

The Power of Trust

Eight Ways Leaders Can Build Trust with Their People

By Aubrey Malphurs

(Number 1, January 26, 2001) One of the most vital assets of a leader in the early twenty-first century is trust. It's more important than being innovative, creative, intelligent, intentional, and strategic. Why? If people don't trust you, they won't follow you. And if they won't follow you, these other things don't matter. It's impossible to lead without trust, and the younger generations – though slow to grant it – insist on it. This raises the question: How do leaders develop trust? The following are eight keys to developing trust in your ministry.

The first is to do the right and just thing (Prov. 21:3). But what is the right and just thing? One involves keeping your word or any promises (Prov. 20:25, Num. 30:1-2). People trust you when your deeds are consistent with your words. When you "walk your talk," or "practice what you preach." It's all about "follow through." You do what you say you'll do. This teaches us to be careful about what we promise or commit to. We must not be too hasty to commit. We must remember not to promise what we can't deliver or what you might not want to deliver later on. In short, "bite your tongue."

Doing the right thing also includes telling the truth (Prov. 24:26; Eph. 4:13, 25). Be honest in your dealings with people. The temptation is to rationalize or fudge on the truth, especially when it makes us look bad. Our abilities to rationalize what we say and do are amazing—at least mine are. In addition, I would add a warning: Don't brutalize people with the truth. We can take the truth that someone has erred in the past and never let them forget it even though God and everyone else has forgiven them.

A second key is to be authentic (Mt. 6:1-8). People trust those they know and tend to distrust those whom they don't know. This can be a generational issue. For example,

preboomers tend not to want authenticity from their leaders. They ask, How can we follow you if you're no different from us? You must be a notch above us. However, boomers and gen xers insist on authenticity. They want to know that leaders are like them-that they struggle with the same or similar issues.

Authenticity leads to knowledge of who you are. Therefore, be open, transparent-"What they see is what they get," or "Who they see is who they get." Don't wear a mask. Risk self-disclosure, vulnerability. Finally, know who you are, and then be who you are-that's authenticity.

A third key to building trust is keeping confidences (Prov. 11:13; 25:9, 10). When someone confides in you, keep that information confidential. Just assume that the information is confidential or, if need be, then ask. There is always the temptation to gossip (we want people to pay attention to us and to listen to us.) Also, resist the temptation to tell your spouse. It puts them in a difficult situation-it tempts them to want to tell others.

An exception to all this is counseling situations. While I hold these events confidential, I never promise confidentiality to individuals in case they reveal something that others need to know about such as potential suicide, abuse, injury to another person, and so on.

A fourth key is to trust people (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31). If you want people to trust you, then you must first trust them. "Do unto others. . . ." You must take the initiative-it begins with you. Taking the initiative in trust-giving means that you'll have to take some risks, and that you'll occasionally get burned. When you get burned, don't make the mistake of not trusting again. People who can't or won't trust others make poor leaders. This means they do much of the ministry by themselves. Even worse, people sense their mistrust and react adversely.

Should you find that you can't trust someone, follow two steps. First, do all that you can to correct the problem. Second, if a staff person, and you can't correct the problem, then you may have to dismiss him or her.

A fifth key to building trust is to communicate well with people. This affects two areas. One is speaking. Keep your people reasonably informed as to what is going on in the organization. Most tend not to pay attention or care. However, they do pay attention and care when you don't keep them informed. Some think that you're hiding something. This, of course, doesn't include confidential matters. You must not share everything.

The other area is listening. Give people a hearing. While you don't have to agree with a person, you do need to listen to what he or she has to say. You owe them that. Even though they don't get their way, people respond and trust better when they know they've been heard.

A sixth key is to be available to people in their time of need (Prov. 25:19, 27:10). Everyone goes through difficult times in their lives when they need others. When your people go through these times, try to be there for them. You don't need to say anything profound or deeply theological unless they ask. Simply be there for them-listen to them. Former writer, Joe Bailey, lost three children. He recounts how one person came and talked endlessly and showered him with Scripture. Bailey grew weary and wished he would leave. Another came and sat with him and simply listened to him. Bailey hoped he would never leave.

A seventh key is to delegate responsibility. When you delegate responsibility to people, you communicate that you trust them – especially when it's important matters. But won't they make mistakes? The answer is, of course. Everyone makes mistakes-they can't be avoided. Allow them to make mistakes as long as they learn from their mistakes.

A final key is to accept responsibility for failure (Prov. 28:13). No person is exempt from failure. As I've said above, everyone messes up sometime. What is critical is how you

handle your failure. The wrong way is to attempt to cover up your mistakes. The right way is not to cover them up. When you make mistakes, you'll lose credibility along with some people's trust. The amount depends on the magnitude of the failure. In most cases, however, you can regain some credibility and trust.

The following are five steps for recovering lost trust (the five A's):

First, admit that you messed up. If someone asks or the situation warrants it, come clean. Never attempt to cover it up. This is a matter of integrity. It will also defang your enemies and those who oppose your leadership.

The second step is to acknowledge responsibility for your actions. Take responsibility for your mistakes and any wrongful actions and let people know that you are doing so. Share some of the responsibility for the mistakes of those serving under you.

The third is to apologize for what you've done. Be genuinely sorry for what happened. Tell people you've hurt that you're sorry.

The fourth is to accept the consequences. People may say or do some harsh things. You'll have to learn to live with people's responses or "roll with the punches."

The fifth is to act to correct the situation. Ask, What can I do to correct the situation? What can I do to make it right? If the answer is ethical and within reason, then do it.

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