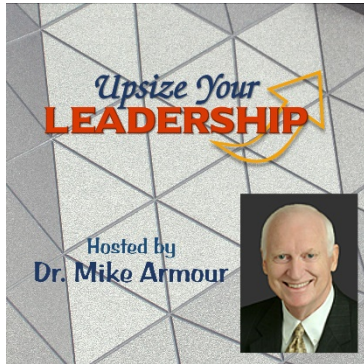


Why Leaders Can't Earn Trust

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Shortly after I began my leadership development firm in 2001, I noticed a pattern which played out in many of my early engagements. Companies would hire me to help them address some specific problem. Perhaps it was poor customer retention. Or a slow decision-making process. Or challenges with motivation or morale.

Whatever their problem, one of my first objectives was to peel back the onion, layer by layer, to uncover the deeper dynamics beneath their situation. Time and again, when I got to the core of the problem, I discovered unrecognized, unaddressed, or unresolved issues of trust. I also discovered that when we dealt with these trust issues, the original problem began to correct

itself. Communication opened up. Collaboration increased. The team found its own solutions to the initial issue which brought me on board.

Out of this experience I decided to make trust-building a major component of my work. I trademarked the phrase Trust-Centered Leadership®. And I published a book entitled *Leadership and the Power of Trust*.

If anything, trust issues are more abundant today than they were when I wrote my book. As leaders, we are constantly confronted with problems created by or aggravated by inadequate trust. Therefore, I'm going to use this episode to visit a pivotal section from my book. My goal is to help you understand the process of gaining the trust of those you lead, and in doing so, to Upsize Your Leadership.

Everything I've learned about Trust-Centered Leadership® traces back to a simple but profound realization: It's the recognition that trust only exists because someone chooses to grant it.

You cannot demand trust. You cannot mandate it. And despite our language to the contrary, you can't even earn it. Trust is something that others bestow on you. It's their choice, not yours. Trust, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder.

Don't rush past this concept. Take time to ponder it, because it's replete with implications. For example, think about what's implied when we say that trust is conferred by the ones being led.

This means that trust in your leadership is always at the discretion of others. Workers are fully empowered to dictate how much leaders are trusted, or even if they are trusted at all. Workers

are equally empowered to withdraw trust once it has been bestowed. This is one arena in which workers are fully, 100% empowered. And no corporate decision can revoke their empowerment.

It then follows that as a trusted leader, you must see yourself as the beneficiary of trust, not its progenitor. In the final analysis, you can't make trust happen. The trust you enjoy as a leader exists solely at the discretion of other people.

For that reason, I avoid references to leaders creating trust. Leaders may do things to foster a trust-friendly atmosphere. They may nurture a climate conducive to enlarging trust. But they can do nothing to earn trust. Not in the strictest sense of the word.

When I present this concept to audiences, it occasionally triggers a vocal objection. "Of course you can earn trust!" the objectors claim. They then recount things they have done to deserve trust. But deserving and receiving are two different things. It's one thing to think I deserve a raise, quite another to get it!

Now, admittedly, we do sometimes say things like, "I earned a raise, but they didn't give it to me." In statements like this, "earned" and "deserved" mean basically the same thing. But when I talk about "earning trust," I'm speaking about actually receiving it. I call it "trust accounting on a cash basis." Let me explain.

Think of two profit-and-loss statements, one generated on an accrual basis, the other on a cash basis. In the first case (the accrual statement) transactions show up on the P&L as soon as you are entitled to payment. The timing of the transaction is determined by your own action, such as submitting an invoice.

By contrast, transactions do not appear on the second P&L (the cash basis statement) until funds are in hand. In this system it's no longer you, but the party rendering payment whose action determines when the transaction posts.

Now let's return to those objections I mentioned a moment ago. If you think of trust as something you accrue, the objectors have a point. Once you've done what it takes to deserve trust, you've "earned" it, in a sense.

But balances in accrued assets are phantom funds. You can't disburse them to make payroll. And when the going gets tough, "phantom trust" won't help you at all. To draw on your "trust" account, there must be funds on deposit. And deposits only occur when people decide to place trust in you.

That's why I argue that trust itself cannot be earned. The deposits in a leader's trust account are always made by others, never by the leader personally. And these deposits do not result from people feeling an obligation to their leader, as though they "owe" their leader trust the way that a customer owes a balance. The deposits are the product of a willing decision to yield power and control to the one being trusted.

The realization that trust is bestowed, not earned, accounts for a unique thread which runs through the principles that underlie Trust-Centered Leadership® and which I developed in my book. These principles, one and all, assume that you are not looking at the enterprise of trust-building from your perspective as a leader, but from the perspective of those you lead.

This shift in perceptual position is indispensable. By getting outside of yourself and taking the perceptual position of your people, you look at your leadership from the vantage of the ones who control the trust-vote.

When you change your perceptual position, you are likely to make a powerful discovery. You will find that your people view your leadership against an altogether different backdrop from the one that frames your own perspective. From your own perceptual position, you picture your leadership against your own experiences, achievements, and proven track-record over your entire career.

When your people look at your leadership, they see very little of this. From their perceptual position the backdrop for your leadership is their own history – their history with the organization, with its leaders, and even with former employers. For good or ill, your leadership plays out in the minds of your workers against the backdrop of their own resume and experience, not yours.

Thus, to practice Trust-Centered Leadership® you begin by looking at the challenge of trust-building from the perspective of your people. From their vantage point, what are impediments to trust which must be addressed? And not just impediments to trust in you as a leader. What are the impediments to trust among peers within the group? Toward management in general? Toward their internal and external customers? And what stands in the way of a greater atmosphere of trust across the entire organization?

Armed with insight from the employee's perspective, you are then prepared to make clearer judgments about how your actions and the actions of others are affecting trust. Are these actions creating an open invitation to trust? Or are they ripping the invitation to shreds? With this clarity, it's then possible to develop specific strategies for negating the impediments, or at least reducing their impact, and giving trust a friendly atmosphere in which to bloom.

If we cannot earn trust, then the corollary follows that trust doesn't come with your title. People aren't going to trust you just because you're the manager. Or the VP. Or the new CEO. Trust will come later, after you have a track record with your people. After trust has had time to build.

New managers commonly make the mistake of implementing sweeping changes immediately after taking office, thinking they must do so while they still enjoy high trust. The truth is, unless their people have known them and worked with them in the past, new managers and executives have very little trust at first. And premature, disruptive change may jeopardize what trust they do have.

Whenever possible, it's preferable to postpone wholesale or disruptive change until trust is established. Sometimes, however, extensive change can't wait for trust to build. Studies indicate that it takes six to nine months before people trust a new manager.¹ Nine months is an eternity in today's hyper-competitive world. Increasingly new leaders must take unpopular initiatives immediately, without time to gain their people's trust.

When faced with this situation, the fallback position for Trust-Centered Leadership® is to choose a change methodology that keeps the potential for trust-building high. This means going the extra mile to get input from your people before implementing change. Help them feel assured that they are being heard and have a voice in shaping your decision.

Then follow your decision with extraordinary effort to communicate the purpose, necessity, and benefits of the change. Not just once. But repeatedly. Whenever possible, clearly identify the benefits to the workers in terms of their personal interests. Show them specifically how this change is going to make their work more manageable. More productive. More fulfilling.

These steps will help your people recognize that their new leader is genuinely interested in them, their opinions, and their well-being. Remember, having “a leader who cares for me” is one of the most powerful trust-builders available to management. Thus, Trust-Centered Leadership® always makes change – particularly in the first weeks of a new executive or management position – in a way that conveys genuine care and concern.

Just as trust does not come with the title, neither does it transfer with you from one leadership role to another. Trust is contextual. Being trusted implicitly in one setting may have little bearing on the trust you enjoy in another. You may be a great mechanic, and I may trust you implicitly to overhaul my car. But I probably won't trust you to take out my appendix!

I was making this point in conversation one day with a long-time executive at Southwest Airlines. He chuckled in agreement and said, “Yep, that's one lesson I learned the hard way.”

He then related how he had spent 18 years in the company's finance department, mostly in top management positions. During this tenure he compiled an exceptional reputation for effectiveness and integrity. As the company positioned him for a senior executive role, they moved him into another functional area to gain broader knowledge of airline operations.

“Because I had been so trusted and respected in my old job,” he said, “I just assumed that I would be trusted in the new one.” Within a month, however, he had tossed that assumption aside. He discovered that the task of trust-building had to begin afresh.

Is this always the case? No, not necessarily. But in my experience, it's true more often than not. Trust-Centered Leadership® always approaches a new leadership post presuming that trust must be built from the ground up. And it starts the building process from day one.

This is another way of saying that resumes don't confer trust. Young leaders are especially prone to count on impressive academic backgrounds or a history of success in the right companies or in the right assignments to give them instant trust and credibility. It simply doesn't work that way.

One of my mentors used to say, “Your resume is only your union card. It shows that you hold the requisite credentials to be at the table. But once you're at the table, the union card doesn't mean a thing. From then on, it's performance that counts.”

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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