



## The Trust Coach Vol 6: Trust in times of transition

Crap happens; it's how we respond that truly matters. This is the mantra I try to impart to my sons. The longer we live, the more likely we are to go through a significant transition. Whether this is the loss of a loved one, a job, or our sense of self through age or injury, we all eventually go through some type of transition. These transitions don't all have to be painful, but they can cause us to feel lost and incredibly vulnerable. (There are, of course, a number of positive transitions in life; this newsletter won't be dealing with those.)

A recent interview with Warren Buffet suggested that we may need to brace for an increase in the number of transitions we experience in our lives. Artificial intelligence is on the horizon and may well lead to massive disruptions in the work force. Many of us may face being made obsolete by machines. The interview sent a chill through me as I thought about the future that my sons face. How do I help them prepare for a future I have a hard time even envisioning? What types of skills or training will allow them to navigate when work as we know it may well be dramatically different? While this change may not happen immediately, it does appear to be on the way; so, perhaps it would be a good idea to give some thought to how transitions affect us and those who follow.

### **The trust challenge**

Trust is a willingness to make yourself vulnerable to another. We make ourselves vulnerable during times of transition by telling others how we are really doing, reaching out to others for help, and when we start the process of getting back on track by looking for a new job, making new friends, or seeking out close relationships. There has been a growing awareness around mental health issues, depression in particular. Sudden, unexpected transitions can really have a harsh impact on our mental health.

Trust entails a combination of uncertainty and vulnerability. Transitions, by their very nature, significantly increase our uncertainty. In times of transition, we are also often feeling more vulnerable than at any other point in our lives. This makes trusting others, even those closest to us, incredibly hard at these times. Similarly, if we have experienced a significant change it may provoke increased uncertainty for those around us, since they also may be struggling with the new situation.

Transitions can provoke a range of emotional responses. Research by Dr. Sheetal Singh from the University of Maryland has shown that our emotional states can have a significant impact on our willingness to trust. Positive emotional states like being happy or in love make us far more willing to trust. Negative emotional states like being angry, sad, or frustrated tend to reduce our willingness to trust. Times of transition often provoke negative emotional states, making us less comfortable trusting others. Unfortunately, it is often during these times that we most need to reach out for the support and assistance of others. This is part of the vicious cycle we see when people are struggling with depression.

The unfortunate reality of these situations is that some of our friends and contacts will fall by the wayside. Some of our friendships are situational in nature, meaning we are connected to some people simply because we are thrown together on a regular basis. It's not that these people don't actually care about us, but rather that their lives, like ours, are often very full; and when situations change, so do these situational friendships. Others in our network will struggle with the changes that are taking place

in our lives and will simply feel helpless in the face of the loss we've suffered. Some will surprise us by standing fast despite the trauma we might be experiencing. There may also be strangers who show up in our lives to help. When we are struggling, finding someone who cares enough to help when others are fleeing can be an incredible experience. We'll look at how to best be helpful a little later in this newsletter.

### **Our sense of self**

A significant portion of our sense of self, our identity, can be tied up in what we do or who we are connected to. If I identify myself as a leader but no longer have a position from which to lead I can struggle. If I identify myself as someone who is smart and can solve problems but suffer an injury that puts that in jeopardy then I will likely struggle. If I see myself as a husband and father but go through a divorce and **don't get to spend much time with my kids I will likely struggle.**

Our self-esteem can be a casualty when things suddenly change. The loss of a loved one, our health, or our job can leave us with questions. If I don't do the things I used to do, then what use am I to myself or anyone else? We can dramatically exaggerate the gap we experience between who we were and who we are after a transition. We tend to have an overly positive perception of who we were, and an overly negative perception of who we are now. When the gap seems so overwhelming, acceptance can be a hard place to get to. This can be even harder when it feels like accepting who we are now means giving up on who we were.

There may well be feelings of shame or guilt that come with a transition. Over 30 years ago, after being fired from a job at a sawmill in Fort St. John, I vividly remember experiencing those feelings. I was afraid to tell my father I had lost the job he seemed so proud of me for getting. It didn't matter that management revealed to me that they were behind in production and had always intended to fire me when they caught up. I still felt like I had failed. Those feelings of being inadequate can impose a significant barrier to frank and honest conversations that may prove helpful. Similarly, those that face an erosion of skills or capacity may feel embarrassed by their lack, and reluctant to discuss coping mechanisms.

### **How can I help?**

Often, people in transition feel so raw that trusting others feels far too dangerous. Even the smallest of trust failures looms large. In these instances, those of us who wish to be supportive should think about how we can help and provide whatever support we can. Sometimes, even asking people how we can help is hard for them to respond to. What if I tell you how much pain I'm in and you don't respond? What if I reveal what my needs are, and you are unable or unwilling to help me meet them?

While a difficult transition is of course painful for those going through it, it can, at times, be every bit as difficult for those forced to sit helplessly by and watch someone they care about suffer. The more we care, the harder it is to watch. In these instances we can develop a sense of urgency, pushing hard and frenetically to just make things better. Unfortunately, our positive intentions may be lost on the person whom we are trying to help; as is so often the case when it comes to trust, the intent behind our actions may not be as important to the recipient as how they perceive our actions. While we may want the other person to rally, get up, and push forward, the person we're trying to help may hear from us a lack of acceptance, disappointment or pressure.

My friend, Gregory Lawrence, is a financial advisor who has developed a more gentle approach. Gregory has created a network of professionals with the stated goal of helping people in times of transition. While many financial services providers have found it trendy to talk about trust, they often expect you to invest first before they lay the foundation of a trusting relationship by actually beginning to help. Gregory's model is to help first, providing connections that can help people get back on their feet, with no strings attached.

One traditional way of generating client leads and referrals is the "buddy" approach: going to the right clubs, joining the right groups, buying people meals and tickets to sporting events. This can be effective in developing a shallow relationship with prospective clients. Gregory's approach, actually being helpful when people really need it, will build deeper relationships with prospective clients than the superficial "buddy" approach. This means that Gregory is more likely to get investments and referrals from those he's helped. A study conducted by a financial services firm showed that anyone with more than a million dollars invested had, on average, 3.5 financial advisors. Gregory's approach will increase the odds that he is one of those 3.5, and is likely to also get him the lion's share of his clients' assets.

Andrew Dorrington is a friend and the co-founder of 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue Partners in Toronto. They focus on helping people relaunch their careers and remake themselves. 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue Partners have adopted a business model which focuses on the success of their clients. The more successful they make the transitions for their clients, the more successful they are. This alignment of incentives makes it easier for those they are working with to trust them. It also helps that they aren't charging fees before they begin to help, but rather begin to help so they can earn their fees.

Approaches like Gregory's and Andrew's can make transitions easier. Giving people options, allowing them to choose how vulnerable to make themselves, and fostering a feeling that they have some control, can go a long way.

### **The road back, getting a job**

Recovering from a transition can take time. Eventually, hopefully, people begin to find their feet and get back into a normal rhythm. While that recovery can take many forms, here I will focus on going back to work if the transition was a job loss.

Being hired for a job, whether it's your first or a promotion, can be framed as a trust decision on the part of those doing the hiring. People are deciding to invest time and energy in someone that they don't know very well. A bad hire can make life miserable for all involved. There is an expense involved in training a new employee or training someone for a new position. There is also the potential risk of having to fire someone. Most of us don't like firing people and know that we'll avoid it if possible. This concern may actually be amplified when hiring someone who is disabled or part of a visible minority. It can be even harder to justify letting go someone from a legally protected class if it doesn't work out. Of course there is also the risk of being sued for wrongful termination if you make a bad hire and don't deal with it properly. All of this to say that there is a certain level of vulnerability for the person doing the hiring.

I often talk about perceived uncertainty and perceived vulnerability as the primary basis for trust. While it is helpful to understand how the other party is vulnerable, there is often little we can do about it when we are looking for a new position. We need to focus on reducing the uncertainty of the people

making the hiring decision. Perceived uncertainty comes from the individual and the context. I will focus here on the elements of uncertainty arising from the individual. My friend Roger Mayer and his colleagues wrote a seminal piece on trustworthiness in 1995 that proposed benevolence, integrity, and ability as the three core elements of trustworthiness.

Most people seem to focus on demonstrating their ability when putting together a resume or filling out a job application. There isn't anything wrong with showing that we have skills and experience. Sometimes giving some thought to what excellence looks like for the role in question can do wonders. We often simply put down our experience and credentials without actually spending time thinking about how they relate to the position we are applying for. Instead, we should think about what skills are required for the position we are applying for and relate our experience to those skills.

The second source of trustworthiness I will refer to here is benevolence. Benevolence is the belief that we have the other party's best interests at heart. What are the best interests of the person doing the hiring and the organization you wish to join? One of the thoughts that goes through the mind of those doing the hiring is, "How will this person get along with the rest of the staff? Will I be able to stand seeing them every day for the next several years? Am I going to have to fire them and restart this process if they don't work out?" Asking your own questions can signal to the other party that you care about how you can help them and their company.

Integrity is the final element in Roger Mayer's model. Roger defines integrity as shared values between the trustor and the trustee. I prefer Tony Simons' definition, which has to do with following through on promises and actions that align with the values you express. Spending some time thinking about examples you can give to show your integrity can also be extremely helpful in building trust with your interviewer.

## **Conclusion**

Whether as the result of the loss of someone close to us, a job loss, or injury or illness that changes us, transitions can be extremely painful. When going through a transition we can feel incredibly uncertain and vulnerable, making it extremely difficult to trust others and reach out for their help and support. We can help people in times of transition, but we need to take the time to understand how they are feeling vulnerable and offer supports that don't make them feel any more vulnerable than they already are.

Have some patience with those in transition, and when you do start to help, try to do it in a way that lets them make the choices about how that help looks.

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