

TRUST

People willingly get on board with change when they have faith in their leaders.

Following the recent natural disasters hitting Japan and New Zealand, one looks for something positive emerging from such events. I stand in awe when disasters propel leaders to get people from across the globe to work together effectively and in an open, trusting manner to solve problems. This gives me hope that trust can become part of a global growth initiative.

Building, maintaining or recovering trust is a very important leadership skill and is needed, among others, for successful management of sustainability projects that can change the way we look at the built environment.

WHAT IS TRUST?

I believe trust is a product of choice – the **willingness** to be vulnerable to other people's actions.

This implies moving beyond **distrust**; “getting over yourself” to continue relying on others, regardless of the positive or negative consequences.

Bill Gates voiced: “the value of having everybody get the complete picture and trusting each person far outweighed the risks involved”.

Some of us might argue that such assumptions are downright stupid – that only a donkey hits its head against the same wall twice. We feel safer when we reserve the right to monitor and control those who give feet to our destiny. We prefer having some control and the right to monitor the direction in which others take us.

But what if leaders become serious about being “trustors” – which in this context means authentic, trustworthy examples to the people they work with?

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WHERE WORK NEEDS TO BE DONE, THE QUESTION IS “WHAT DOES TRUST DO”?

The collective reward of trust in the workplace demonstrated among the 100 best companies to work for in the USA is simple: superior financial performance. For our planet the reward of trusting relationships could have “tsunamic” proportions of a more constructive kind – namely that mankind’s collective efforts would support greater cooperation and also things such as conservation rather than destruction of our natural resources. Trust engages people and glues their commitment to end results, especially in difficult times.

Leaders carry the DNA of trust. Trust comprises both character (who we are) and competence (what we do). Employees sense and hear the intent of management, even when nothing is said out loud. The impact of leadership is interpreted through multiple networks of relationships, behaviours and events – a mixed bag of people’s perceptions of the presence or absence of openness, concern for others,

consistency and reliability. I vividly remember feeling implicitly safe in the presence of a leader who was deeply committed to contributing towards generating a healthier society while going about his business, regardless of making mistakes.

Indeed, certain workplace studies indicate that trustworthy leaders show tolerance for mistakes – even in the face of projects or experiments failing as a consequence of other people’s deceptiveness, disloyalty, callousness, arrogance and failure to keep promises. Ironically, such leaders also deliver superior results through others.

Trust is the “home” in which we live our relationships. It can offer shelter and security to strip off our defences. The cement that holds this house intact is communication and it is demonstrated in the way a leader behaves and makes decisions.

Leaders’ willingness and ability to move beyond distrust affect the very foundation of the “house”.

BEHAVIOURS THAT BUILD AND PRESERVE TRUST

Leadership trust involves three key behaviours:

The ability to engage with and involve others. Leaders who take the time to involve others are rewarded with commitment. We often overlook the value of involvement because we want to get things done fast. “Paying attention” is expensive and takes time, patience and humility. I have witnessed multiple business meetings going in circles or towards deadlocks around the most vocal people’s agendas – often when a high impact, win-win solution is silently sitting in the room already. Authentic leaders get people away from “being right” and ensure balanced air-time with a sincere intent to understand diverse and controversial angles. This leads to a shared focus on finding solutions.

A profound willingness to listen without prejudices. Many leaders participating in our workshops insist that they are good listeners. However, the acid test for being a good listener is simple: does the other person feel understood? The most basic step towards really hearing others is to “silence” your mind of its own opinions, solutions and conclusions. This is often easier said than done and it is particularly difficult to demonstrate respectful listening when you disagree with what another is saying or if you feel under attack. Great listeners have the ability to step out of their own shoes and into another’s safety

boots without blinking an eye. The payoff of active listening is mutual respect.

The humility to disclose. “Disclosing” in this context simply means that we admit our mistakes, say when we do not know, ask others for help, share important information (especially about yourself) and take risks in offering and receiving feedback, and offer apologies. However, there is a caveat: some people feel, with some good reason, that disclosing behaviours can be dangerous in the workplace. It should be used with caution: abusing this behaviour to manipulate reciprocity, or using it insincerely for “effect”, destroys trust rather than builds it. Broken trust can be very costly.

DEALING WITH BROKEN TRUST

All of us have been exposed to deceit. Whether dishing it out or being subjected to it, the results are painful. Friedrich Nietzsche once said: “I’m not upset that you lied to me, I’m upset that from now on I can’t believe you.”

Recovering trust means taking a long road. It requires at least three separate actions:

Sincere apologies. A sincere apology is one that is felt. You should know exactly what you have done and how it damaged your victim’s feelings of security and safety. Then apologise in specific, not general, terms.

Permitting the victim to influence you. If you have damaged the trust between you and another person, you need to be willing to give away some power. This means that you will need to give the person the leave to influence you by respectfully hearing exactly what damage you caused and which new conditions will be required for regained trust.

Fulfilling your promise. Your integrity is directly related to how you live your word. If you have broken a trust relationship once and you commit to a new set of behavioural conditions, you can expect zero tolerance for further errors. Assume that you have lost all your credits – unless, of course, you are on the receiving end of an authentic “trustor”. ☉

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