



IS YOUR TEAM TRUSTING OR JUST POLITE?

FOUR STEPS TO ENSURE A TRUSTING CORPORATE CULTURE

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Between Samsung explosions and Volkswagen recalls, FIFA's racketeering and Wells Fargo's fake accounts, some of the most recent corporate scandals have been mainstream events with far-reaching impact. They've not only clouded public perceptions of business in general, but also highlighted the pervasive mistrust underpinning interactions among corporate executives themselves. Individual whistle blowers won't bring about sweeping cultural change. We need leaders who will help whole organizations become vibrant sources of trust.

But this type of corporate culture isn't easy to establish. Sure, leaders aspire to create challenging discussions that can move their organizations forward. But does the corporate culture allow them to challenge their teams without descending into personal attacks? The willingness to challenge is often undermined by an already existing absence of trust marked by politeness and defensive behaviour.

So how can senior managers create teams that feel trusting enough to enable challenge?

There are four steps to developing and maintaining trust:

First, managers must **recognize the symptoms** of low levels of trust. These are often seen in how communications takes place. When meaningful conversations take place mostly on the side, or outside of the committee room, there's a big indication something isn't right. When teams consistently run out of time for discussion and debate because presentations are taking too long, perhaps it's because time isn't being left for them. Are executives simply pretending to listen to or build on each other's points of view, but actually only pausing long enough to find another opportunity to speak? Are conversations repetitive with executives restating their points of view several times?

A seemingly polite atmosphere created by these behaviours could easily be perceived as respectful. But the absence of trust is covertly driving the discussion. It is common to find an absence of trust at senior levels of an organization because colleagues tend to avoid the real issues by defensively shutting down emotionally, not listening to others, and by creating a wall that prevents the sharing of information. Being able to distinguish politeness from respect is the first step in identifying an absence of trust.

The second step is to **initiate uncomfortable dialogue**. In teams where excessive politeness is the norm, this will be difficult. People may try to initiate uncomfortable dialogue at the end of a meeting, but dialogue is unlikely to get challenging at that time. No one wants to leave a meeting on bad terms, when there are low levels of trust. Difficult conversations need to be initiated in the middle or even at the beginning of a meeting. They also need a defined space and time. Sometimes moving to another room, and agreeing on a time limit will facilitate and contain a difficult conversation. Different spaces can break the scripted and polite conversations that often emerge among executives.

The third step is to **encourage transparency**. Transparency to most senior executives means allowing others to see information that is otherwise held privately. However, a deeper level of transparency is about actively sharing and revealing thoughts, emotions and beliefs that flow through our mind. Senior executives are usually very good at keeping these things private, and some believe it's the right thing to do.

But this is not humanly possible. Everyone carries emotions with them that influence their perceptions and judgement. By being open and transparent about irritations, frustrations, competitiveness or anger, executives can understand how they are restraining the dialogue. For example, it may be helpful to say "I felt no one was listening to me" to shift the conversation. Suppressing emotions is delusional. It can trick us into thinking that we or others are not experiencing any discomfort.

To be sure, building trust requires an active disclosure of *selected* thoughts and feelings. We cannot disclose everything we think or feel - nothing would get done, and it would lead to chaos.

Another form of transparency involves giving feedback. For example, “I felt irritated with you when you said...” or “I felt angry when you were dominating the conversation”. Such feedback is difficult to find in executive ranks, especially on polite teams. On the surface, feedback can be seen as a personal attack, and as such it is often avoided. There can also be a tacit collusion between executives not to criticize each other publicly.

The deeper explanation for the lack of feedback is the fear of rejection. When giving honest and direct feedback both the receiver *and* the giver may feel rejected, even when the feedback is requested. Yet, *the relationships that are most likely to strengthen and build trust are those where disclosure and feedback are reciprocated.*

If we actively make our feelings transparent through disclosure and feedback, we stay with one another through our feelings of rejection. If acceptance follows, we feel greater trust in the relationship – building belief that it will sustain in the long term. Achieving this state is the key to maintaining the balance between the intimacy and tension needed for optimal productivity. It needs to be a gradual and reciprocal process. Sharing too much can overwhelm. Sharing too little or much more than others can breed mistrust.

The fourth and final step is to **keep difficult conversations ongoing and continuous**. Difficult conversations are often replayed in our own minds for many hours after they are over. “I should have said...” While executives will need to move on and get back to the task, if one person or if a relationship is left “bruised” or “raw” it is better to acknowledge this and then move on rather than pretend nothing has happened. It is also wise to come back to the conversation a day or a week later. As time passes, if expressed, most difficult feelings pass. By coming back to the issue, you are signalling that you are still ‘with’ the person, and not avoiding or dismissing them. You are showing them that they can trust you with the difficult issues, not just the polite ones.

With corporate failures often dominating the headlines, one has to ask how many could have been avoided if more trust had been achieved across management. Because of the responsibility and power embedded in senior executive roles, there is much going on below the surface that is difficult to discuss. Instead, corporate leaders often fall back on being polite or ‘civilized’ with colleagues. How many Wells Fargo employees knew they were engaging in wrongful behaviour, but didn’t have an environment to speak up? In many cases being polite creates the delusion of respect, but an absence of trust. By making themselves vulnerable with one another, by exposing some of their thoughts and feelings that they do not usually share, managers will be able to build trust, and with it, genuine respect and a better corporate world.

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