Facilitating Trust:
What team leaders need to know
by Jay Gordon Cone
FACILITATING TRUST: WHAT TEAM LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

Trust describes an attribute of our relationship to a surprising number of things. We talk about trusting a person, for example: “I would trust her with my life.” We may talk about trusting an object: “You expect me to cross the gorge on that bridge?!” We can trust (or not) a situation, a company’s brand, or a celebrity endorsing a product.

Regardless of how we define trust, the one common element that warrants the attention of leaders and organizations is this: whenever we choose to trust, we give something of inestimable value. In this article, I talk briefly about why it’s worthwhile to pay attention to trust and then describe a framework for understanding what people want in return for their trust. I conclude with practical tips for leaders who want to facilitate trusting relationships and create a work environment where trust thrives.

GETTING THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT VERSUS GETTING SECOND GUESSED

If trust is ultimately about giving something of value, what exactly is it that we’re giving, and what makes it so valuable? The gift I offer when I choose to trust we idiomatically refer to as “giving the benefit of the doubt.”

Essentially, when I trust, I’m choosing to hold the belief that something good will happen instead of holding the belief that something bad will happen, even when the available facts make either outcome equally likely. I’m positively disposed toward that which I trust, so that at the point in time I’m required to act I’m betting on a favorable - or at least, a harmless -outcome. Because we hold a world-view that our interests are being protected, we ascribe positive intentions to a trusted leader, and look for ways to reinforce our beliefs. The trusted leader is late for an appointment, and I assume something unavoidable is preventing her from arriving on time. The trusted leader asks for a report, and I assume that she is preparing for a critical meeting and wants to feel prepared.

When I’m unwilling to give the benefit of the doubt - or worse, when I fear something bad will happen - I begin to “second guess” the actions of a leader. Instead of ascribing positive intentions, I speculate about hidden agendas or motives that do not necessarily align with my interests. The distrusted leader is late for an appointment, and I assume she doesn’t value my time, or is intentionally avoiding me. The distrusted leader asks for a report, and I assume she is checking up on me, or gathering ammunition to be used against me.
Our true relationship to our leaders generally falls somewhere in between these extremes. The point here is to consider the implications to the organization when I freely give the benefit of the doubt, versus the implications of my second-guessing what leaders are up to.

OUR TRUST PROFILE – HOW WE ASSESS TRUSTWORTHINESS
A deeper look at one theory of motivation sheds light on what each of us needs in order to trust. David McClelland considered three different attributes (Achievement, Control, and Affiliation) as distinct categories of needs we each have. In an organizational setting, we can think of McClelland’s attributes as: Results, Process and Relationship (RPR).

RESULTS, PROCESS, RELATIONSHIP
Because leaders are accountable for results, they tend to focus their energy and attention on reaching the goal quickly. Consequently, leaders often inadvertently undermine the long-term success of endeavor.

Facilitative leaders balance their focus across three dimensions — results, process, and relationships — for multidimensional success.

Results refers to the accomplishment of the task, or achievement of the goal.

Process means how the work gets done, how it is designed and managed, and how it is measured and evaluated.

Relationship refers to the quality of one’s experience in relating to colleagues, customers, and the organization, including the level of trust and respect.

Useful When:
This model is useful in determining goals and measures for the success of any endeavor. Often, the “process” and “relationships” dimensions are leading indicators of what you can expect in terms of “results.”
Results You Can Expect:
A more satisfying work experience.
A higher level of productivity, because people feel valued and respected.

Results satisfaction relates to our desire to strive for a goal or accomplish a task. Process satisfaction relates to our desire for predictability and influence. Relationship satisfaction is about our needs for rapport: how we’re treated, and the extent to which we feel valued, included, and safe.

To find out how you might score, use the framework beginning on page 7, and then plot your score on the following page.

Applying McClelland’s attributes to trust, we can begin to see how our personality dictates the criteria we follow when making an assessment of trustworthiness. If results matter to me, then I will consider an individual trustworthy based on whether commitments are met. If I can count on you to do what you say you’re going to do, I will trust you. In other words, like me, you place a value on accomplishing what you set out to do.

If process matters to me, then I will consider an individual trustworthy based on the predictability of that person’s approach to things. If the way you plan, strategize, sequence and organize your approach makes sense to me, then I will trust you. Like me, you value having a consistent and orderly process, so I know what to expect.

If relationship matters to me, then I will consider an individual trustworthy based on how he or she treats me and others. If you’re inclusive, encourage openness, and you demonstrate empathy, then I can trust you. Like me, you value people’s feelings and consider how decisions and situations will impact people, so I know you’ll look out for me and my interests.

Of course, we apply all three attributes to varying degrees based on the situation, the context, and the people involved. At times, I’m focused on the goal and may ignore the people and the process. At other times, I may pay exclusive attention to my relationships and let deadlines slip. Generally, however, I’m clear about what it takes for me to consider an individual trustworthy. Those who demonstrate over time that they share my priorities among attention to results, process, and relationship are most likely to get the benefit of the doubt from me.

Leaders who want to be viewed as trustworthy by a diverse group of people should pay equal attention to 1) doing what you say you’re going to do, 2) having a clear, consistent and well communicated approach, and 3) demonstrating that how people feel about their work and their colleagues matters.
TIPS FOR BUILDING TRUST

After assessing a team or an individual using the linked survey, you’ll end up with a coordinate that falls into one of the quadrants on the graph. Each quadrant suggests a unique strategy. Each strategy has a number of tactics, or tips, a leader can employ:

To Increase Transparency (high safety, low certainty)
- Express the rationale for your actions and decisions (see Levels of Involvement in Decision Making*).
- Externalize your thought process: “I’m trying to figure out . . . and right now I’m thinking that . . . “
- Hold frequent meetings to communicate both what’s known and what’s not known.

To Increase Appreciation (low safety, high certainty)
- Focus on what’s working.
- Say “thank you.”
- Learn what matters to the people with whom you work.
- Offer appropriate rewards and recognition (see Celebrating Accomplishment*).

To Increase Empathy (low safety, low certainty)
- Active listening without judgment (see inquiry techniques).
- Share your own feelings about facing uncertain situations.
- Check your understanding: “Are you saying that . . . ?”

To Increase Rapport (high safety, high certainty)
- Learn about the personal histories and interests of people.
- Share personal information about yourself and your vision of success (see Sharing an Inspiring Vision*).
- Enjoy relationship-building activities not specifically related to getting work done.

Naturally, all the above ideas would be helpful in any set of circumstances for building productive working relationships. Thinking through how individual styles and changing situations impact people’s willingness to trust will help you set priorities for change management and communication.
TRUST ASSESSMENT
This assessment is designed for use with the guidelines outlined in “Facilitating Trust,” by Jay Gordon Cone.

Part 1: Write the number that represents the degree to which you believe the statement accurately describes the person or team you’re rating (from 1 = very inaccurate to 5 = a completely accurate description)

Regarding the person or team I lead

- willingly takes risks ........................................... □
- expresses optimism, often describes the benefits the future will bring ................................ □
- has formal or informal power/has influence over others .................................................. □
- always expresses faith that things will work out .................................................................. □
- willingly shares personal thoughts and feelings ................................................................... □
- Safety Score (average of the ratings above) ........................................................................... □

Part 2: Write the number that represents the degree to which you believe the statement accurately describes the current situation you’re considering (from 1 = very inaccurate to 5 = a completely accurate description)

Regarding the person or team I lead...

- the stakes are low – the worst that could happen isn’t that bad ........................................... □
- the situation is familiar .............................................. □
- the people involved share similar views and opinions about things ................................... □
- the people involved have aligned interests and goals ......................................................... □
- the people involved tend to look out for one another ......................................................... □
- leadership’s actions and decisions are fairly predictable ..................................................... □
- people are well informed about what’s going on .............................................................. □
- Certainty Score (average of the ratings above) ................................................................. □
Part 3: Plot the “Safety Score” and the “Certainty Score” on the graph below.
What the person or group being asked to trust wants from their leaders…

The survey and graph are based on the research of Robert F. Hurley as described in his article The Decision to Trust; Harvard Business Review, September 2006.

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