

Trust in the Digital Age

By Sid Scott



Trust in all organizations is a key to cultural cohesiveness and teamwork. However, because of the unique aspects of an employee-owned culture where the owners are always onsite, having a trusting supportive culture is vital to success.

Establishing trust has always been difficult, yet in the fast-paced world of the 21st century and with the variety of ways we communicate digitally with each other, establishing trust has unfortunately become more challenging. The main reason for the increased difficulty is that the written word--whether sent through a text message, an e-mail, a tweet, a posting on social media, or other means--lacks many of the characteristics by which we judge whether we can trust others. Put very simply, written communication lacks the body language that humans exhibit when they are conversing face-to face.

Here's what I've learned about the characteristics of people we tend to trust.

Trustworthy folks:

1. Listen and acknowledge suggestions of others. This sounds pretty simple to do, but I am always amazed at how many leaders don't listen and acknowledge ideas that others generate. Not only is this arrogant and demeaning, but it is also dumb to not seek and encourage input from everyone in the organization. Just because someone isn't in management or doesn't have a college degree or other qualification doesn't mean that they don't have good ideas or creative thoughts that could help the organization.
2. Tell the truth and communicate openly. This is very difficult for some people. Sharing part of the information about a change or a situation, or rationalizing that others wouldn't understand or wouldn't care can undermine future trust. Of course there are times when we can't share all the details because of legal issues, etc., but we can note the confidentiality limitation and be truthful about it. People who are trusted don't try to rewrite what happened, spin the truth or avoid it. This applies to mistakes that a leader or the company has made. Acknowledge them, make your apologies and move on. People will respect you for being human.

3. Do what they promise to do. There is no surer way to kill trust than by not following through with something. When a leader states his or her intention to make changes, whatever they might be, people expect to see the changes implemented. If something goes awry and inhibits the leader's ability to do the thing he or she promised, we need to tell the truth, answer questions and listen to the feedback.
4. Live by the same rules and policies they ask others to live by. This has been a huge criticism of Congress. Laws have been passed that apply to businesses, but senators and representatives have often exempted themselves. It's no accident that the majority of citizens do not trust them. The same applies to businesses. Every time an organization makes exceptions and has one set of rules and policies for a small group of leaders, trust deteriorates and sometimes evaporates completely.
5. Consistently do the first four things on the list. We know this is true in our personal relationships and it applies to business, too. We can't be trustworthy 95 percent of the time and expect loyalty and respect from others. It really is an 'all or nothing' thing with trust.

When you read through these five items, note how many of them require us to observe and make judgments based on how people act and behave. In early infancy, we learn, long before spoken language, how to trust our family members. They, in turn, learn how to read our cries and visual actions to accurately assess if we are hungry, tired, fussy, playful or just want to be held. It's no accident that some experts contend that the majority of what we understand and believe as humans comes from non-verbal cues. While facts are important, how someone presents those facts through the combination of voice, facial expressions, body motion, gestures and other subtleties determines whether we believe him or her; i.e., whether we trust them.

I remember clearly going to a reception for a U.S. Senator many years ago. We were all given the opportunity to shake his hand. Though few words were spoken, at the moment I grasped his hand and looked at his face, I had the distinct sensation that he was a person who could not be trusted. Later, after having been a vocal crusader for morality and honesty in government, he was discredited by his deception and not re-elected.

To further reinforce my argument about the difficulties of establishing trust without in-person contact, a recent study by the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia found that people are more likely to lie when texting. The study, using college students, set up an imaginary stock exchange with part of the group as brokers selling stock and the other part acting as buyers. When the researchers included actual money and gave brokers inside information about the businesses, the opportunities to win by lying increased the amount of untruths. Since texting is a common form of communication among younger citizens, it will likely increase opportunities for deception as will other forms of digital, written communication.

As business people and employee owners, here are some suggestions to consider if faced with concerns about a person's honesty or trustworthiness regarding an important relationship, a contract, employment, large purchase, etc.

1. Ask to meet in person. While this may not be practical in all situations, the more non-verbal cues we can observe and sense, the more we can address honesty and trust. If we

are faced with a decision that involves large amounts of money, people's jobs, welfare or lives or other serious matters, there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings.

2. If in-person meetings are not practical, do a video conference or a telephone call. All subtle cues are not easily apparent with video conference technology, but some are. We can witness discomfort, judge how people face the camera, and hear and sense things with their voices. Telephones have long been an accurate tool to tell if people are nervous, distraught, etc. They can give us good clues about trust as well.
3. Finally, always check references. It has been said by many counselors that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Ask to talk to references. Better yet, ask to talk to ones that will give good and not so good references. Honest people will let you see their flaws. We are wise to never trust a person who claims no imperfections.

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About the Author



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