Trust in Leadership
by Beata C. Lewis, JD, MSC

Leadership is a relationship, founded on trust and confidence. Without trust and confidence, people don't take risks. Without risks, there's no change. Without change, organizations and movements don't thrive.

Where does trust fit in your vision, conversations, and practices for effective leadership, collaboration and business success? Is your answer something like this?…

- "Trust is an interesting topic and it would be great to have the luxury of time and bandwidth to cultivate it in our organization's business practices, but there are more pressing and critical issues which I/we need to address instead." …or this…

- "Leaders in our organization appreciate the value of trust in all our business relationships; they have made a real commitment to generate and sustain high-performance, creative collaboration and to cultivate a workplace environment that attracts and retains the best talent, but our efforts at identifying and shifting trust dynamics have been less than fully successful."

If that sounds like you or someone you know, then my questions are:

- What issues take priority over trust and why?

- What is that taking care of AND what is that costing you?

- What can be better for you now?

Trust has been shown to be the most significant predictor of individuals' satisfaction with their organization. It is identified as the foundation for achieving strategic objectives, such as increased participation and risk taking, creativity and innovation, engagement, self-motivation and empowerment. Although trust—and an absence of betrayal—can be critical to the accomplishment of strategic goals, today's business leaders are often faced with the task of (re)building trust in organizations without the support, tools or understanding necessary to work with the consequences of betrayal and complex dynamics of trust. You can change that.

Leaders go first

When leaders create trusting environments, people are safer to challenge the system and perform beyond expectations. People feel more open to collaborate with others and freer to express creative ideas. They are more willing to take risks, admit and learn from mistakes. Leaders create trusting environments by setting an example and building commitment through simple daily acts that create progress and momentum. Leaders go first in all respects.

Our capacity for trust is our readiness to trust ourselves and to trust others. When we trust others, we see ourselves as reliable and dependable to others. When we trust others, we feel we can rely on their judgment, and we have confidence in them. The same is true for ourselves. Our capacity to trust influences our perceptions and our beliefs. Our capacity for trust expands or contracts, depending on our experiences, positive or negative. It involves managing our expectations of ourselves and of others.

What do you do when trust shatters?

Breakdowns in trust are at the core of any conflict. Restoring trust is at the core of renewed collaboration. Cultivating one's capacity to trust is a practice. The human journey is such that just as you begin to experience mastery in some area of your life, life presents you with the challenge of practicing in yet another area or at a deeper level. Where we pay attention to trust issues, we open the possibility of reconciliation and healing for the sake of moving forward into another future—either alone or together. Cultivating capacity to trust is a life-long practice in cultivating the Self.

Consider, for example, the following scenarios:

- You have finally finished negotiating a settlement you both agree is fair and sensible. You could live with it…if you believed that the person who let you down time and again would actually follow through. In your heart, you may be strategizing how to survive the loss. Or, instead, you may be strategizing how to inflict penalties for non-performance.   …or…
- You have finally finished negotiating a settlement that you know is not fair but is the best you are going to get. Despite the impression that this business partner has shown you her worst, you have agreed to continue working together. You now know what is possible and you think you know what to expect. This time around you are ready. No more Mr. Nice Guy from you. Nobody takes you for a fool twice.   …or…
- The colleague who publicly tried to block you from authorship on a paper describing your collaborative research is now furious. Despite all his efforts, your name was included among the authors; to his dismay, his efforts backfired and his own name was left out. There is ample funding to continue working on this project but the funding is under his control. You are passionate about the cause but you cannot bring yourself to work with that person anymore. The vigilance required to protect your "back" is too exhausting.

In each of these scenarios, something has shattered. While you may have done your best to resolve the issues ostensibly at issue, you find yourself unable to move with the same ease or energy as before. The basic (and possibly blind) trust you once were prepared to grant is unavailable now. And even if you reach an agreement—establishing what could be the basis for authentic trust—you may still experience the residue of betrayal.

Trust is the central issue in human relationships within and outside of an organization. There is a growing body of literature and practical experience indicating that trust is at the heart of fostering collaboration. In their book, *The Leadership Challenge,* authors James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner offer the following example from research about the impact of various levels of interpersonal trust on group effectiveness. This case study highlights how quickly we can be impacted by even the ungrounded suggestion of "not trustworthy." It also highlights how leadership and collaborative difficulties may be rooted in trust issues but not understood or appreciated as such.

In one study, several groups of business executives in a role-playing exercise were given identical factual information about a difficult manufacturing-marketing policy decision and then asked to solve a problem related to that information as a group. Half of the groups were briefed to expect trusting behavior ("You have learned from your past experiences that you can trust the other members of top management and can openly express feelings and differences with them"); the other half, to expect untrusting behavior.

After thirty minutes of discussion, each team member completed a brief questionnaire. Other executives, who had been observing the team meetings, also completed the questionnaire. The responses of team members and observers were quite consistent: the group members who'd been told that their role-playing peers and manager could be trusted reported their discussion and decisions to be significantly more positive than did the members of the low-trust group on every factor measured. In the high-trust group,

- Members were more open about feelings.
- Members experienced greater clarity about the group's basic problems and goals.
- Members searched more for alternative courses of action.
- Members reported greater levels of mutual influence on outcomes, satisfaction with the meeting, motivation to implement decisions, and closeness as a management team as a result of the meeting.

In the group whose participants were told that their manager wasn't to be trusted, genuine attempts by the manager to be open and honest were *ignored or distorted*. Group members' distrust was so strong that the manager's candor was viewed as a *clever attempt to deceive them*, and they generally reacted by sabotaging the manager's efforts even further. Managers who experienced rejection of their attempts to be trusting and open responded in kind. Said one who played the manager role, "If I had my way I would have fired the entire group. What a bunch of turkeys. I was trying to be honest with them but they wouldn't cooperate. Everything I suggested they shot down; and they wouldn't give me any ideas on how to solve the problem."

The responses of the other members were no less hostile. Said one, "Frankly, I was looking forward to your being fired. I was sick of working with you — and we had only been together for ten minutes." Not surprisingly, more than two-thirds of the participants in the low-trust group said that they would give serious consideration to looking for another position. People don't want to stay very long in organizations devoid of trust.

What's crucial to keep in mind is that this was just a simulation; these people were executives from various organizations attending an executive development program. They behaved and responded as they did simply because they'd been told that they couldn't trust their role-playing manager. They wanted to be rid of each other after only about ten minutes! *Trust or distrust can come with a mere suggestion, it seems, and in mere seconds. It's also highly contagious and can spread through the group.*

After this simulation, participants were asked to think about what factors might have accounted for the differences between the outcomes and feelings reported by the various groups in the experiment. *Not one person perceived that trust had been the overriding variable.* One executive in the study reported this insight: "I never knew that a lack of trust was our problem (at work) until that exercise. I knew that things weren't going well, but I never really could quite understand why we couldn't work well together. After that experience, things fell into place."

The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations (Kouzes and Posner), pp. 163-165.

In an environment where people are more likely to trust and be trusted we are more likely to be creative, dynamic, think critically and have a greater collaborative capacity. Relationships characterized by trust allow people to breathe freely, collaborate and explore possibilities with a sparkle of life. A growing number of experts assert that the only viable way to achieve superior performance and a sustainable competitive advantage is by cultivating trust- and relationship-based leadership and management practices and organizational systems. Making trust a priority means making success a priority because trust is vital to individual, team and overall organizational performance.

TYPES OF TRUST IN THE WORKPLACE

Trust is an emotionally loaded and highly subjective concept. Translating ideas about trust into effective and meaningful action—give it a pull-down menu, so to speak – means getting specific about behaviors that build the capacity for and perception of trust. It helps to have a common, objective language for talking about trust dynamics. With a framework for inquiry and understanding and accessible data, people are better equipped to make informed choices and targeted decisions for action.

Trust is essential to who we are as social animals. Working with trust in relationships overall, it helps to distinguish between two types of trust: basic and authentic. Working with trust in the workplace, it helps to distinguish types of trust that translate to specific behaviors and a more nuanced appreciation of what works at work.

Fundamentally, our capacity to trust shows up in how we make and fulfill agreements—commitments to ourselves and to others. What authors Solomon and Flores describe as *Basic Trust* provides the basis for one's entire personality and demeanor toward the world (See "Building Trust: In Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life," by Robert Solomon and Fernando Flores). *Basic Trust* is relatively open-ended and indiscriminate. By contrast, *Authentic Trust* exists in each and every instance of the practice of trust. *Authentic Trust* focuses on relationships rather than single transactions or outcomes. The key to *Authentic Trust* is action and commitment: commitments made and commitments honored.

A person's capacity for trust begins with Self. The trust you are able to extend to others corresponds to the trust you are able to extend to yourself. Building one's capacity to trust is not about training for trustworthy behaviors (e.g., those that may be organizationally approved or politically correct). It is about becoming more aware of the attitudes, behaviors, and interpretations that, over time, have shaped our willingness to stay open, present and connected to ourselves and to others. Beyond basic and authentic trust, what other distinctions make a real difference in the workplace?

The Reina Trust and Betrayal Model™, based on ten years of research in over 65 organizations, differentiates between types of trust and identifies behaviors that develop trust—or may result in betrayal—in the workplace. From a behavioral perspective, the Reina model identifies two main types of trust: *Transactional* and *Transformative*. Because people's experience of trust is inextricably tied to experiences of trust breakdown or betrayal, the Reina model is the first to offer a framework for differentiating between *types and degrees of betrayal*. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it provides a map for individual and collective *healing from betrayal*.

BASIC TRUST

- Provides the basis for one's entire personality and demeanor toward the world.
- Relatively open-ended and indiscriminate.

AUTHENTIC TRUST

- Focused on relationships rather than single transactions or outcomes.
- Exists wholly in its particulars, in each and every instance of the practice of trust.
- The key to authentic trust is action, and, in particular, commitment: commitments made and commitments honored.

Source: (Solomon & Flores) *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*

TRANSACTIONAL TRUST

Trust is a relationship of mutual confidence in contractual performance, honest communication, expected competence, and a capacity for unguarded interaction.

- Competence
- Contractual
- Communication

TRANSFORMATIVE TRUST

- Conviction
- Courage
- Compassion
- Community

Source: (Dennis Reina & Michelle Reina) *Trust & Betrayal in the Workplace: Building Effective Relationships in Your Organization*

Transactional Trust is the type of trust people struggle with most in the workplace. In most workplace situations, trust is earned. It is reciprocal in nature. There are three types of *Transactional Trust*: *Competence* trust, *Contractual* trust, and *Communication* trust.

Behaviors that tend to build *Competence Trust* include competently applying one's knowledge, cultivating skill in others, involving others and seeking their input for decisions that affect their work and lives. Behaviors that tend to build *Contractual Trust* include managing expectations, delegating appropriately (with the necessary resources and authority, etc.), and sharing influence and rewards. Behaviors that tend to build *Communication Trust* include telling the truth, disclosing relevant information in a timely manner, and speaking with good purpose.

People earn trust by being fair in their dealings with others, fulfilling the spirit of their agreements, and by not abusing their power. The reciprocity factor is key: you have to give trust to get trust. For anyone whose capacity to trust is rooted in "I'll give it when I get it," this definition can be a revelation.

Restoring trust & healing from betrayal

If the intention is to build trust, then why open the proverbial Pandora's box of betrayal? Betrayal makes for unhappy, uncooperative, guarded people who give their leaders and peers only limited access to their knowledge, initiative, and commitment. When you've felt betrayed, when has it ever been enough for the other simply to insist that you get over it and move on? Realignment or reconciliation require acknowledgement of the impact of what really happened. Without it, people can harbor grievances for a long time and in mysterious ways. We can move on pretending to trust, hoping that it might work out. But when you're sincere about rebuilding the kind of trust for moving forward at your best, then you have to address the messy topic of trust breakdowns and betrayal.

To what extent do people where you work expect to be betrayed? You might be surprised to learn that the percentage is higher than you'd imagine. Research and experience independent of the Reina model indicate that people in American workplaces increasingly suffer profound, chronic, and systemic instances of betrayal and have come to expect situations and relationships characterized more by betrayal than trust in the workplace. Part of this might not even be about what they have experienced in *your* particular workplace; our experiences of betrayal have long, deep, vivid roots. When trust has been broken, shattered or betrayed, giving trust anew generally happens in much smaller, slower, and more controlled increments and with heightened awareness.

What counts as a betrayal? The Reina model reveals a continuum of trust breakdowns characterized by *impact* and *intention*. Typically, we'll think of betrayal as something that had major impact and was done intentionally. It turns out that betrayal is more nuanced than that. Sorting out who gets to say what the impact and intention was can be a revelation, too.

- The impact can be *major* or *minor*. The person impacted determines whether the impact was major or minor. What about gossiping, backbiting, and delegating inappropriately? What about unconscious micro-aggressions? Those trust breakdowns can be annoying or hurtful but in their individual instances we might let them slide. When and what do we communicate about impact?

- The behavior that caused that impact may have been *intentional* or *unintentional*. The person whose behavior caused the impact knows their intention. The impacted person might think they know better ("you obviously meant to!"), but, in truth, we must each be accountable for our own intentions. It can be hard to accept that "I didn't mean to" doesn't change the impact. Often a real challenge can be in cultivating the self-awareness and self-honesty to be in touch with intentions that are rooted deeper than the conscious cover story we use to justify or rationalize our behavior.

Significantly, the cumulative impact of what are classified as "unintentional minor betrayals" cause the most damage in organizations. How can that be? For one thing, things that are likely to result in *major intentional* betrayal tend to be anticipated and "covered" by organizational rules and legal agreements. As such, they occur and are dealt with mostly as discrete instances of untrustworthy behavior. *Unintentional minor* betrayals might be like paper cuts rather than a gash wound. But a pattern of such behavior (paper cuts) can amount to serious wounding that's hard to pin-point to any discrete instance. It's the stuff that is ridiculous to legislate; you rely on people's self-awareness, common sense and capacity to self-correct. But "common sense" is often neither common nor sensed as we would wish.

Rebuilding trust often starts with an apology and doing something to make amends. In making amends, people are sensitive to whether the action meets the need and the quality of energy behind the actions they witness. The apology is more than saying "I'm sorry." The recipient will be listening for cues—generally non-verbal ones—that indicate that the apology is sincere and reliable, not just an easy or flippant thing to say so things can move on. The recipient may be listening for an acknowledgement that the person apologizing recognizes the damage and suffering connected with their action or omission. When trust has been damaged in the relationship we become all the more attentive to the apparent congruency between what a person says and what they embody. Any incongruence can be interpreted as just another reason not to trust.

Healing from betrayal and moving on to build trust anew requires a willingness to understand and to forgive. As described in the Reina model there are *seven essential steps to healing from betrayal*. The first step in that healing process is to *observe and acknowledge what has happened*. The last step is to *let go and move on*. The intervening steps are to *allow feelings to surface*, *get support*, *reframe the experience* for the learning, *take responsibility* for one's own role in what happened, *forgive oneself and others*. To go directly from the first to the last step and skip the intervening steps—a practice commonly experienced in fast-paced business environments—consistently results in the perception of yet another betrayal. Going through all seven steps is the path to healing.

It takes courage to see the larger truth about a situation that created damage in a relationship. It takes courage and emotional resilience to be willing to see things in hindsight that you missed before. Acknowledging—and feeling—your own real feelings allows you to drop into the heart of the matter for yourself. It also may create the possibility of empathy for what another person is experiencing.

We choose to heal the internal damage from trust breakdowns for the sake of being able to move on. The process tends to be messy, non-linear and often irrational. And when you are in the thick of it, it is important to have support. Opening yourself to receive support is the third step for healing. It is a way of taking care of yourself and the situation. Support comes in human and non-human form. Acknowledging what support you really need and taking the steps necessary to have it helps build trust in yourself.

Reframing the experience to include others' perspectives and to be open to learning is the fourth step for healing. The challenge is to learn and grow in resilience, overcoming the temptation to become hardened, rigid or closed.

The fifth step is to take appropriate responsibility for our own intentions and actions. This may involve acknowledging—at least to oneself—the hidden agendas and often unconscious needs that drive our behaviors. You come to acknowledge that, despite good intentions, your actions may have produced unintended consequences. As you become fair witness to yourself, this inquiry for understanding can produce greater compassion and even fierce determination to grow in wisdom from the experience.

Understanding is only part of the equation for healing. The other necessary element is forgiveness. By its complex and paradoxical nature, forgiveness may be the most difficult aspect of the healing process. And just as trust begins with Self, so does forgiveness. If you feel betrayed, self-forgiveness may not be the first

place you dedicate your attention. But it might be the most important thing you do in making yourself more trustworthy to yourself. Forgiving yourself and the other person unlocks the possibility for you to let go and move on.

Just as trust can be transactional or transformational in nature, so can forgiveness. For some, forgiveness is like a deal: I'll forgive you if you apologize…or do something I recognize as being worthy of the gift of my forgiveness. When it is transactional, the willingness to forgive may grow incrementally, perhaps in parallel with the painstaking steps of a renewed willingness to trust. When it is transformational, forgiveness no longer depends on the actions of the other person. You grant forgiveness. People who have, for example, forgiven someone long dead know what this quality of forgiveness takes…and what opens up as a result.

When forgiveness is hard, it can help to remember the purpose of forgiving. Forgiveness allows your own healing. Somewhere I saw this on a bumper sticker: "Forgiveness: giving up all hope for a better past." Is forgiving the same as accepting that what happened was acceptable or good? Unlikely. But there is an element of acceptance involved: accepting that what happened, happened. It can be like releasing an old debt, the debt of "you owed me" a different way of behaving. Is forgiving the same as no longer holding someone responsible (response–able) for fulfilling promises made in the wake of damaging behavior? Unlikely. Each person defines forgiveness differently. More than anything, forgiveness is about embracing your own need to be whole and fully available to love and trust again, for the sake of your own precious life. With different awareness and actions for self-care, you choose to grow and be authentically whole.

AGREEMENTS AND PRACTICE

It is essential – in relationship as in leadership – to be able to express what you want or need, understand what others need, and to create and fulfill agreements that are responsive to those needs. Our agreements allow us to connect and coordinate with others. How do you negotiate and fulfill agreements in such a way that produces value and satisfaction for yourself and others. How do your agreements reflect your commitment to be accountable for achieving desired the results? In making agreements, do you stay connected to your overriding commitments and what you care about?

In the workplace—and in human interaction generally—everything moves by way of conversation; we are taking and catalyzing action through language. There are *basic speech acts* that we deal with regularly in the workplace. What *promises* are you willing to make to yourself and others, and what tendencies do you notice about how you follow through? Are you able to articulate directly and unapologetically an *offer* or *request*? What affects your ability to respond unambiguously to an offer or request by communicating clear *acceptance*, making a *counteroffer*, or choosing to *decline* the offer or request? When someone declines your offer or request, are you able to *insist* when necessary while still taking care of your "customer's" concerns? What happens for you when it is most appropriate to *quit*—whether that means no longer interacting with a certain person or a given behavior?

While these are all acts in language, they are communicated and experienced by the whole Self, in a body. Each of these speech acts produces a host of corresponding neuromuscular and bio-chemical activity.

Without conscious awareness and a commitment to being fully present, we can easily become hostage to that which "lights us up" and throws us into more or less familiar patterns of reaction or defensiveness.

We tend to trust people who are self-aware and where our gut instinct tells us it is safe to trust them. We tend to distrust people who we experience as inauthentic, selfish, self-absorbed or self-righteous—people unaware of what they create around them, oblivious to their impact. We learn to distrust those who blame and judge others without considering their role in the experience, those who distort the truth and change the rules for their own purposes. Trust arises when people have confidence in how they and others will use knowledge and power. They practice the values they say are important to them. They speak the truth without blame or judgment. We are more likely to trust people who take responsibility for their role in a relationship. We experience as trustworthy someone who listens to and responds to needs and interests— their own and those of others—with appropriate action. You can rely on who is really there.

Building and restoring trust is a practice of making and fulfilling commitments. These are the commitments that give a life meaning and are connected to a deep sense of passion and values. In any relationship, you have implicit and explicit commitments about the quality of connection that you want to co-create and participate in. When things get difficult or fall apart, you need to know what you are fighting for, not just what you are fighting. In identifying your commitments, you also clarify your conditions of satisfaction. That way, you can ask for what you need and want, communicating clearly what will satisfy you.

When you know to pay attention to your core commitments, you begin to connect with others with that same focus and quality of attention. You become curious about their commitments and their conditions of satisfaction. You learn to discern where and with whom to devote your energy. You become more authentic, powerful and trustworthy by taking action from informed choice and an abiding connection to what you care about. To the extent that you care about leading a cohesive, creative, collaborative team to a new edge: cultivate trust in leadership.

For information about individual and group coaching to promote trust in leadership, please contact me.

Beata Lewis, JD, MSC - As an Executive Coach, I love partnering with business owners, entrepreneurs and professionals to co-create a path for bringing more of their authentic self and creative excellence to leadership and collaboration. Clients grow in resilience and capacity to co-create and sustain engagement, especially while navigating complexity, conflict, and change. They become more effective leading their own way and making the difference they care about with greater authority, trust, creative presence, joy and wisdom.

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