust will corrode. Studies have shown that leaders who are prepared to own up to their faults are more likely to be trusted by their followers.

Another aspect of integrity has to do with moral authority. Leaders who have moral lapses, no matter how competent they may be, will destroy trust. It is no wonder that when leaders who cheat, are dishonest, or commit adultery, are perceived to be less than trustworthy.

### 2. Leadership Incompetence or Toleration of Incompetence

The inability to lead is another factor that will erode trust. When leaders consistently cannot see a real problem that is so obvious to the rest of the team and insist that they are right, people will lose confidence in them. When corporate leaders (unless the original word corporates is a technical term here) consistently under-perform, staff will become jittery. Look at Kodak and Polaroid in their times of decline. People will spend more time thinking about their exit.

When leaders fail to deliver or unable to galvanize their teams to meet company's objectives, people become disengaged and disillusioned. They will lose faith in their leaders.

Another source of disillusionment is the leaders' tolerance of incompetence and promotion of poor performing staff. Everyone is stupefied by the decision but quietly accepts it. But trust is slowly eroded if the leaders do not change course.

### **3. Political In-fighting**

Another source of distrust is in-fighting among executives. The Marketing Manager cannot get along with the Finance Manager and they constantly jibe and criticize each other publicly at meetings. If leaders don't manage these conflicts, soon the staff will lose faith and become disengaged. One senior manager, frustrated with in-fighting, complains, "How can I trust the leadership when they can't even trust themselves?"

One manager carps, "I have received nasty emails about another manager from my peer that was not meant for me and I shudder to think about the kind of politics in the office. It makes me sick!" No wonder, people despair about their leaders.

Another source of trust destroyers is sharp caustic attacks of leaders by people with a cloud of negativity. These are people who may have been by-passed in promotion, or feel shortchanged in their bonuses. They see only the negatives and downsides of the company.

The perpetual complainants may not outwardly sabotaged the company but their negativity may rub on to their co-workers. And soon, trust is undermined.

### **4. Consistent Non Communication, Poor Communication or Inconsistent Communication**

In crisis, some leaders refuse to communicate for fear of being misrepresented. They have the mistaken notion that silence is golden. But non-communication is still communication. Usually, people will invent their own messages, deliberately distort messages and spread rumors. It is better to communicate the little we know and explain what we do not know.

Don't ignore things when everyone already knows what is going to happen. Don't underestimate the power of the grapevine. Honest, regular open communication will build trust.

In some organizations, people are bombarded with myriads of contradictory and inconsistent messages every day. Badly phrased or unsolicited designated emails can create disharmony and disrupt workflow. Confusion will arise and this will diminish trust.

Sometimes, managers send inconsistent messages. They tell their subordinates what they want to hear and suppress information to their bosses. They are driven by self-interests.

Ensuring messages are communicated consistently is important. And don't rely on emails alone to do your communication. Say the same message consistently in as many different ways as you know how until it sticks. It has been estimated that it takes about 6 times before the message gets understood and owned.

## **5. Treating People Unfairly**

When staff realize that their managers are playing favorites and practicing cronyism, they will lose trust. When promotions are based on 'who they know' rather than 'what they do', people will distance themselves from their leaders.

When star performers persistently bend the rules while the rest toe the line, this, too, will breed mistrust. Leaders, who play the blame game and take credit for success not of their own making, can frustrate their followers. People don't treat leaders too kindly when they change rules to suit themselves.

Fairness has to do with transparent policies that are communicated clearly and practiced consistently. If exceptions are made, explanations should be forthcoming or else people will lose trust in the leadership.

## **What happens when trust is eroded?**

### **1. Leadership Is Destroyed**

The first victim of mistrust is the leadership. People question the moral authority of the leaders. They grumble about their unrealistic goals. They instigate rebellion. They engage in unproductive activities by focusing on the negative attributes of the leaders and the organization.

Worse still, they become counter-productive by attacking the leadership, championing their self-interests to the detriment of organization's goals, and alleviating conflict to unmanageable levels.

Very soon, there is widespread resentment against the leadership. Distrust cuts deep into the root of leadership and paralyzes the organization.

### **2. Staff Is Demoralized**

When there is a lack of trust, people become suspicious. They begin to define their work territory. They polarize into their functional roles and departmental roles. People become less cooperative and more demanding. There is a little tolerance for errors and mistakes. As a result, the morale of the staff is abysmal and relationships sour. This will affect the productivity of the people.

### **3. Productivity Is Diminished**

The final outcome of the erosion of trust is the demise of productivity and eventually, the organization. Demoralized staff can never perform to their maximum capacity.

It is like a choked pipe in which water cannot flow freely. Instead, it spews out rubbish. Clock-watching becomes the norm. Quality is compromised. Initiative is stifled. Creativity is choked. Nobody takes ownership of quality product or service. Under-performance becomes the order of the day. Good performers disappear.

Hence, when trust is broken, the leaders' chief responsibility must be to build trust, restore and maintain it<sup>ii</sup>. Kouses & Posner suggest that leaders need to ask themselves four questions<sup>iii</sup>:

1. Is my behavior predictable or erratic?
2. Do I communicate clearly or carelessly?
3. Do I treat promises seriously or lightly?
4. Am I forthright or dishonest?

Failure to do so will lead to the leaders' own demise.

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<sup>i</sup> Galford, R. & Drapeau, Anne Seibold, 2003. *The Enemies of Trust*. Fortune Feb 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> Galford, R. & Drapeau, Anne Seibold, 2003. *The Enemies of Trust*. Fortune Feb 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> [Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. Credibility. 1993. Jossey Bass Publishers. San Francisco, USA.](#)