

# Is Trust at Work?

By BRIAN CARLSEN

## “TRUST IS THE LUBRICATION THAT MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO WORK.” - WARREN BENNIS

The Internet search phrase “restoring trust in government” returned approximately 244,000 hits for me this morning. Clearly there is a deep and wide sensitivity around the importance and urgency of realizing trust in our public institutions locally, nationally and globally. It is an enormous topic, and spotlighted even more in an election year!

I do not intend to add my voice to those who cry for sweeping policy reform to regain trust in government (however well-meaning and laudable those voices are) but rather to explore trust where you work. My point of view here is that a key ingredient, and in many cases a necessary prerequisite, to having trust in government is growing it from the inside out. It starts with you and your team or agency.

Where do you start when it comes to building trust in government? An environment of trust can only form through the aggregate behaviors and experiences of an organization’s individual members and leaders over time. It is virtually impossible to instill such a culture simply by creating oversight and policing checkpoints to catch the bad guys. This reinforces a culture of mistrust when more trust is needed. Or as Paul G. Thomas stated in a 2007 Public Policy Forum speech, “Too much internal regulation, centralized control and surveillance based upon elaborate reporting requirements will restrict the autonomy, flexibility, creativity and innovation which are needed in a period of rapid change.”

Leaders in the private sector have discovered the importance of interpersonal and organizational trust through hard-won experience. Norm Blake, former Chairman, President and CEO of USF&G states, “from my experience of having turned around several companies, I have learned first hand the importance of earning the trust of those involved. The trust and confidence that you earn with your board of directors, managers, employees, customers, and vendors determines your ability to institute change and take the necessary actions to save the company and lead it to prosperity.” The same is true for any organizational leader in the public sector who is attempting to fulfill expectations in times of diminished resources.

When trust levels are high, performance and productivity increase. In a Social Science Research Network article “Trust and Efficiency,” Chami and Fullenkamp observe that “when employees who work together trust each other, they exert more effort in their jobs and expend less effort monitoring each other. This leads to increased productivity, lower costs, and greater satisfaction for workers as well as shareholders.” (<http://papers.ssrn.com>)

The concept of trust is complicated. Trust is clearly a powerful force while being notoriously hard to quantify and act upon. Yet there are some straightforward ways to think about instilling trust where you work.

## A DEFINITION OF TRUST

In *Trust Rules: How to Tell the Good Guys From the Bad Guys in Work and Life*, Linda Stroh, Ph.D. describes trust in this way, “Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable—a willingness to take a risk that someone will not harm us. When we place our trust in another person, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, because we have positive expectations of another’s behavior.”

## A TRUST EQUATION

A quick way to erode trust is by acting in ways that are self-oriented. Charles Green in *Trusted Business Relationships: The Core Concepts* depicts the Trust Equation as follows:

$$T = \frac{C + R + I}{S}$$

The level of trustworthiness (T) assigned to another is the sum of credibility (C), reliability (R), and intimacy (I) divided by the level of self-oriented (S) behavior.

Quite simply, the trust level will go up if the numerator increases or denominator decreases, and will go down when the numerator decreases or denominator increases. With only one factor (S) in the denominator, an increase here (more self-oriented behavior) results in much more rapid erosion of trust.

*Reducing the denominator:* Reduce or eliminate self-oriented behaviors. Some examples of people demonstrating self-orientation include:

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- ◆ Consistently looking after their own needs and interests without regard (or with disregard) for the needs and interests of others
- ◆ Ensuring that they win while others lose
- ◆ Saying one thing and doing another
- ◆ Taking credit for the work of others
- ◆ Breaking a promise
- ◆ Being unappreciative or ungrateful
- ◆ Failing to apologize when an apology is in order
- ◆ Listening poorly or not at all
- ◆ Not admitting mistakes
- ◆ Being defensive rather than open and welcoming of feedback

## TIPS FOR GROWING PERSON-TO-PERSON TRUST

Using these concepts as a foundation, here are some tips that a leader can follow to build and sustain an environment of trust.

- ◆ Get to know your people; their preferences, motivations, interests and aspiration. Hold monthly information conversations to check in with your people.
- ◆ Be careful to make promises and commitments that you can keep. If you cannot keep a promise you have made to a colleague, apologize, tell the person what happened and how you plan to follow-up.
- ◆ To be seen as someone who has the ability and the credibility to be a trustworthy person, you must be seen as someone who trusts. For example, avoid being a micromanager, giving assignments with tight constraints and managing others too closely—unable to trust another person's sense of responsibility and initiative. Instead, be clear on required outcomes, and more flexible on methods to get there.

*“A person who trusts no one can't be trusted.” - Jerome Blattner*

- ◆ Avoid hiring people who may support or create a climate of distrust. In your hiring criteria, define what integrity or character means in behavioral terms.
- ◆ After hiring employees, trust them from the start. Coach for lapses in judgment, but continue to trust.

*“Don't employ someone you suspect, nor suspect someone you employ.” - Chinese Proverb*

- ◆ Be benevolent—show concern and care for others. This type of behavior begets similar behavior in the organization, so it has a reinforcing, contagious effect.

*“People love to be nice, but you must give them the chance.” - Pierre-August Renoir*

- ◆ Communicate clearly, with openness, honesty and transparency. Be truly sincere in what you say. Avoid spinning the truth.

*“The highest compact we can make with our fellow is – ‘Let there be truth between us two forevermore.’” - Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## A HOPEFUL THOUGHT

When you, your colleagues and your constituents can say, “yes, trust is at work here,” you will have gone a long way in serving the public interest and in providing a positive culture where members can flourish. And, just maybe, you will have begun a process of trust building that will have ever-widening positive impact on the way government works across agencies and constituencies. Being worthy of trust begins with who you are and how you approach your work every day. ■

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