



Rebuilding Trust: What's it Worth?

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

Earlier this year, the cover of The Harvard Business Review noted that it was time to rebuild trust in organizations. No doubt, the HBR would only risk its circulation sales on a “soft” topic such as trust because something was rotten in Denmark.¹

For months we've been subjected to headlines outing unethical business practices, abuses of power, and widespread suffering of consumers. For many, times have been pretty grim. And yet, as a confirmed pragmatic optimist (I don't just believe good things will happen, I do good things!), I have believed that situations will get better; we will have relief in the market and in the economy—we will emerge from the recession having learned and grown. That is the natural state of things.

What's it cost to have lost the trust of others?

Or, what's it cost us not to trust? In recent years, business books have ventured out on the trust balance beam and typically it's paired with ethics or values. Covey's book **The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything** cites

the research around how trust impacts the bottom line in terms of cost and speed in an organization. Low trust = higher costs and slower movement; high trust = lower costs and quicker movement. Working with my own clients, it's easy to see how important trust is in their professional relationships, the day-to-day operations of their businesses, and frankly, in determining how successful they will be.

This isn't just about being nice.

Yet, what we do know is that when we create an environment that fosters high trust, we also get a lot of other good stuff: high productivity, higher morale, better customer service, higher employee retention, higher employee engagement, higher profitability. My clients care about all of those things, and many times they have spent time, energy and resources to try to fix what's not working in their organizations and they want to either ignore the trust factor, or they just don't want to admit the impact it's having on their bottom line, whether it's profits, association membership, meeting their mission, etc. Here's a secret: *if you think it's lack of trust, it*

¹ I love referring to Shakespeare and knowing the source: this one comes from Hamlet when all was not well in the Danish country after Hamlet's father was dead and his mother married his uncle.

probably is. If you fix a process or a policy and you have people who cannot speak honestly or confront respectfully, you have a nice new process and people who might not follow it. If they are unhappy and morale is low because of lack of trust and fear of dealing with issues, and you give them a raise or change their compensation, you have richer, unhappy people. If you buy a new software program or technology in the hopes that this will streamline your sales process and create access to the data you need, but your team isn't telling you the truth because they don't trust you, you've got another expensive venture into a new technology they're not going to use, and the sales numbers won't go up.

Fixing What's Broken.

I've been invited to meet with potential clients who thought their real issues were lack of sales skills, lack of accountability or ownership of issues, low performance, bad hiring practices, and broken processes, and sometimes these are big issues they face, but one of the things we've got to determine initially is whether or not the environment, the trust factor, is an obstacle or a support to success. We know it intuitively, and when pressed, we recognize its symptoms: frustration, suspicion, lack of energy, doing the minimum, gossip or interpersonal strife, negativity, glacially-paced movement. We decide to spend money on expensive team building activities, or taking our groups to the woods, we label ourselves with our personality profiles---I'm a Red J-Driver; You're a Turquoise P-Back-Seater---when really, truly, we need to take a look at trust. You want a culture of trust because it makes everything easier. Easier! We accomplish more, we grow faster, we create and innovate, we are inspired, we have more fun. It's not too good to be true.

Myths About Rebuilding Trust.

Don't be discouraged or fooled by these notions:

1. **It takes a long time.** Not necessarily, though it can depend upon the relationship itself and the history among the people involved. **Presuming good intent** is a short-cut. In other words, if you can get people together, clearly articulate the goals for increasing trust, define and commit to the behaviors that will increase trust, you can accelerate the process.
2. **It will be uncomfortable.** Only if you let it be. Yes, sometimes, we must face either our own (or others) hurt or misgivings, our fear, or our real trepidation about moving forward. No one wants to get burned again and again. Mostly, if you begin the process, what you will feel right away is relief—you are finally working to speak the truth where you haven't before.
3. **Naysayers will sabotage the efforts.** What if, in your organization or on your team, this lack of trust has been around for a long, long time? What if it seems like you've had generations of not trusting? Raise the bar! As you lead the efforts to increase trust, you, as the leader, must model the behaviors you want to see, and you must address, immediately, anything that threatens to stifle your movement forward into a more productive, positive work culture with high-performing relationships.
4. **It won't last.** Certainly it won't if you don't believe it will! Just as with #3 above, you must carry the flag! Sometimes, you'll need your own mantras, "I am committed to creating and maintaining a positive, productive working relationship with you," or "I want to make sure we're on

the same page, so let me make sure I understand where you're coming from." If you've been working to strengthen trust, and something doesn't feel quite right, i.e.

communication or relationships seem to be slipping back to old behaviors, address them! Presume good intent, and check it out to see how to get back on track.

Some Truths to Consider.

Here are some things that can help:

1. **It's easier with leadership commitment.** It's true what they say about how the ship is steered—it's easier to have a trust culture when the leaders model those behaviors and when they demonstrate integrity and humility. It is easier, for sure. What if you're not at the top and you are concerned about the lack of trust and the trusting behaviors from the top? You know you've always got three choices: **influence, acceptance and removal!**² If you're not sure how to influence "up" effectively, consider both amassing evidence of what a lack of trust is doing to your team or organization, and share those with the other person's self-interest in mind.
2. **The key ingredient is discipline.** Changing any sort of long-standing or painful organizational culture element cannot be fixed in a weekend retreat, a team-building activity or a personality profile exercise. It takes real commitment and accountability. You can get a jump-start with some tools or processes, but in reality, you've got to identify the outcomes you want, design a plan to get there, and then commit and recommit. The pay-offs are huge and worth it, but you've got to be all in. And get some help if you need it!

² Key Influencing Options® tools to use for change!

3. **Transparency will create transport.** Many of my clients, when embarking on changing their cultures to raise the bar and/or navigate real change, recognize that the process might be messy or imperfect. Sometimes, right in the middle, they wonder if it's really going to happen, especially when as the organization begins to turn around, hopes begin to rise, and trust starts to emerge stronger; some element (a person who's not working out or a process that's really tired and ineffective) will become evidently painful. This is part of what happens when we really commit to transparency, truth and a positive movement forward. Step-by-step, day-by-day you will begin to notice a difference and one day, you say, "wow! It feels really different to work here!" or "My relationship with this person has just gotten so much better—it's easier now!"

Two Tools to Help: The Team Agreement and The Four Core Dimensions

Are you wondering if you can lead an initiative to rebuild trust on a team, within a whole organization, or with one, specific individual? You can—and you might need some assistance or guidance, too. Check out the other resources available online at www.libbywagner.com or give us a call at 206-906-9203 for a free consultation. We help create commitment cultures that last!

Libby Wagner

www.libbywagner.com | www.influencingoptions.com
6523 California Avenue SW #139 | Seattle, Washington 98136
p 206.906.9203 | f 866.451.5618
e libby@libbywagner.com