Book Trust & Betrayal in the Workplace

Building Effective Relationships in Your Organizations

Dennis S. Reina and Michelle L. Reina
Berrett-Koehler, 1999

Recommendation

Dennis S. Reina and Michelle L. Reina discuss the importance of having a strong sense of trust in the workplace. They advocate avoiding both the major and minor betrayals that undermine trust. Creating an environment that promotes trust contributes to effectiveness in the workplace, especially during times of rapid change. The book discusses the nature and effect of trust. It is enhanced with a variety of exercises that promote workplace dialogues and help people think through the issue of trust. Many of these exercises are especially suited for teams, work groups and divisions. The exercises facilitate discussing and resolving problems in a more trusting atmosphere. This well-written, easy-to-read book is directed to front-line supervisors and unit mangers, although it will also interest top management and company owners. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to team builders in organizations of all sizes.

Take-Aways

- We need trust in the workplace more than ever, because people are feeling betrayed.
- Recent great changes contributed to the feelings of distrust.
- When people lack trust in their organization, they don't work as effectively or as productively.
- Trust is the glue that holds relationships together, and business is based on relationships.
- Individuals with a good capacity to trust tend to think in more pragmatic, abstract, complex and differentiated ways.
- There are four key components of trust: the capacity for trust, contractual trust, communication trust and competence trust.
- We feel betrayed when there is a breach of trust.
- After betrayal, individuals heal through a process of recognizing what has occurred, working through the pain, getting support, learning to forgive and moving on.
- Keys to promoting trust at work include sharing information, telling the truth, admitting mistakes, maintaining confidentiality, and giving and receiving constructive feedback.
- You also promote trust by honoring agreements, clearly stating expectations and respecting people's knowledge and skills.

Summary

Why We Need Trust

When we trust someone and they betray us, we feel a great sense of pain. Today this sense of betrayal is growing because of all the workplace upheaval caused by change, such as downsizing, mergers, and other transformations. Employees feel betrayed by their leaders and leaders feel betrayed by their employees.

> "After years of constant change - years of downsizing, restructuring and reengineering or of upsizing, mergers and growth - trust among people at every level in the organization is at an all-time low."

People feel their trust is betrayed when they think someone has taken advantage of them, when they have expectations that are not met, or when they are not kept informed about decisions that affect them. These betrayals can come from failures to keep promises or from a person who uses lies to get ahead of others. Whether these are serious, intentional betrayals or minor, inadvertent ones, they cause breeches in relationships that damage the working atmosphere. Business is based on relationships, and trust is a kind of glue that holds these relationships together.

> "Betrayal, like a migraine headache, is energy-depleting and can shut down a whole system."

Ironically, changes in the organizational environment create conditions that undermine trust at a time when trust is most necessary. When uncertainty and anxiety increase, organizations need to be more open and flexible in response. You need to promote trust during times of change so people feel comfortable taking risks and experimenting with new approaches. Organizations are less effective and productive when there is a lack of trust. Leaders and managers are less likely to achieve their goals. People do better work when they trust the people they work for, those they work with, and themselves. They are better able to adapt, be creative, take initiative and perform well. People feel more satisfied working in organizations where there is trust. This healthier working environment improves your bottom-line results.

The Four Key Qualities of Trust

You trust others when there is "mutual confidence" in how they will fulfill expectations, communicate honestly and work competently. By contrast, you feel betrayed if you perceive a breach of trust, intentional or unintentional, actual or not. Trust in the workplace consists of four key components:

1. Capacity for trust, how ready we are to trust.
2. Contractual trust, our trust in each other's character and ability to keep promises.
3. Communication trust, our trust in being open and disclosing information.
4. Competence trust, our trust in the capabilities of ourselves and others.

The Importance of Your Capacity for Trust

Your capacity to trust is based on how ready you are to trust others or yourself. It comes from viewing yourself and others as reliable, dependable and capable. The capacity to trust is affected by positive and negative experiences. These affect your ability to trust, a capacity which can change over time.

> "Flexibility requires a force of workers that trust their leaders, one another and themselves."

Trusting yourself is necessary for a sense of self-worth. It contributes to confidence, which helps you present yourself so that others will trust you more. Those who trust themselves are more willing to take risks and express creativity. Employees who trust themselves are more able to trust others and work well with them. This is particularly important when conditions are changing and you want to foster a looser, more flexible work environment.

"Low trust impedes organizational leaders from achieving objectives. Low trust eats away at the bottom line and the overall health of the organization."

This capacity to trust has four key attributes or criteria: "pragmatism, abstractness, complexity and differentiation." They are measured on four "capacity to trust scales:"

1. Idealistic-Pragmatic: Being idealistic means being altruistic, being a perfectionist and having blind trust in others. Being pragmatic means having a more practical attitude and taking calculated risks. It is better to be pragmatic, because an overly idealistic person will be too trusting at the wrong times.
2. Concrete-Abstract: Being concrete means wanting solid, tangible evidence before being willing to trust and, often, being suspicious of others. Being abstract means accepting more ambiguity and uncertainty, and thus being more willing to let go and trust others.
3. Simple-Complex: Having a simple orientation means seeing the world in black and white terms. Having a complex capacity to trust means being able to see gray areas and to perceive many different facets of someone else.
4. Undifferentiated-Differentiated: An undifferentiated outlook means being likely to project one's own feelings onto others or to stereotype others into groups. A differentiated outlook means being able to make finer distinctions between individuals and groups.

Understanding the Destructive Power of Betrayal

Betrayals occur when one experiences a breach of trust, whether major or minor, whether committed intentionally or not. Major intentional betrayals might include revealing company secrets or sabotaging company data. Major unintentional betrays might include layoffs due to a restructuring. For example, it is betrayal when a manager delegates a job but then doesn't provide the necessary authority for the employee to carry it out. Minor intentional betrayals include gossiping or taking credit for someone else's work. A minor unintentional betrayal might occur when an employee repeatedly arrives late for work, or doesn't keep promises to perform a job.

"When people work in fear, they are guarded and calculating in their actions. The best they have to offer is no longer available."

Commonly, major betrayals occur when people act out of fear or greed. They break commitments or deceive others to gain their own goals. Most betrayals are minor. They may even initially seem "innocent and unimportant," more in the nature of inadvertent mistakes. But over time, these minor betrayals build, turning into major betrayals that poison the workplace. Workplace betrayals are damaging because they undermine your ability to trust. When people experience less trust in others, their ability to work together is undermined. Though major betrayals have a dramatic effect in undermining trust, minor betrayals "eat away at it bit by bit."

"When leaders create trusting working environments, people are safe to challenge the system and perform beyond expectations. Employees feel more freedom to express their creative ideas."

These betrayals operate on a personal and an organizational level. On the personal level, betrayal undermines self-confidence. Organizationally, betrayal creates a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. This makes people close down and feel resentment, therefore, they cooperate less willingly and are less able to work together. The more you trust, the more you have an opportunity to be betrayed. Conversely, through your own actions, whether inadvertent or intentional, you can lead others to feel betrayed.

Dealing with Betrayal

Because feelings of betrayal are so destructive, it is necessary to learn to how to deal with them. People must heal from betrayals to restore their sense of trust. An individual undergoes seven key steps in healing:

1. Recognize and acknowledge what has occurred.
2. Experience any painful feelings.
3. Get support. Receiving supportive help makes it easier to deal with feelings of powerlessness and to rebuild self-esteem.
4. Reframe the experience. Think of it as a learning experience.
5. Take responsibility. Admit any personal contribution to what happened.

6. Forgive that contribution and forgive the other people involved.
7. Let go and move on." Think of how to act differently in the future.

Contractual, Communication and Competence Trust

Because betrayals can be so damaging to relationships and to the individual's capacity to trust, managers should act to promote the other three types of trust: contractual, communication and competence trust.

> "Our capacity to trust in others is critical to our work relationships. It is the force that holds a relationship together."

Contractual trust is based on the understanding that "we will do what we said we will do." This can be any kind of promise or agreement, from delivering a product or service to completing a job. To promote this kind of trust, you need to carry through on committed actions. Specifically, you should take the following actions to foster contractual trust:

* Manage expectations. Make it clear what you expect.
* Establish boundaries. Define everybody's role.
* Delegate appropriately. Clarify instructions and objectives.
* Encourage mutual intentions. Employees should support each another.
* Honor agreements. Keep promises and commitments.
* Be consistent. Behave in a predictable way.

> "Our capacity to trust is not static but dynamic. It expands and contracts as it is updated by our positive and negative experiences."

Communication trust is based on a willingness to share information openly, be trustful, acknowledge errors, keep confidences, provide helpful feedback and have good intentions in what you say. Let people know what is happening in the business. Keep them informed. This keeps them from jumping to incorrect assumptions or trying to fill information gaps with gossip and rumor. Give them the knowledge they need to work effectively. When you do not know something, say so. Act in the following ways to promote communication trust:

* Share information. This helps people feel that you trust them.
* Tell the truth. Employees need to know you are straightforward.
* Admit mistakes because cover-ups sap time and energy, and hurt morale.
* Use feedback. Give and receive constructive feedback.
* Maintain confidentiality. This helps people trust you.
* Speak with good purpose. Speak "constructively and affirmatively" and "stand up for" others. This helps unify people, in contrast to gossip and criticism which pull relationships apart.

> "The more you are able to trust in yourself, the more you are able to trust in people, and the more you are able to deal with the uncertainty of the process."

Competence trust is based on respecting others' knowledge, skills, abilities and judgments, and helping them learn additional needed skills. People want to feel that they contribute to the success of the organization. Be willing to let them use their abilities to achieve your goals at work. They will feel more competent and do a better job. As your employees gain even more competence and confidence, they can do a better job. Building this trust helps them exercise their skills more effectively. With trust, employees will feel safe sharing their real feelings and opinions, even if they differ from yours. To promote competence trust, do the following:

* Respect people's knowledge, skills and abilities.
* Respect people's judgment, so they can make decisions.
* Involve others and seek their input.
* Help people learn skills.

Rebuilding Trust in Teams and Organizations

When trust breaks down, whether in work teams or the organization as a whole, you need to take steps to rebuild it. The decline in trust can contribute to even further declines, and the process will snowball if you don't stop it and reverse it. When contractual, communications or competence trust breaks down in a team, teach employees to use the steps outlined above to rebuild them. As a leader on the organizational level, you can rebuild trust in two ways. First, help others see change in a positive light, since many people may think of change as a loss. Second, help people get over betrayal by helping them express their feelings, giving them your support and using the steps above to help them heal.

About the Authors

Dennis S. Reina and **Michelle L. Reina** are principals in Chagnon & Reina Associates, a organizational development, research and consulting firm. They are change management consultants, executive coaches and speakers. They each have a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems. The Reinas have worked with and conducted research in more than 65 organizations in private industry, state government, higher education and the non-profit sector.