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# HOW DO LEADERS BUILD THE TRUST THING?

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Attention is the currency of leadership claims my former teacher Ron Heifetz from Harvard University. I now think that he is half right – attention coupled with trust is the actual currency of leadership.

Donald Trump is masterful at hogging attention – but surveys suggest most of the planet don't trust him and don't consider him to be a leader. This absence of trust is usually deadly for public leaders because people stop paying attention but Trump compensates by using the celebrity path of daily shock and awe, combined with a substantial minority of followers whose faith in him appears to be rusted on. Trust is a funny thing. A colleague of mine recently asked me for any articles which I had written about it and I demurred that trust was woven through the fabric of much of my writing on leadership so I had not seen the need to produce a separate article on the topic. "Trust is like smoke", he said, "you know when it is there but it is hard to get your hands around it."

Unlike smoke though, trust is not transitory. Trust can be withdrawn or lost through abuse, but by nature it is not fickle. Trust is sticky. I have recently been doing some work for a senior bank manager who participated on one of my leadership programs more than a decade ago. I mentioned to her that lots of my work comes from former participants whom I haven't seen for a long time. "I am not surprised", she said. "On that course we came to trust you". This trust is mutual and long abiding. We achieved a lot on a very short short course by quickly building trust, and to excuse a pun, we can still bank on that bond.

The trust challenge for leaders is threefold. We need others to trust us and our leadership if we want to avoid the path of command and control, or fear and

coercion; we need our people to trust each other in order to work well together and to attract customers and stakeholders who trust them, and; we leaders also need to trust ourselves and to trust others. The latter may be a pre-requisite for the first two. Trust may be a choice we make and a gift which we give – more later. But it may also be a currency which we employ. The ways to build trust as a currency may be a lot more pragmatic and less cherubic than they are often depicted. In negotiations, leaders are urged to be hard headed about trust and to use reciprocity as the vehicle to build it. Others argue that there is an efficiency and effectiveness dividend to be had by those leaders and those organizations who operate at “the speed of trust”.

Negotiators know that there is a good reason why trust can be hard to maintain in relationships and organizations – the rewards can be too great and the sanctions too weak to rely on individuals to act in a trustworthy way towards others and the group. Potential collaborators in organizations and in society are often faced with a “Prisoner’s Dilemma”. In my version of this dilemma two robbers are captured by the police in the grounds of a mansion where the owner is found murdered. Just before their capture they shake hands and agree to tell the police nothing – their worst prospect will be six months jail for theft. The police put them in separate cells. They tell Prisoner A that they know B murdered the owner and if he signs a statement to that effect they will hang B so there will be no concerns for him there and the police will not pursue theft charges against A. Prisoner A has a dilemma – this is a good deal and he knows the police will make the same offer to B and B is a criminal and untrustworthy, so he signs the statement. The police show the statement to B and tell him they know A is lying and that he is the real murderer but one of them has to hang. “Would B like to make a statement?”, they ask. Well B has nothing to lose and is so angry that he signs the statement naming A and they both hang. The moral of the story is if they just trusted each other and kept their word everything would have been fine apart from the owner’s funeral, but there was a tempting individual reward on offer without any enforceable sanction which lured them to abandon their trust.

Negotiators have developed various “win-as-much-as-you-can” type simulations based on the Prisoner’s Dilemma and studied what are the most successful behaviours and strategies over time and through multiple interactions to build trust and achieve the best results for the most people (see for instance Rodney Axlerod’s “Evolution of Cooperation”). Here are some of the lessons from these studies and from my own experiments: start out in a trustworthy, cooperative way because it can be hard to get back there otherwise; keep reciprocating and reinforcing their trustworthy behaviour; do not reward their untrustworthy behaviour with too much cooperation, but implement sanctions or withdraw your cooperation; if they get the message and start cooperating again do not seek vengeance, abandon the childish competitive notion that you must beat them every time or even up the score, and start to cooperate immediately; build trust through an iterative, reciprocal process of mutual gain rather than one reliant on personalities or affection; adapt the system to support trust, such as lots of opportunities for communication, strong team identity for the group or a high price for defection; if success is the name of the game be sure to define that success clearly for all the participants – how we play the game is surprisingly influenced by how we name the game, as well as how we reward the game; understand that human beings have a tendency to project malevolent motives on others and there is always the potential for a spiral of mutual destruction, so do not try to be too clever but behave in consistent and transparent ways which are easily read by others; realize that trust lost is hard to restore, and great trust betrayed is almost impossible to regain.

In his book “The Speed of Trust”, Stephen Covey argues that we are living in a “low trust world”. He was writing a decade ago, but anyone who visits a bookstore today will be confronted by scores of urgent new titles analysing the decline of trust and loss of confidence in our major institutions in the West. Covey argues that there is a major efficiency and effectiveness dividend to be achieved through building high trust cultures. He argues that the business case for trust is very simple – when trust goes down, speed goes down and costs go up. It is trust that turns coordination into collaboration, suppliers into partners,

exhaustive due diligence into handshakes, and the clash of diverse views into innovation. The leadership case for trust is that when it goes up, energy and fulfilment levels in organisations go up too.

Covey argues that trust is a “learnable competency” and is based on credibility established through behaviour. Leaders inspire trust in their leadership through their character and competency. Leadership intent and motivation matter, but only if there are corresponding actions and results. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott acted decisively, but voters did not seem to believe he had their best interests at heart. Disillusionment with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s leadership seems to be focused not so much on his beliefs but on a lack of corresponding action and results. Stephen Covey claims that there are thirteen major behaviours that need to be cultivated to build a high trust culture. His behaviours are not surprising and include activities such as Talking Straight, Showing Loyalty, and Keeping Commitments.

These pragmatic approaches to trust are primarily behavioural and attitudinal. But there is another dimension to trust for leaders. This dimension is more existential or ontological – it belongs to the realm of being and choice. Leaders both inspire trust and extend trust. The inspiring of trust is part of the process of gaining informal authorization from others to lead them. It is also a key act of leadership to extend trust to others. We have seen already that leaders cannot be naïve or impractical about extending trust to others, but nor can we be entirely transactional and withhold trust until trustworthiness has been proven to us. We have all experienced how empowering it is when parents, friends or bosses extend their trust to us. But someone has to go first and that is often the job of leaders.

On almost every leadership program that I have ever led, groups will identify at some stage that it is a lack of trust which is holding them back as a group and preventing them from doing really valuable and powerful work together. And the question is often asked: How do we go about trusting? The stock answer is that it takes time and members need to get to know each other better. But time and familiarity are not reliable sources for building trust – often the most

distrustful groups have been hanging out with each other for a long time. The real answer which we have designed the learning process to help them to wrestle with themselves, is pretty simple. You build trust in the group by members extending trust to the group. It is an act of leadership to take a risk and show some trust in others. On our leadership programs it can take hundreds of different forms – someone shares some personal or intimate information which they did not previously entrust to the group, or someone apologises for some nasty private judgement they have been making of others in the group, or someone makes a risky request of someone in the group. As a regular observer of these dynamics, I can vouch that trust appears at these times like a powerful energy which transforms how a sluggish group works together.

However, it is hard for leaders to give what they don't already have. Leaders often need to learn to trust themselves if they are to inspire and extend trust to others. The process of trusting ourselves as leaders can require a life time of work, reflection and self-awareness. Leadership is a very demanding activity and it is easy for stress points to emerge. Bravado, ego and a meticulously crafted identity are poor substitutes for a genuine trust in ourselves – faking it until you make it will get you only so far. When leaders genuinely trust themselves and their leadership there is a certainty, and confidence and clarity present which is not based on having all the answers and which communicates itself loudly to others. I coach and advise many very senior and very successful leaders. I know that in the pressure cooker of businesses, organizations and leadership, trust in ourselves can be shaken and go missing momentarily. These are the times when it is good to have the ability developed through daily practice, to turn down the noise and the chatter, and simply attend to the present moment where we are free to choose and to trust ourselves. There is a stillness available in the present moment which allows us to experience trust as a gift which we extend to ourselves and to others.