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Why Trust Matters in Work Relationships

Sometimes it causes us to roll our eyes, and sometimes it permeates our every move: distrust. At work, just as in our personal lives, a lack of trust can damage relationships and change the way we interact with others.

“Trust is the very basis of everything we do,” says Linda Stroh, Ph.D., Loyola University Faculty Scholar at the Graduate School of Business.

The high cost of distrust

“Without trust, workplaces become increasingly inefficient and ineffective,” Stroh says. “When we do not trust our colleagues or employees, we have to put all sorts of rules and regulations in place to ensure people do what we want them to do. In economic terms, the opportunity cost of ‘not trusting’ is wasted time, money, and our physical and mental health. We are forced to protect ourselves from those we can’t trust.”

Conversely, when we work and live in a trusting environment, our lives become more productive and peaceful, Stroh continues. “You can’t put a price tag on that.”

Effect on commitment

Stroh is author of “Trust Rules: How to Tell the Good Guys From the Bad Guys in Work and Life.” She offers insights on trust in the university environment.

“An important ‘trust factor’



is that we follow through on the commitments we make,” Stroh notes. “The weighty bureaucracies in university settings often weaken the link between commitment to projects and outcomes. Decisions and commitments made at the department level can be lost in the shuffle as they move through a university hierarchy. Consequently, faculty can discover that excessive time put into planning at the department level can turn out to be a waste of their time—and they learn to distrust the decision-making process of the bureaucracy.”

Worry among the wary

An atmosphere of distrust can create a cascade of unfounded worries that interfere with the way we work.

“This might be seen in a university setting when the administration suddenly sends out a request for information,” observes Rick Brenner, principal, Chaco Canyon Consulting, Cambridge,

Mass. “While the request may be truly routine, an individual may read more into it, thinking, ‘Something is coming. They don’t ask for this every quarter. This information could be part of a strategy to reorganize the department.’ Then they can waste a lot of time guessing and worrying about the reason behind the request.”

Another cause of distrust is the perception of infringement on the rights and responsibilities of others, says Brenner. “Whether it’s seen as a power grab, disrespect, contempt, superciliousness, arrogance, or any of a number of other patterns, infringement can cause those infringed upon to ask ‘What next?’ They can quickly move to defensive, distrustful postures that might not be specific to the infringers.”

Another real danger of pervasive distrust is that the

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Trust in Work Relationships: Challenging Yet Essential

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atmosphere becomes so poisonous that it becomes truly unpleasant to go to work. The cost can be enormous. “The people who have options may leave. In a university setting, for example, when famous faculty members leave, money will follow them,” Brenner says. “Then junior faculty without tenure question why they would want to stay there. So unresolved distrust issues can cause erosion of staff quality—you lose your best people.”

On a tactical level, distrust can cause operating costs to rise, as people within departments start to duplicate a centralized function, so they don’t have to deal with a centralized function they do not trust.

To foster greater trust at work, “stay in your own hula hoop,” Brenner advises. “If you have any experience with hula hoops, you know it’s impossible to hula your own hoop and someone else’s hoop

at the same time. If you try, you mess up both. Know your role, and recognize that you don’t really need to know as much about anyone else’s hula hoop.”

Organizational management consultants sometimes use tools like the Johari Window (see article below) to identify the roots of distrust and conflict. Often, these can be traced to differing assumptions by the parties involved, says Brenner. “Working out these differences is a lot easier when we know what everyone’s assumptions are.”

“Trust is an active sport”

We can not only predict whether someone is trustworthy, we can learn to be more trustworthy ourselves, says Stroh. “Trust is an active sport. Those who play it passively make a lot of bad trust-related decisions in their work and personal lives.”

Stroh interviewed many

CEOs and leaders to develop a “Trust Rules Questionnaire” which she says can be used to make better decisions about whom to let into our inner circle of confidants at work and in our personal lives.

“To predict whether someone is trustworthy or not, we just have to remove the blinders and be objective about the behaviors that we see,” Stroh explains. “We cannot let ourselves be influenced by titles, pedigree, gender, race — or any other ‘noise’ that we may have mistakenly learned — to predict whether someone is trustworthy or not. We often grant some people trust without their having earned it. Yet everyone, including clergy, doctors, teachers, or our bosses, should have to show us through their behaviors that they can be trusted.”

One very important outcome of using the Trust Rules Questionnaire to assess another’s trustworthiness is that most people begin to question their own trustworthiness and will often “rate” themselves, Stroh says. “As they do, they begin to realize several areas of weakness and then begin to work to change in a positive manner.”

Stroh says her research showed her that the way people react when things go wrong is a very important predictor of how trustworthy they are. “Do they lose their temper, misbehave or act out, for example? We can all look like ‘good guys’ when things are going well,” she says. “It’s when things go wrong that the extraordinary ‘good guys’ surface, and the ‘bad guys’ show their true selves.”

“The roots of distrust and conflict can often be traced to differing assumptions by the parties involved.”

- Rick Brenner



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The Role of the Johari Window in Improving Trust

The Johari Window is a communication model that can be used to improve understanding, communication and trust between individuals. “The model uses a four-pane window, in which each pane represents a category of our joint knowledge,” says Brenner. “The panes are Open, Blind, Hidden, and Unknown.”

Open: I’m aware of this knowledge, and so are you.

Blind: You’re aware of this knowledge, but I’m not.

Hidden: I’m aware of this knowledge, but you’re not.

And Unknown: Both of us are clueless about this.

When we disagree, the sources of our disagreement can often be outside our mutual awareness. Using the Johari window to classify our assumptions, we can surface them using techniques that are best for each of the Johari window’s four panes.”

Resources:

- “Trust Rules: How to Tell the Good Guys From the Bad Guys in Work and Life” by Linda K. Stroh, Ph.D. (2009) www.lindaastroh.com

- Chaco Canyon Consulting www.chacocanyon.com/

- “Assumptions and the Johari Window: Part I” by Rick Brenner (Sept. 27, 2006) www.chacocanyon.com/pointlookout/060927.shtml

- “Trust is Everything: Become the Leader Others Will Follow” by Aneil K. Mishra and Karen E. Mishra (2009)