

Trust, Language and Action In the Workplace

By Charles Feltman

Most successful managers and executives will tell you that trust is essential to the effectiveness of their teams, their departments, their companies. But if you ask them how they build and maintain trust their answers are often simplistic. Even those who consistently maintain strong trust relationships with those around them will say things like, “I keep my commitments” or “I tell it like it is and expect my managers to do the same.” While keeping promises and speaking the truth are important to building trust, there is far more to it than this.

As we will see, trust and trustworthiness in relationships between individuals offers enormous benefits to a company. Building trust between groups within an organization is also important to sustained success. A third key distinction is the difference between a trusted leader and one who also has the capacity to build and maintain a culture of trust in his or her organization. A leader must be trusted in order to create a culture of trust, but trusted leaders often fail to create such a culture and as a result still suffer the consequences of low trust. In this article we will look at the organizational value of having high trust between individuals, and explore the specific behaviors and actions that form trusting relationships in the workplace. Subsequent articles will address building trust between groups, and how leaders can intentionally create a culture of trust throughout an organization.

The Disaster of Distrust

“I don’t trust that Sharon will follow through or, if she does, that she’ll do it right,” Alan says, explaining why he spent several hours doing a task that belonged to

one of the other people on a product branding task force he had been appointed to.

Leonard, a middle manager in a computer chip manufacturing company, complains, “I don’t trust that Tom [his boss] will support me on my plan. He tells me I have his full support, but I’m afraid when it comes up in executive committee he’ll back down the minute Brad or one of the other execs takes a shot at it. He’s done it a couple of times before. I hate not trusting my boss. It really bothers me, and I don’t know what to do about it. It makes me wonder why I even bother coming to work here.”

Susan, a marketing director for an ad agency, tells me, “Jim agreed to have the

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proposal for this new client on my desk by Tuesday afternoon. It wasn’t. Wednesday I went and asked him for it. By then it was not only late, it had typos and grammatical errors in it. Definitely not something I could give to the client. Jim is really good on the creative side and it would be a shame to lose that talent. But we hired him as a creative team leader and I realize I’ve been taking some of the work we hired him to do and giving it to other people just so I know it’ll get done. If I can’t trust him to keep his commitments we may have to invite him to leave, which would be a shame because we’ve invested a lot in him. Plus he’s such a creative guy.”

In all three of these instances people expressed distrust in an individual with whom they worked. In each case that distrust was costing the individuals and the company. Lost trust equals lost time, money, energy, creativity, commitment and investment. It creates undue stress, resentment, resignation, and eventually leads to cynicism. The cost of lost trust in businesses is enormous.

Alan spent considerable time doing work that was not on his to-do list, creating stress and resentment along the way. As it turned out, Alan's actions also have angered and undermined the self-confidence of the team member whose task he did. Leonard's distrust of his boss had begun costing his company in lost productivity as over time he had made less and less effort to put forward new ideas. Susan's lost trust in Jim was costing time, creating bad feelings, and threatened to result in her company losing a talented artist.

The Cost of Trust Lost

Studies recently conducted by Tony Simons, Associate Professor of Management at Cornell University Hotel School, offer hard data on the effect of trust on a company's bottom line. In one study he and his research team found that of 76 hotels they surveyed, those where employees strongly believed their managers followed through on promises and demonstrated the values they preached were *substantially more profitable* than those whose managers scored average or lower. Simons notes in an executive summary, "Employee perceptions of their managers' integrity—both keeping promises and demonstrating espoused values—were strongly linked to hotel profitability.

Employees' belief in managers' integrity, and their trust in managers, have a lot more impact on profits than more traditional issues like employee 'satisfaction' or even 'commitment.'"¹ In those organizations where employees deem their managers to be trustworthy everyone was a beneficiary.

As Simons' studies show, there is direct value in maintaining high trust at work. Trust is an essential ingredient of effective work—creativity, positive engagement and coordinated action.

Yet we seldom talk directly about trust in our companies, even when we believe that it is low. We fail to have intentional conversations to build and maintain trust. We go about doing what we judge will engender and maintain trust in others, but we rarely check it out to see how

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we're doing. And when we find we distrust others we rarely address it directly with them. Instead we pretend outwardly that trust exists even though we know it doesn't. Robert C. Solomon and Fernando Flores term this way of interacting *cordial hypocrisy*, "the defensive pretense of trust and agreement that hides fear and resentment and makes honest communication impossible."²

Trust In Language and Action

In their study, Simons and his team measured peoples' assessments of their managers' credibility, what he calls *behavioral integrity*, by asking the respondents of their survey to use a five-point scale to rate how strongly they agreed with statements such as "My manager delivers on promises" and "My manager practices what he preaches". In this sense trust can be seen as a set of assessments one

person makes about another. The assessments made by the people who participated in the study were based on their observations of their managers' words and actions, and how the subordinates interpreted those words and actions.

Is building and maintaining trust, then, simply a function of keeping commitments, of walking one's talk? While it is certainly a critical part of building trust it's not the whole story. As anyone who has worked in an organization knows, we make commitments in an environment where many, often opposing demands compete for our time and allegiance. Moreover, we do so in the context of multiple relationships with bosses, peers, subordinates, customers, even our families, friends and members of our communities outside of work. Trust is a dynamic aspect of all of these relationships. As we'll see, establishing and sustaining trust in this context includes and goes beyond the elements of Simons' *behavioral integrity*.

Still, when all is said and done, both trust and distrust spring from our language—what we say and how we say it—and the actions that follow. We can begin to understand how to intentionally build and sustain trust, then, by examining the language of trust. In our conversations at work we *assert* facts, make *assessments* (judgments or opinions) about our experiences, *declare* our feelings and intentions, and *request*, *offer* and *promise* particular actions. By being careful and intentional about how we speak and what we say, we have a much better chance of aligning our actions with them.

Here a woman named Anita describes her relationship with her boss, Randy. Randy is in charge of information systems for a mid-sized service company. Anita and her co-worker, Tom, both report to Randy.

“I have a great working relationship with Randy. Even though he is our boss, Randy, Tom and I really work as a team most of the time. We get a lot done and have a good time doing it. And it shows because our clients often tell us they appreciate what we do for them, which makes me proud to be part of this organization. The three of us don't always agree, and he does have final say because he's the boss, but he'll always hear Tom and me out before he makes a decision. He makes his share of mistakes, of course, just like Tom and I do. But we all take responsibility for them when we do, and we try to learn from them. Another thing that is really important to me is that when Randy states an opinion it is based on solid evidence, on facts.

“The bottom line is I trust Randy. I trust that he knows what he's doing and that he has what's good for our clients and the company foremost in mind. I also believe he has my professional growth and development in mind. I'm really glad to be working here and working for Randy.”

In contrast, here is a woman named Lisa talking about her boss, Ray. Lisa, a colleague named Ann, and their boss are supposed to work as a team to process loans.

“Our office has the lowest productivity in the state and it's really because of him. To be honest, I don't think the man knows what he's doing most of the time, but he won't admit it or ask anyone how to do things right. Instead he makes mistakes and then blames someone else when they [his mistakes] cause problems, which they always do. The 'someones' who gets blamed are usually me or Ann. I've even caught him in outright lies he's told to cover for mistakes he made. If I see he's about to do something that isn't to regulations and tell

him about it, does he thank me for it? No. What he does is he argues with me about it, like he knows what he's talking about, until I show him the specific regulation or procedure.

When Anita says, "I trust Randy", she is actually talking about several different assessments, or judgments, she holds about Randy.

"Not only do I not trust that he knows what he's doing on the loans, I'm sure he's badmouthing me and Ann to his boss and to our customers to make it sound like we're the ones who are messing up. I don't even talk to the man anymore unless I absolutely have to. And it's too bad, because it's the customers who ultimately suffer."

While these two working relationships are structurally similar, they are obviously very different in nature. The possibilities for action are vastly different in each of them and they produce polar opposite results. Trust, or its absence, is at the heart of both of these relationships. But the trust between Anita and Randy didn't just appear full blown one day any more than did the distrust between Lisa and her boss.

Trust Isn't Just Trust

When Anita says, "I trust Randy", she is actually talking about several different *assessments*, or judgments, she holds about Randy. She judges that what he does will be *consistent* with what he says—that he will walk his talk. But there are several other aspects of trust wrapped up in her statement. The degree of trust Anita has in Randy is based on her assessments having to do with his consistency, sincerity, competence, credibility, and the benevolence he holds

towards her. Taken together, they make up what she calls the trust she has in him.

Anita is not alone in her strong trust of her manager. Randy's peers and his manager also express an equally high level of trust in him. As Anita's description attests, the high level of trust that Randy evokes in the people around him is good for him, good for them, and good for the company they work in. What does Randy do to evoke a high level of trust among his fellow workers? To answer that question it is useful to make distinctions among each of the different assessments of trust.

Consistency. When he makes a commitment to do something Randy treats it as a *promise*. He takes care only to commit to what he knows he can do and, once committed, he does everything in his power to deliver.

He is clear and direct in making commitments, and is equally clear about saying *no* when a request is made of him that he doesn't believe he can fulfill. Or, he may make a *counteroffer*, an offer to do something different than what was requested, something that he knows he can commit to and fulfill. For example, if his boss tells him he needs to complete a project by a particular date and he doesn't believe he can, Randy makes this clear to his boss, along his reasons for thinking so. Then he offers to do what he knows he can commit to—a later date, for example, or fewer deliverables. Or, he might ask that other commitments to be taken off his plate so that he can deliver in the timeframe his boss originally requested.

What Randy is careful *not* to do is commit to something he doubts he can accomplish successfully. While this may seem like the obvious course of action, all too often

people make commitments, without taking time to determine if they can actually deliver on them. Or they knowingly make commitments they can't support because they believe saying *no* or offering a more achievable alternative is not acceptable. In either case, the overall result is that they fail to deliver as promised and trust is eroded.

Another important word in the vocabulary of trust is *renegotiation*. If Randy finds that he can't do so as promised because of some change in the situation (unexpected higher priority demands on his time, for example) he renegotiates with whomever he has made the commitment to *as soon as he realizes he can't deliver*.

Being clear and intentional about how he responds to requests, and even commands, Randy makes it easier for himself to keep his commitments.

Sincerity. Giving others reason to assess that we are sincere in what we say is primarily a matter of being *congruent* when we speak. Before Randy makes a promise or offer, he checks his internal congruence. He asks himself, "Can I follow through on this? Do I have any reservations about it and, if so, what are they?" He may even ask himself questions like, "When I think about committing to this, do I feel any anxiety or fear? If so, what is that about? What is my body telling me about my ability to honor this commitment?"

Like anyone who works with others in an organization, Randy must declare intentions, make offers and promises in the context of multiple different relationships. When he

offers or promises something to Anita, for example, he has to be sure those others—his boss, peers, other subordinates, customers—can live with it, as well. Like many of us, Randy has at times been tempted to say to himself something like, "I know this will work well for Anita, but I suspect my boss may not like it. Oh, well, I'll go ahead and make the offer to her now and deal with him later."

But Randy knows this kind of internal conversation is a red flag that he is not congruent, that the conversation in his mind contradicts the one he is having with Anita. It can lead a situation in which he must later retract his offer or promise to Anita. She, in turn, will likely interpret this as Randy "going back on his word" and question his sincerity in the future. By being rigorous and intentional in checking his own internal congruence, Randy supports others' assessments that he is sincere.

Competence. Being competent means doing well what we declare we will do. It does *not* mean never making mistakes. When Randy says he will develop a new IS strategy for his company, or lead a system design team, or serve as Anita's manager, he is saying that he believes he has the capability to do these things competently, and that he will likely make some mistakes *and* is open to learning from them. By intentionally setting an appropriate expectation for himself and others in these areas, he can do his best work, ask for help when he doesn't know something, and learn by making mistakes. All of these actions are considered by others to be part of his competence.

Assessments of Trust In Action

Alan and Sharon

“I don’t trust that person” may mean *I hold one or two of these assessments about that person as negative*. For example, Alan, the member of the product branding team quoted earlier, said he didn’t trust a fellow team member, Sharon, to do the work right. When pressed, he acknowledged that his assessment about her was that Sharon wasn’t competent to do the work to the committee’s standards. He wasn’t questioning her sincerity, credibility or benevolence, just her competence. Yet lacking these distinctions he simply said, “I don’t trust Sharon...” By understanding the distinctions between the different assessments of trust, Sharon can better understand Alan’s concerns and can more effectively build trust with him. Alan, in turn, can examine the validity of his assessment of Sharon. That is, he can try to *ground* the specific assessment by asking himself on what basis he made it. In fact, when Alan, with the help of his coach, realized how his assessment and subsequent actions had created a great deal of stress for himself and alienated Sharon he had a conversation with her about it. He was able to tell her specifically what behavior of hers led him to make the assessments he did about her competence. When “I don’t trust you” became “I had a concern about your ability to do the work, and here is why” Sharon was able to hear Alan and make some changes in her behavior.

Leonard and Tom

Contrast this to Leonard, the middle manager, who distrusted his boss Tom. His issue wasn’t Tom’s consistency, competence or credibility. He questioned his boss’ sincerity and benevolence toward him. When asked specifically what he imagined, Leonard said that the thought had occurred to him that Tom had no intention of taking his idea to the executive committee because he knew one of the members would shoot it down and Tom didn’t care enough about the idea to risk political capital supporting it. When Leonard finally confronted Tom with his distrust Tom became angry and defensive, which exacerbated Leonard’s distrust. But after some coaching he realized that it was, indeed, his problem to fix, not Leonard’s. While he found that these assessments of lost trust are more difficult to rebuild, he made it a priority. By understanding the nuances of the language of trust he was able to recognize situations where, by being careful and intentional about what he said he could more easily follow it with actions that were congruent. Tom also saw how his actions could lead Leonard to assess that he didn’t hold his interests to be important, and understood the devastating effect this had on Leonard’s trust and commitment to the work.

Credibility. Randy is careful and intentional about both what he *asserts* to be true and the *assessments* he makes. When he asserts something as a fact he is careful to ensure that to the best of his knowledge it is true. As he knows, there is nothing that erodes one’s credibility faster than being consistently shown to be wrong on our facts. Equally important, when he offers an assessment or opinion about something Randy takes care to be sure that, as much as possible, it is based on sound evidence or fact. Also, he is rigorous about not treating his assessments as if they are facts. He recognizes they are only his opinions and if

evidence doesn’t support them, or if someone else can offer a more valid assessment, he will let go of his in favor of the better one. Because of this, people trust the accuracy of Randy’s facts and the validity of the assessments he offers.

Benevolence.³ As Anita says, “I also believe he has my professional growth and development in mind.” She regards Randy as holding her interests and their company’s interest at least as high as his own self-interest.

Benevolence that can only be determined over time. In conversations with Anita it became clear that initially she relied more heavily on her assessments (and the assessments she got from others) of Randy's consistency, competence and credibility to determine whether and how much she was willing to trust him. If, after working with him for some time she had determined that Randy kept his commitments, was competent, and credible, *but* only had his own self-interest at heart she would probably say that she *did not* trust him. In this case, though, Anita assesses that Randy is benevolent toward her and it has become a key ingredient of her trust in him.

Trust and Betrayal

It is often said that it takes a long time to build trust but it can be lost in an instant. It has been my experience, however, that people who are intentionally rigorous in using the language of trust and who follow what they say with consistent actions build trusting relationships that are enduring even in the face of betrayal. Equally important, however, is that they use another form of the language of trust: *acknowledge and apologize*.

In their book *Building Trust*, Solomon and Flores state that what they call "authentic trust" always recognizes the possibility of betrayal. Betrayal may come in many forms and can range from the unintentional error to the calculated lie. When we trust authentically we acknowledge that we may be betrayed in some way. Solomon and Flores consider this fundamentally different from two other ways of trusting. One they call "simple trust" in which we trust without any consideration for the possibility that we may be betrayed. The other they term "blind

trust" as a way of describing how we can delude ourselves into continuing to trust another even as he or she clearly betrays us.

For someone who is engaged in simple trust betrayal is a shattering experience. The betrayal looms larger than the innocent trust that preceded it, and the betrayer is usually vilified while the virtue of the one betrayed is played up. For those caught up in blind trust, when betrayal is finally acknowledged it is also

shattering, but usually more to the self-confidence of the one betrayed. In both cases, the betrayal is difficult to repair. It is far easier to restore trust when we trust authentically, in a way that acknowledges the possibility of betrayal *and* the possibility of rapprochement.

Restoring Trust

The only known antidote to betrayal—whether the person who has been betrayed trusted simply, blindly or authentically—is to acknowledge and apologize.

To *acknowledge* the action that created the betrayal means taking responsibility for it as is due, no more, no less. This, apparently, is more difficult than it would seem. People in our business and government institutions from the bottom to the top routinely seek to avoid taking responsibility for their breaches of trust, whether they be simple mistakes, errors in judgment or lies they have told. If blame can be cast on others that is the preferred tactic. Unfortunately, these actions further erode trust and deepen the betrayal. Before trust can be restored a betrayal must be acknowledged.

To *apologize* is to ask for forgiveness, and it is also much more than that. In the language of trust, when we apologize we are also

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saying *we intend to redeem ourselves*. This, in turn, opens the possibility of a conversation about how this can be done.

Acknowledging and apologizing are essential to restoring lost trust. When people like Randy realize they have made mistakes or acted in ways that damaged trust they acknowledge responsibility for their actions and apologize for whatever damage it has caused. Using these elements of the language of trust, they begin a conversation to reestablish it.

Learning a New Language

The nuances of the language of trust can be learned. But using it intentionally and consistently takes practice. Neither learning nor using the language of trust is necessarily easy in today's organizations. In many the culture doesn't support it, there is little conversation about it, and it is rare to find an organization that has any kind of explicit public agreements about using it.

I have had the privilege of working with a number of people who identified a need to build or rebuild trust and asked for help in doing so. It requires acknowledging the issue and talking about it. It also takes discovering what elements of the language of trust are missing—what needs to be learned in order to consistently build and maintain trust. Many people need support as they begin learning and practicing the

language of trust intentionally and dependably.

My experience is that coaching is one of the most powerful tools for helping people to learn—and learn to practice—the language of trust. A good coach provides the support necessary for learning, correcting mistakes, and eventually making the language of trust a solid practice.

Becoming a fluent practitioner of the language of trust should be a top priority for all of us. Building and maintaining mutual trust is essential to the success of our corporations, government and social institutions, as well as our communities and families. To encourage this we need more public discourse and agreement about what constitutes integrity and why it is important to trust and be trusted. We speak constantly about the importance of winning, of increasing revenue, power and influence. We need to talk about trust, as well. Without a strong foundation of mutual trust, none of the rest can be sustained.



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¹ *The High Cost of Lost Trust*, by Tony Simons in Harvard Business Review, September 2002. Also see <http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/tls11/>.

² *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships and Life*. Robert C. Solomon and Fernando Flores; Oxford University Press, 2001; page 11.

³ Use notion of benevolence as a dimension of trust has been used by a number of researchers who have studied trust relationships. In their seminal paper, An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust (Academy of Management Review, 1995, Vol. 20), Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis and F. David Schoorman define benevolence as, "...the perception of a positive orientation of the trustee toward the trustor."