The Trust Coach, Vol. 5: "Trust me, I'm your leader?"

One of the primary differentiating factors between good and great leaders is the ability to understand and build trust. The more senior a leadership role we take on, the less direct control we have over outcomes. We become more and more reliant on those who report to us for our own successes. In fact, at very senior levels, all of our goals and aspirations depend on the work of others.

Research and experience have repeatedly shown that higher trust levels within an organization lead to higher levels of employee engagement, organizational citizenship behaviours, profitability, and performance. There is conclusive economic evidence that organizations with higher trust levels perform better. In short, leaders who can build trust will run organizations that perform better and are more likely to be successful.

In this version of The Trust Coach I will be reviewing the story of "Pat" (not his real name), an executive I coached through various stages of his professional development. Pat's needs and skill sets changed over the course of his career, but elements of the need to build trust were always present.

The Story of Pat

Pat was referred to me by another coaching client. He was an upper mid-level manager and his team was underperforming. When I first started working with Pat, he expressed extreme frustration that his direct reports seemed so listless and passive. "I can't get them to give any real feedback, offer up suggestions, or take any risks. When I tell them about group and organizational priorities, they seem so slow to respond and indifferent. I'm also the last one to know when anything goes wrong." Of course, when I heard this, being a trust expert, I immediately suspected this was a trust problem. I decided to follow up by interviewing some of Pat's direct reports to see what their perspective was.

It took time to get Pat's direct reports to open up, but when they did, they made a number of interesting comments: "They tell us everything is top priority, which essentially means that nothing is." "With all of the cutbacks, I just try to keep my head down." "There's no way I would push back on senior management or offer suggestions; I have no idea how they would respond." "There are always new priorities being announced; if you wait a month or two it always goes away and a new priority gets announced." These are all symptoms of a lack of trust in an organization. A follow-up survey of Pat's team showed that there was indeed a lack of trust in the organization, and more specifically a lack of trust in Pat himself.

One of the challenges I encounter most frequently is a fundamental lack of awareness around trust: what trust is, whom we trust, and who trusts us. When I ask senior executives, "Who trusts you?" I'll often get a long awkward pause, followed by some variant of, "How on Earth would I know?" The answer to this question is found in the definition of trust. Trust is the willingness to make yourself vulnerable to another. So, if you are a leader, ask yourself how those you lead can make themselves vulnerable, and whether they do so.

People are intrinsically vulnerable to their leaders, and can demonstrate trust by increasing that vulnerability in a number of ways. Giving clear and honest upward feedback to someone who has the ability to make your life miserable, or even fire you, can be daunting, to say the least. Telling your boss that Ted is goofing off, then finding out that Ted is your boss's drinking buddy, can quickly put your career in a tailspin. Investing time and energy learning how to pursue "new priorities" only to discover they've changed and your split attention has led to you not completing other work to your boss's satisfaction isn't just frustrating, it can be career-limiting. From the perspective of a subordinate, when things don't go as planned, it's usually not the leader who takes the spear; it's someone among the rank and file.

One of my favourite academic articles is "Learning through failure: the strategy of small losses," written by my friend and former advisor Sim Sitkin. Sim points out that if people are pushing to the limits of their abilities, they should be making mistakes. In part this is how we learn, grow and develop. If employees aren't making mistakes it may mean that they are being overly cautious and conservative – something that would indicate an unwillingness to trust, to make themselves vulnerable to the repercussions of making those mistakes.

When people decide to trust someone, or not, they ask themselves two fundamental questions. How likely am I to be harmed (perceived uncertainty) and if I'm harmed how badly will it hurt (perceived vulnerability). Our perceptions of uncertainty and vulnerability combine to give us a level of perceived risk. If our level of perceived risk is higher than the level of risk we are comfortable with we don't trust. This means that if we feel really vulnerable then we can't handle too much uncertainty. If we feel a lot of uncertainty then we can't handle very high levels of vulnerability. Employees can feel, and indeed be, extremely vulnerable at work. There is a lot at stake if they don't do well. We often spend more time at work than we do in any place other than our homes. We have friends and colleagues there, it forms a part of our identity, and it pays the bills. Struggles at work, losing your job or watching those around you lose their jobs can provoke intense feelings of unease.

Now what?

Pat struggled with the news that there was a trust problem with his subordinates, particularly the idea that they might not trust him. The results of our survey were clear, but hard to accept; people generally tend to believe they are trustworthy and that others should trust them. After all, they know the reasons for the things they do and believe that there are good reasons for the decisions they make. They seldom consider the perspective of others who may be affected and may not be aware of the reasons behind the decisions.

I wish that I could say that Pat was unique, or even rare, in his lack of awareness about how little his subordinates trusted him. Despite the fact that trust is critical to the success of leaders in any organization, most, like Pat, often don't have a very clear idea about how much (or how little!) they are trusted. Sim Sitkin, mentioned above, is Faculty Director of the Fuqua/Coach K Center of Leadership and Ethics (COLE) at Duke University. Based on self-report and survey data, one of the largest gaps COLE has found in their studies of organizations is the one between how much leaders believe they are trusted, and how much they actually are.

Leaders aren't alone in overestimating how much they are trusted; we all tend to believe that we are trustworthy. This may actually be one of the reasons that trust levels in our society have fallen so far. There is a lack of trust in the world, but since we all think we ourselves are trustworthy, it's always someone else's problem. And if it's someone else's problem, we tend not to take action.

While leaders aren't alone in overestimating how much they are trusted, they may find it harder than others to gain an accurate picture. As yet unpublished research by Tony Simons from the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration on top management teams suggests that all members of the team EXCEPT the leader have a very clear and consistent sense about how the team is doing. The leader seems to be completely out of the loop in terms of how well the team is getting along and functioning. Structural elements and power differences make others behave differently around the leader. There is often also a reluctance to admit to the boss that the rest of the team can't figure out how to get along.

The solution for Pat was to become more transparent with his thought processes. Over time we worked on creating a story that was comfortable for Pat and that he could refer back to when he made decisions or took actions. An example of this was Pat's public commitment to his subordinate's development. This meant that when he gave them tough feedback it was clearly aimed at helping them improve. Previously it was seen simply as him being mean or overly demanding. When he followed up that feedback with training and coaching to help them get better in areas they needed to improve in the story was that he was investing time and energy in helping them get better. Previously this had been seen as him micromanaging, nagging, and creating make work tasks. This transparency allowed Pat to systematically reduce the level of uncertainty that his people were experiencing in their interactions with him. Follow-up surveys six months later showed a significant difference in how Pat's subordinates were feeling about him. Team performance also began to dramatically improve.

Pat, version 2.0

After adopting this new approach, Pat made great progress within his organization and was rapidly promoted. There were a number of reasons for Pat's success. He had become increasingly skilled at building relationships with subordinates, peers, and those he reported to. Pat also worked very hard and consistently demonstrated strong technical skills throughout his career. He had never met a problem he couldn't outwork.

I was a bit shocked when I met with Pat 18 months after our original coaching sessions. He looked terrible. He had gained weight, lost hair, and looked incredibly stressed and exhausted. I asked him what was going on, and he said he was struggling to keep up. As he had risen through the ranks, his span of control had expanded: he had more responsibilities and more people reporting to him. He was running himself into the ground trying to oversee what everyone was doing, and attempting to keep up with the technical demands from a range of his direct reports.

As our span of control gets broader, we become less and less able to do everything, or even oversee everything that is happening. While it's possible to be very hands-on at lower levels of an organization, it becomes increasingly time-consuming to check everyone's work and micromanage people the higher we go. Pat had become great at getting others to trust him, but he was still really struggling to trust others.

As we move up the hierarchy, we are less and less able to rely on our technical competence to resolve problems. With the rate that technology is changing, it seems unrealistic to expect leaders to be able to manage the issues of running an organization while maintaining technical expertise. We eventually become overwhelmingly dependent on others for the success of the organization we are leading. As our dependence on others increases, so does the need for strong interpersonal skills – and trust.

Pat needed to realize that his people were going to make mistakes, and that was just part of their development. He needed to start trusting his people by letting go of certain things and slowly building his own confidence in his people's abilities. We moved forward by having Pat be conscious of letting small things go, clearly defining what success looked like, and working with Pat's subordinates to systematically build his trust with them. It took some time, but Pat was able to make the transition to a more balanced life and became even more effective as a leader.

Conclusion

The ability to understand others and build trust with them – in both directions – is one of the primary variables I've found that differentiates between good and great leaders. It's important not only to be trusted but also to be able to trust others. The good news is that this is a skill that you can work on and develop over time. The bad news is that not many leaders are actually aware enough to realize it's a problem, or something they should be working on.

We all have the ability to build trust with others, though it does come more naturally to some than to others. Trust building is a skill that we can all learn and we all have room to improve. Leaders can take steps to become more aware of trust levels within their organization. They can also take steps to improve the trust building skills that they have.

Do you know a leader who could use this information? Please feel free to pass it on. Are you a leader who would like to know more? Check out the website at www.trustunlimited.com.

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