

Leadership Lessons from a Best Seller

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As I mentioned in last week's podcast, I'm resuming these episodes after a number of factors forced me to forego additional programs for several weeks. During the weeks the podcast was in abeyance, a number of good things came my way. One was the continuing success of the second edition of my book, *Leadership and the Power of Trust*.

I first published the book in 2006. Last year, in late September, I released a second edition. And it quickly climbed to best seller status on Amazon. In fact, it became number one in five different business and leadership categories.

With this success, many people have been asking why I wrote the book in the first place. And that seemed to be a good topic for a podcast program. So, that's what's in store for you today. Drawing on the story behind and about this book, we're going to talk about an array of concepts which can individually and collectively Upsize Your Leadership.

Shortly after I founded Strategic Leadership Development International in 2001, companies began asking me to help them overcome one thorny leadership breakdown or another. It might have been a cumbersome decision-making processes, poor internal communication, or problems with quality or customer service.

Once I began working with them, I would focus my effort on peeling back the layers of factors which had led to the breakdown. My goal was to uncover the underlying causes. It wasn't long before I noticed a recurring pattern. Down underneath the problem at hand we would find issues of trust which had gone unrecognized, unaddressed, or unresolved, often for years. And I also discovered that when we put the problem with distrust on the table and effectively addressed it, the original issues which I had been engaged to address seemed to solve themselves.

Communication opened up. Defensiveness went down. Collaboration increased. The organization already possessed all of the resources which it needed to resolve the problem that caused them to bring me in, to begin with. But the distrust, lurking beneath the surface, had kept them from tapping these resources.

What I came to realize is that trust-building is not merely a priority, it is a strategic priority for any organization wanting to establish a culture where peak performance is commonplace. Soon I was developing that theme in keynotes and leadership training programs nationwide and overseas.

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The reception to this message was so wide and so warm that I came to realize the place for a book on this theme. Especially a book which centered on the role of leaders in creating a high-trust culture. And so, the first edition.

The book outlines nine principles of what I call Trust-Centered Leadership. Perhaps the most critical principle is this: despite our statements to the contrary, we cannot actually earn trust. Trust, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. If people choose not to trust us as leaders, there's absolutely nothing which we can do to compel their trust.

As a result, our primary focus as leaders should not center on earning trust, but on becoming trustworthy. Our job is to conduct ourselves with such integrity and such genuine concern for our people that we make it easy for them to invest their trust in us.

I devote individual chapters to each of seven traits which are characteristic of highly-trusted leaders. These include humility, integrity, truth-telling and receptivity to truth, responsiveness, unblemished fair play, support and encouragement, and team care.

I also emphasize five things which people must feel if they are to trust. They need to feel safe, informed, respected, valued, and understood. Our role as leaders is to create the kind of culture where these five things are widely felt.

Little did I know when I published the book that trust would be an even more timely topic 15 years later. In the period since the first edition appeared, our society seems to have become more polarized on more topics than an earlier generation could have possibly imagined. And wherever there is entrenched polarization, distrust inevitably ensues. And when distrust pervades a society or a culture, it spills over into the companies and organizations that function within that environment.

When I talk about the problem of distrust today, I find that far greater numbers of people are eager to explore the topic than when I wrote the book initially – although the reception to it was strong and positive from the outset. It gradually dawned on me, therefore, that the book needed to be expanded and the statistics in it needed to be updated so that it could continue to contribute relevantly to the national discussion on trust.

The COVID shutdown gave me the free time to draft a revised version. Then I teamed with C-Suite Network to publish it.

The foreword to this second edition was written by Ross Smith at Microsoft, who describes how his team at Microsoft applied the principles of this book and achieved stellar results. In fact, Ross and his team did more with the first edition than any other group of leaders I'm aware of. They genuinely made trust-building a strategic priority.

Ross' foreword documents the specific metrics which they used to confirm that trust-building, pursued as a strategic priority, yielded solid improvements in both performance and effectiveness. They sought to embody the sentiment expressed in the sub-title of the book: *How to Build a High-Trust, Peak-Performance Organization*.

Those words sum up what I want for whatever organization you lead. And for that reason, this second edition adds an entire chapter on the keys to building a high-performing organization. I wrote the chapter in such a way that it is relevant to any organization which puts a premium on overall performance.

As I said at the outset, the reception to this second edition has been phenomenal. I hoped it would be a best-seller, but never dreamed it could reach that level in just a few weeks. As media took note and began to highlight the book, I was asked to respond to a number of questions from reviewers. Let me spend the remainder of this episode addressing some of the questions which these reviewers raised.

The wording of the subtitle – *How to Build a High-Trust, Peak-Performance Organization* – led to a number of questions. One was, “How do you define trust? And how is high trust different?” Here’s how I answered.

In my book I define trust as “complete confidence that an individual or organization will consistently do what is right in every situation.” This confidence does not necessarily have to be absolute. But it must be reasonably robust. We can think of “complete confidence” as represented by a continuum which runs from adequate confidence on one end to absolute confidence on the other.

As a retired naval officer, it’s easy for me to draw on a military analogy to illustrate this continuum. If I know that my fellow warriors have been thoroughly trained and are fully equipped, I will have adequate confidence to go into battle alongside them without hesitation. I’m completely confident that they will do what’s called for when the shooting starts. But if my fellow warriors are in fact members of a SEAL team, I’m even more confident that they will perform superbly. In this case, my trust borders on absolute confidence.

Trust can exist if confidence is merely adequate. High trust occurs as we move closer to absolute confidence.

Along these same lines, another reviewer asked, “What is the ideal High-Trust, Peak-Performance Organization?” I replied,

I don’t think in terms of an ideal high-trust, peak performance organization. Rather, I believe that each organization must define for itself what it means to describe itself in that manner. Peak-performance in an emergency room is notably different from peak performance on a manufacturing line, which is likewise different from peak performance for a professional sports team.

As a consultant and advisor, I help my clients identify the hallmarks that they believe would denote peak performance for their organization. Then, I respect their definition and help them build the culture and systems which would expedite the achievement of that status.

From another reviewer came the question, “How can leaders turn around the “silent distrust” in their work culture?” This was my response.

Silent distrust is frequently the elephant in the room. To combat it, leaders have to recognize it, name it, and put it “on the table.” Because it is the elephant in the room, people typically feel a sense of relief when it’s finally okay to talk about the elephant openly.

However, the way the leader approaches this dialogue is pivotal in overcoming the problem. When these types of distrust are put on the table, the leader must bring it up and discuss it in a non-judgmental tone, in collaborative dialogue with all who have strong feelings on the matter. Coming back to the five things people must feel in order to trust, those who are part of this dialogue must be engaged in such a way that they feel safe to voice their points of view on the underlying trust issue and to be specific about places where they feel they have not been kept

properly informed. Likewise, in the course of the ensuing dialogue, they must feel that others – and especially the leader – treated them with respect, valued their input, and made a genuine effort to understand their concerns and recommendations.

And finally, this question from a reviewer: “What is the number one threat to trust between employees and their boss? I offered this opinion:

If I had to name just one threat, and one which is there both in the employee’s distrust of the boss and the boss’ distrust of the employee, I would probably say inconsistency. Inconsistent effort and performance on the part of the employee. Inconsistent standards and lack of even-handedness on the part of the boss. And inconsistency in truth-telling, work ethic, and communication on both parts. Having coached and trained now across some 70 industries, I’ve repeatedly seen inconsistency as the root cause of distrust, especially silent distrust.

These were all great questions. And I received others which I will address in future episodes. I hope you found a worthwhile benefit from both the questions which reviewers posed and the responses which I offered.

If you would like to know more about the book – or perhaps to order it – go to my web site devoted to promoting Trust-Centered Leadership. That website is TrustIsPower.com. There you can find a link to order it from Amazon, either in hardback softback, or as an ebook. You will also find a sample chapter from the book, which allows you to peer between the covers before you buy.

And if this topic of trust-building genuinely interests you, check out the extensive resources identified on the website where you can learn more about trust and how it is formed. Again, the website name: TrustIsPower.com.

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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