



## A Culture of Trust: **Essential**

**C**ontractors tell me when you are setting forms and pouring a foundation for a house the level of the foundation needs to be precise and have very little margin of error. Why? If the foundation isn't plumb, nothing from that point on is right in the structure, and the higher it goes the more problems develop. Windows sag, doors do not close properly and cracks appear in the walls.

A lack of trust in where you work creates gaping cracks in the entire foundational culture of the workplace. Unless those cracks are repaired, or a new foundation is poured, nothing goes right from that point on.

John is a supervisor and two of his staff members can't seem to get along in the office. They are separated by a cubicle wall that is only an inch thick. The tension between them is felt by everyone that works near them. The staff is becoming polarized and there is a sense that an invisible line is being drawn regarding which employee to side with.

All three of them have met together and the two staff members have committed to resolve some of their hurtful behaviors toward each other. It's not working



and now John is spending a lot of his time looking over his shoulder and planning what he can do next to help resolve the issue. A crack is appearing in John's trust level toward the two employees and the staff is checking out John's ability as a leader to handle this professionally as their supervisor.

Robert was told by his manager that he wanted to add new responsibilities to his job description because he hoped to work him into a leadership role. When one of Robert's co-workers, Kevin, found out about this he was quite upset because he had hoped for that same opportunity.



Kevin was a personal friend with the supervisor and complained about the lack of equity in this decision. The supervisor has since reneged on his offer to Robert, and Robert now questions his supervisor's word and sense of favoritism towards Kevin. The first sign of a crack is appearing in the foundation of Robert's believability in his manager.

In his book "Speed of Trust", Stephen Covey Jr. states that in a recent survey of organizational trust they noticed interesting facts that began to emerge:

1. Only 51% of employees have trust in senior management.
2. Just 36% of employees believe their leadership act with honesty and integrity.
3. 76% of staff has observed illegal or unethical behavior from others in the last 12 months.

As you briefly analyze your organization's trust level, maybe you're wondering if your place of work or business falls in line with the overall average. Listed below are some common symptoms of workplace mistrust to assess:

### **Symptoms of Mistrust at Work**

- ▶ Staff refuses to open up in meetings or trainings.
- ▶ There is an increase in gossip.
- ▶ Turnover and lack of retention increase with time.
- ▶ Long-term loyal employees are beginning to look for work elsewhere.
- ▶ There is low morale and energy levels, and more sick days are being taken.
- ▶ Previous promises and commitments are either being broken or have been misunderstood.
- ▶ Staff no longer feels trusted, but micro-managed.

Of course, it's not all dark everywhere. Compare the weaknesses of any organization with the strengths of another:

### **Symptoms of Strong Foundational Trust in the Workplace**

- ▶ People love going to work.
- ▶ There is a sense of teamwork and collaboration.
- ▶ Management solicits ideas, opinions and input from workers in the trenches.
- ▶ When mistakes are made, there is a mentoring model to help prevent them from happening again instead of a punitive, "What have you done wrong this time?" model.
- ▶ Employees and management speak to one another seeking advice and how to resolve problems, rather than gossip about them.
- ▶ People are encouraged to be creative in their areas of efficiency.



Knowing the differences between a culture of trust or distrust is critical. I once was called to work with a management team at a hospital who wanted me to develop a training called "The meeting after the meeting." When I inquired about why people would have the meeting after the meeting, they seemed surprised because management thought they had developed a culture of trust. The more we talked, the more apparent it was that there was little to no credibility in management from staff's perspective.

Here is another statement to post and frame on the wall in your conference room: "It simply makes no difference how good the rhetoric is or even how good the intentions are; if there is little or no trust there is no permanent foundation for success." Stephen Covey Jr.

In order to rip out the old rotting foundation of distrust then, we must first be aware of how we got there so it doesn't happen with another new foundation:

### **A Few Common Termites that Threaten the Foundation Structure**

- ▶ When problematic behavior is ignored and allowed to continue.
- ▶ When management ignores protocols and standards.
- ▶ When certain employees are shown obvious favoritism.
- ▶ When confidences aren't kept.
- ▶ When management shows little to no confidence in staff's abilities or creativity.

So how do we turn the ship around? Did you know it takes 7 miles to completely turn around an aircraft carrier?

### Rebuilding Trust When It's Lost

The quickest way to reverse a negative perception when you have lost trust with anyone is to change the behavior that caused the crack in the foundation of trust to begin with.

This must begin with an acknowledgment that leadership, or whomever, realizes why their credibility started to be questioned.

This acknowledgment should not be minimized, explained away or deflected back on staff in any way, shape or form. Since all water runs downhill, when there is a broken foundation in the company's believability, the fix or restoration must begin with management first.

When I met with the above-mentioned hospital management team and they discussed the reasons for their culture of distrust, we spent the rest of the afternoon discussing "how to prevent the meeting after the meeting."

This management team was determined to reverse the trend in their culture of distrust. Below are some of the solutions they discussed to change the skeptical trend in their staff:

1. When ideas and suggestions are offered by staff in meetings, supervisors will follow up with the individual with further discussion, or at least acknowledge they were heard and appreciated.
2. Allow the input of staff and more collaboration regarding future decisions by staff.

3. Make immediate changes in a few of the areas that created the loss of credibility.
4. Revisit previous promises made by management and begin to fulfill, or at least discuss, them.
5. Before future changes in the organization are implemented, leadership will give a heads-up explanation to staff as to the type of change that will be coming, especially if the changes will have a big impact on specific individuals or departments.

I recommend that if your organization, department, or you as an individual have lost the confidence from others, come up with a list of behaviors you can immediately change in order to reestablish trust.

### Conclusion:

There is almost always a way back when trust needs to be restored, but it takes honest admission, new behaviors, and sincerity to rebuild the foundation of trust again. Once this happens, a new culture of teamwork will return and people will stop looking over their shoulders, start to open up again, and an entire new structure will bring added strength and morale to the organization!



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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.