

How to Maintain a **Trusting Workplace** By J. Mark Walker

Have you ever noticed how much a greeting with a smile means to you when you are out in the world each day? Conversely, how do you feel when a greeting is abrupt and expressionless? What emotions come up when a person on the phone is unfriendly or “no nonsense” with you? Do you tend to respond to each person the way they respond to you? Which persons do you intuitively trust more?

You probably learned everything you need to know about creating and maintaining a trusting workplace in kindergarten or Sunday school. The first century Jewish carpenter and rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, instructed his followers in what we call today, “The Golden Rule:”

“Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior. Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them.”

The Message Translation, Matthew 7:12

1 Author, Ron Willingham, has his own version of this advice in what he calls “The Law of Psychological Reciprocity:”

“People tend to give us back the same feelings, attitudes and responses that we give them.”

Integrity Selling for the 21st Century

What does this mean in the context of a “trusting workplace?” Here’s an exercise:

1. Think of the most rewarding job or work environment you have ever experienced. This might go back to your first job as a high school kid, or work as an unpaid volunteer.
2. What were the characteristics of that work environment or of your boss?

In this exercise you will probably come up with some thoughts about how you were involved in something meaningful to you – something “bigger than yourself.” And there will likely be a strong element of trust – “My boss taught me what we were to do, and let me do it.” Or “We were all committed to our objective, and we collaborated to create new ways to reach it.”

Robert Greenleaf in his book *Servant Leadership* makes this point:

“...the business exists as much to provide meaningful work to the person as it exists to provide a product or service to the customers.”

My research in at least a dozen “how to” books, written in the last 15 years, has yielded five characteristics of a trusting workplace:

1. The right people are in the organization, doing the jobs at which they excel.
2. The executive teams, or at least the CEO, are leaders, not just managers.
3. The vision and mission of the organization are based on clearly articulated and inculcated values, not a list of rules.
4. The habit of listening (really listening) to employees and customers is exhibited throughout the organization.
5. People are built up in the areas of their strengths, and operate in those strengths. There is no attempt to change their fundamental gifts into something they don't do well.

1. The right people. In his now classic book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins uses the metaphor of getting the “right people on the bus, sitting in the right seats.” He gives examples of good companies being restructured *after* the right people are in the right places, and becoming great companies. Some of the advice in his book and elsewhere include:

- It is better to wait than to hire (or promote) the wrong person. I have seen this error almost destroy organizations, especially small companies. A recent example was a CEO who hired a VP of Sales based on the person's resume and references. He was in a hurry to get the position filled to increase sales. Unfortunately the individual selected turned out to be unwilling to make plans and execute them, was poorly organized and reactive, and exhibited a poor work ethic. It was a great learning experience, but very costly to this fledgling enterprise.
- The right people on the bus in the right seats will be very effective at determining the direction and setting up the values and vision for the organization.
- My experiences has been that sometimes the right people are already there, they just don't know it because they do not see where their work contributes to the whole of the organization's mission.

2. Leading, not just managing. Professor John Kotter of the Harvard Business School makes a distinction between leadership and management. They are two different skill sets, but they are not mutually exclusive. My impression is that we manage things and processes; we lead people.

- Perhaps the most critical role of the leader is to establish, clearly communicate and emphasize a clear vision and ideology for the organization. In the book, *Built to Last* Jim Collins and Jerry Porras tell us that the vision must be
 - Reflected in actions and decisions,
 - Authentic,
 - Take precedence over profits.
- In his recent book *How, Why How We Do Anything Means Everything in Business (and in Life)*, author Dov Seidman explains:

“An organization can only succeed when all of its members unite behind a common vision, creating a climate of trust and allowing people to be bold and take chances and innovate.”

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3. **The culture is based on ethics and values, not rules.** There have been some tragic and costly business blunders in recent years because organizational values were not identified and effectively communicated. Rather than “Doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do,” as Willingham express it, leaders at Enron and Arthur Andersen asked, “Can we do this?” Their companies have ceased to exist. Hewlett Packard suffered significant business declines and culture destruction because a former CEO did not ask, “Is this electronic eavesdropping the right thing to do?” Instead the question was, “Is this legal?”
 - In *How* Seidman emphasizes that human beings are “hard wired to connect with others, but not for rules.” He emphasizes the vital nature of clearly communicated and practiced values. In a rules-based organization, the absence of a specific rule encourages us to try to “get away with it.” In a values-based organization people know the right way to behave in virtually every situation. The employees don’t ask, “Can (legally) we do this, but should (based on our values) we do this?” The responses fall into a spectrum, not a black/white response.
 - A good example of rules vs. values is a government agency’s response to an issue that does not really fit the rules. The employees, who are “managed,” usually are forced into rules-based decisions, which are often against the basic value of service to the citizens they exist to serve. There are exceptions to this; especially with state and local governments where the people live in the communities they serve.
4. **Habitual listening to employees and customers.** Everyone knows we are supposed to listen to customers, but we must also learn to think of our employees and colleagues as “internal customers.”
 - Greenleaf in *Servant Leadership* beautifully puts this in context: “In saying what I have in mind, will I really improve on the silence?”
 - In their book, *The Secret*, Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller emphasize listening as the “number one” tool in encouraging and leading people.
5. **Focus on Strengths.** There are two significant ideas to emphasize in the focus on strengths.
 - **The Organization.** In *Good to Great*, Collins stresses the importance of leaders having and communicating a positive view that the organization has the strengths to become and will become like the vision being communicated. He calls this the “Professional Will.”
 - **The Person.** Tom Rath, Global Practice Leader in the Gallup Organization, notes that his research demonstrates that employees must have “positive interactions” and feelings of being appreciated at work. Specifically people must be told how their positive attributes relate to their work and the company’s vision.
 - Literally scores of books over the last 75 years document research and anecdotal evidence that success of individuals and enterprises depend on the creation and maintenance of “a positive belief system.” Most of the success in creating positive beliefs relate to building up people rather than “critiquing” them.

- In my experience as a facilitator of training courses, I have observed that when you build the person, the person will build your business.

The Paul Zak Research. Dov Seidman suggests that trust falls into the category of “doing the right thing” more than being “the most profitable decision.” In his book, *How*, quoted earlier, he introduces the research on the “neurobiology of trust” conducted by Dr. Paul Zak. A Professor of Economics, Zak is the founding Director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

Dr. Zak's lab discovered in 2004 that a chemical in our brains, oxytocin, allows us to determine who to trust. At the risk of oversimplifying, the Zak study showed that when you exhibit trust to another, the other person's brain makes oxytocin, a hormone that is linked directly to pleasure, trust and generosity. When this hormone is created, people trust you in return. Seidman concludes, “Reciprocity, or ‘doing unto others as they do unto you,’ seems therefore to be a biological function. Trust begets trust.” Remarkable! A biological explanation for “The Golden Rule.”

Profound Implications. Executive leaders must encourage strong, friendly, trusting work relationships among employees. Rath, of the Gallup Organization, reports that his research demonstrates:

- Of 100 employees in an organization, 26 are “engaged,” 55 are “not engaged,” and 19 are “actively disengaged.”
- Organizations which encourage “best friends” at work are 7 times more likely to have “engaged” employees.
- Companies with “engaged” employees have a 2.6 times the earnings per share of other companies.
- He wrote a book about the significance of these findings, *Vital Friends*.

Jim Collins notes in *Good to Great* that “Members of the good-to-great teams tended to become and remain friends for life.”

Conclusions.

- People are created (hard-wired) to trust, and tend to thrive in trusting work environments.
- Characteristics of Trusting Work Places:
 - Right people on the bus
 - Clearly and consistently communicated vision
 - Based on defined values, not rules. Think “should?” not “can??”
 - Listen
 - Build on strengths
- Leaders must put systems or processes into place to facilitate work, and then trust people to do the work.
- Reward the behavior you want to encourage with positive feedback and more tangible rewards such as bonuses or time off.