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The Dangerous Allure of Trust
The Misconceptions of Upward Trust

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Upward trust and downward trust together constitute the direction of trust. While downward trust is admittedly essential, upward trust is what is being discussed in this article.

Much has been written and talked about in leadership circles regarding the importance of trust, specifically what managers can do to improve their trustworthiness with their direct reports. Notwithstanding best efforts to achieve that end, many managers are finding themselves no better off, than before they engaged in the said undertaking. While faulty implementation may adequately describe the majority of cases, it by no means explains them all. They can't all be doing it wrong, can they?

More likely than not, there's a problem with the underlying assumption of the issue; maybe a manager's trustworthiness is not as important as customarily thought.

Maybe a manager even wanting to be trusted by his/her staff is a fundamental flaw in modern leadership thinking. That's not to say that the goal of modern management should be distrusted. But the conclusion I have reached from years of executive coaching and leadership consultant experience—and more than two

decades as a leader in various organizations—is that when managers strive for trustworthiness, it is professionally *immaterial* at best and organizationally *toxic*, at worse.

Before going any further, let's distinguish the *direction* of trust as being a crucial variable. The trust that employees give their managers and/or their managers seek to obtain from them is called Upward Trust. This is the trust that flows up the organizational chain. In contrast, Downward Trust is trust that flows downward, or the trust that a manager has for his/her direct reports and staff. While Downward Trust is admittedly essential, Upward Trust is what is being called into question in this article.

Let's take a closer look at why.

The Perception of Necessity

Boss' bosses tend to think that a manager's trustworthiness is important; Human Resource and Organizational Development personnel think so, too; and trustworthiness is important in personal relationships. Ergo, a manager's trustworthiness must be an essential element of employee relations and organizational success, right? Wrong.

Fundamentally, I have absolutely no problem with people wanting (or needing) others to trust them in life. And I have no problem with encouraging downward trust. As a fully-trained and certified business/personal life coach, I'm all for people doing what it takes to get their needs for recognition and regard met in appropriate ways. But a manager encouraging upward trust is not, in my view, "appropriate" workplace protocol. I say this because:

i) There are more important things for a manager to be doing at work than trying to convince staff she/he's trustworthy; ii) Getting staff to "think of me as I want to be thought of" is less about trustworthiness than it is about manipulation and perceptions; iii) The workplace is simply not the place for a manager to try and get his/her unmet needs fulfilled. That's not what jobs are for—it's what life is for.

So, if you have a need (or want) to be trusted by others, get a puppy, tutor a child how to read, volunteer at a hospital, commit to doing something important

for your significant other, or any of a number of other non-work-related activities that will kindle or display your trustworthiness. But don't bring that unmet need into the workplace and impose it on others.

The Misconception of Workplace Dynamics

To further complicate the dynamics at play, there are a number of additional faulty or incomplete assumptions that managers tend to make about the importance of trust in the workplace:

- **Misconception:** Being a trustworthy boss is what motivates an employee to do a good/better job.

Frederick Herzberg's "Two-Factor" theory speaks to the inaccuracy of this assumption. Hygiene Factors, as he described them, such as salary, benefits, interpersonal relations with co-workers and supervisors, company policies, etc., relate to job context. And although hygiene factors tend to be what employees complain most about—and what companies focus significant resources on—they do not motivate employees to work harder. Only Motivating Factors—things related to job content, such as recognition, opportunity for advancement, involvement in decision making, etc.—are, as their name implies, true motivators. While it's debatable whether a manager's trustworthiness should be considered a hygiene factor or not, it clearly is not related to job content and, therefore, is not something that truly motivates employees.

Fred was the executive-in-charge of a major operations organization and fancied himself as being particularly politically astute. As such, he worked very hard to develop his trustworthy quotient up, down, and across the chain of command so that he could get approval for whatever new initiatives he wanted to recommend. Notwithstanding his best efforts, though, his staff and direct reports found him to be increasingly *un*-trustworthy as they saw how easily he swayed with the political breeze. That Fred could gain Board-level approval for exciting new projects could not counterbalance his staff's skepticism about trusting him. He ultimately lost control of his organization and was subsequently asked to leave the company.

Contrast that with Bill, an admitted curmudgeon-of-a-leader in a related department. But instead of focusing on getting his staff to trust him, Bill focused

on insuring that each of his direct reports had the resources, training, and attention they needed to successfully complete a set of increasingly complex projects and assignments over time. Not surprisingly, his workgroup's productivity and morale skyrocketed, even though no one ever accused Bill of being a "people person."

Bill's trustworthiness was not what motivated these employees. It was his ability to do his own job, and do it well.

- **Misconception:** Believing that a boss can sustain trustworthiness by being as likeable as possible.

Pop star Nick Lowe may have overstated the point when he sang, "You gotta be cruel to be kind," but he did recognize that being likeable is not always in the best interests of the people you interact with. And, while it may be enjoyable to have a boss you like as a friend, it's more beneficial for you, and the organization that employs you, to like your boss ... *as a boss.* That is, someone who is consistently open, honest, apolitical, and fair, and provides you with meaningful work and opportunity regardless of how you personally feel about him or her.

Marcia, a middle manager in a financial controls area, believed that if she could get her staff to really like her they wouldn't mind if she occasionally sold them down the river to her boss. Initial feedback seemed to validate her approach. In formal 360° assessments and informal conversations, her staff reported that she was very likeable, indeed. "Marcia is a blast!" "She's one of us." "She's always up for a good joke and doesn't pimp us on the little stuff." But, every time that Marcia was called into her boss' office because of a problem in her area, or her work, Marcia blamed her employees rather than take responsibility for what happened.

As likeable as Marcia was as a person, her employees learned the hard way that trusting her was a BIG mistake.

- **Misconception:** Believing that in the absence of trust, distrust will develop and fester.

It's true that when distrust develops, it does tend to fester. But if the issue of trust is removed from the situation, it is simply not true that distrust will develop.

Consider a situation where you go to your eye doctor to check your prescription and instead of a new pair of glasses, he recommends eye surgery. Do you automatically trust him and say yes? Probably not. You probably don't distrust him, either, though. The doctor's trustworthiness is irrelevant. What's germane is that you get a complete and accurate description of what's going on with your eyes (and maybe a second opinion) before deciding about the surgery.

Consider another situation where you're getting ready to negotiate a contract renewal with a customer's legal counsel. Even though you have worked together before, and actually respect her work, will you automatically trust that the first contract draft you receive will adequately protect and represent you company's best interests? Probably not. But that doesn't mean you distrust the attorney. Trust has nothing to do with it. What's germane is the specific contract language you're being asked to approve. Your acceptance is not a function of what the last contract said; it's about what it says at this point in time. Again, no trust or distrust; just a healthy absence of trust and a heightened sense of attentiveness.

In each case you've known the person in question for sometime. You may even like him/her. Yet because the content matter matters, you have chosen not to blindly trust him/her and do whatever he/she says until you can question or validate a few things.

In the absence of trust, people tend to listen better, observe more closely, communicate more thoughtfully, and engage more fully.

Shouldn't the surgery's necessity be evaluated on its own merits? Shouldn't the attorney's contract draft be evaluated on its own merits? Shouldn't what managers say to staff be evaluated on its own merits, as well?

It can be in the absence of trust.

How Being Trusted Actually Undermines a Manager's Competency

Hopefully, you're starting to realize that upwardtrust is not as benign or helpful as you originally thought. Hopefully, you're starting to see that it can actually add a significant amount of downside risk for managers and organizations they work for. The implications form a very slippery slope. Consider:

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- **Implication:** The boss' communications will become increasingly imprecise and negatively affect group performance over time.

Think it through: If a boss is trusted by his/her employees, chances are good that he/she'll be given the benefit-of-the doubt if things aren't said as clearly, or cleanly, as they could be. And without the need to be particularly articulate or insightful, many managers will simply stop trying to be. After all, it takes a lot of work to communicate effectively. To be sure, the temptation to not have to is pretty appealing, especially to the typical manager who is generally overworked, stressed, running late, and pretty darn tired of having to explain yet another priority change to staff—again. So if staff wants to let the boss off-the-hook from fully detailing, the whys and wherefores of their latest set of assignments, why wouldn't a boss just accept it and move on to the next thing on his/her list without giving it a second thought?

The problem, though, is that by staff cutting their boss some slack, the employees will likely miss some important information that could significantly affect their decision-making over time and dilute the value of the work they do.

- **Implication:** The boss will increasingly *rely* on getting a free pass from staff and stop considering it an exception to the rule, thus demonstrating an increasing disrespect of, and disregard for, the very people who offered their upward trust in the first place.

 Back in the 1950s, Cyril Northcote Parkinson realized something that remains remarkably relevant almost a half-century later: "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." Anyone who's ever needed every last minute before a deadline knows the intuitive truth in Parkinson's Law. (Parkinson's Law also explains why it's so difficult to reclaim time gained when meetings are canceled, but that's another topic.)

So there you are: A manager with more than too much work on your plate, Parkinson's Law slowing you down at every turn, pressure mounting, your boss screaming, customers yelling, things only getting worse, and then your staff suddenly decides that it's okay if you're a bit unfocused with them. "That's great!" you say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" It's a perfectly logical response on your part. But that's what starts the slippery slope.

Jim was a recently hired department head. Although the job was bigger than he originally thought, he enjoyed the profile of working on as many corporate initiatives as he could. It didn't take long for these additional responsibilities to start impacting his ability to adequately run his department. As this tension mounted, Jim became increasingly brusque with his direct reports, especially when they asked for clarification on the increasingly complex work he was delegating to them.

At first they gave him the benefit of the doubt. They trusted him. "Oh, he's just a little stressed," they'd say. But his outbursts got increasingly worse. "You should know what I mean," he'd bark. "What, are you brain-dead?!" As the frequency and intensity of Jim's outbursts continued, the caliber of his team's work significantly decreased. Things got so bad that his boss was soon forced to ask Jim to leave the company. When asked what happened, the staff said they trusted he'd figure out how to manage his stress. But never did.

- **Implication:** The boss will self-destruct.

When you encourage employees to trust you, the probability is that they will inevitably learn the hard way that they really can't. And their disappointment and failed expectations will likely result in significantly lower morale, poorer performance, unnecessary turnover, and possibly even your termination.

Examples like Fred, Marcia, and Jim are everywhere, and represent a reaffirmation of The Peter Principle, as articulated by Lawrence J Peter in his 1968 book of the same title: Employees (in this case managers) will continue to rise in an organization until they reach their level of incompetence. In each instance, these managers undermined their own credibility—and put their jobs in jeopardy—simply by relying too heavily on the upward trust provided by their staffs.

It's a high-risk leadership strategy with a dangerous allure. But it makes very little sense.

You've Gotta Talk the Walk

Tacit recognition of the dangers of upward trust is not enough. To truly insulate yourself from the slippery slope, you need to make sure that your staff knows—

and is regularly reminded—that you do *not* want them to trust you. As already discussed, this does not mean that you want them to distrust you. It merely means that you're giving them permission to judge you on the value of your day-to-day interactions with them. That they hold you accountable for the commitments you make to them. And that they never let you avoid a difficult conversation or justify a questionable decision.

In fact, the more you allow them to—no, the more you insist that they—hold you accountable, the more likely it will be that your relationships with them mutually develop. It will encourage competency, meritocracy, and partnership from you all. It will help you listen better, observe more closely, communicate more thoughtfully, and engage more meaningfully. It will minimize misunderstandings, moderate misinterpretations, and provide a path for each of you to reasonably work through the challenges you face. Collaboratively. Respectfully. Creatively.

Now isn't that the kind of boss that you'd like to work for?! Isn't that the kind of boss you'd like to *be*?

Addendum: Downward Trust Revisited

This dismantlement of the value of trust would be incomplete if it did not further address the question on the other side of the coin: Should a manager trust his/her staff? The answer is yes. Absolutely, positively, yes. This does not mean, of course, that they should not still be held accountable for the requirements of their job or to the commitments that they make. But it does mean that giving employees the benefit-of-the-doubt whenever possible is a savvy and powerful, if not underutilized, leadership move.

Referring back to Herzberg, a manager's trust in an employee is a major hygiene factor for that employee. And in keeping with the Two-Factor theory, the absence of a hygiene factor is usually a significant source of dissatisfaction for employees. That's where the festering thing kicks in, by the way.

As such, I whole-heartedly encourage you to actively demonstrate your trust in, and regard for, your staff doing the right thing without you having to micro-manage them. If you do, you will be eliminating a major barrier for employees who want

to contribute in increasingly meaningful ways—especially if you also disabuse them of the notion that you want to be trusted in kind.

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