

A Living Trust: Build One With Your Top Performers

By

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Building trust within an organization is a complicated and fragile process that requires unwavering attention on the part of the leaders at all levels of the organization. Employees need to have trust in the people who are running the organization. They have to believe that decision makers have the vision and competence to set the right course, allocate resources intelligently, fulfill the mission, and help the company succeed. They want to feel confident that processes are well designed, consistent, and fair. Does the company make good on its promises? Research demonstrates that there are links between trust and corporate performance, and common sense indicates that, all other things being equal, people will stay with the trusted leader.

Just as importantly, employees want to trust their own bosses. When determining whether their boss is worthy of their personal trust, direct reports will ask, “Does the boss treat employees fairly? Does she consider her direct reports’ needs when making decisions about the business and put the company’s needs ahead of her own desires?” If they can’t answer “yes” to both questions, there is no foundation on which to build trust.

But what can a boss actually *do* to build this climate of trust that characterizes F² Leadership? Obviously some aspect of trust, like organizational trust, might be outside the purview of a particular leader, but there are many aspects the boss can control:

- Send consistent messages. One of the fastest moving destroyers of trust, inconsistent messages, can occur at any level of the organization. Often bosses are helpless to do anything about the strategic or organizational trust issues in their companies, but they can certainly make sure that they are not guilty of sending mixed or inconsistent messages. An element of trust is predictability. Direct reports want to know they can trust their bosses to do what they say they will. For instance, the boss who tells her direct reports how much she values them and then doesn’t keep scheduled appointments with them, takes calls or other interruptions when they are meeting, or shows up late for meetings with them, is sending the message loud and clear that indeed they are *not* important to her. Employees who have this kind of boss can be counted on to disengage, focus on rumors and politics, and update their resumés.

- Keep policies and standards consistent. When bosses play favorites and allow a few pet performers to bend the rules, others notice. Consider the boss who doesn't like confrontation. He turns a blind eye to the fact that a select few are not adhering to the company's rules regarding flex time, signing in and out, using work time for doctor's appointments, etc. If there is a rule, everyone should be required to uphold it. If it's not important enough to have a company policy about, don't bother with it. The HOT stove form of leadership applies here. No matter who touches the stove, it's hot, and the person touching it will get burned, no matter the person's position in the organization or the favor the boss feels for the person who touches it.
- Don't have a policy about something unless you are willing to fire your most valuable employee for violating it. In other words, if it is important enough to make a rule about it, it's important enough that the company's star will be fired for violating it, and whatever you do, don't create a policy in response to the bad behavior of a few. If you have a direct report that doesn't come to work on time, address the issue with that person instead of instituting an expensive clocking in system that will just annoy others who never needed it in the first place.
- Expect competence, high-quality performance, and decent behavior from everyone. Whether the person is a genius, technical expert, top salesperson, rainmaker, or company curmudgeon, the same standards should apply, but often they don't. Bosses tend to turn a blind eye to people who operate at one end of the continuum or the other. Too often top performers get away with volatile behavior and tantrums, both appalling behaviors in any organization. On the other hand, the under performer can also get away with unacceptable behavior simply because bosses don't want the confrontation that is likely to occur if they address issues. Once again, others notice, and they resent the company tolerating problematic employees.
- Give honest, balanced feedback. How many times have I had conversations with frustrated human resource managers because obviously a person needs to be fired, but the performance reviews are glowing? A legitimate question a lawyer would ask in a wrongful termination hearing might be, "If this employee is bad enough to fire, how do you explain these high scores on his last appraisal?" In addition to causing headaches for the company, this kind of dishonest feedback fails to help the direct report develop skills or take actions to better performance. Similarly, if everyone is given the same bonus and raises, what is the incentive for others to work hard for stellar performance? Motivation may come from within, but *de*-motivation often comes from the boss. People tend to object to unfair treatment that they can't control. The boss who engages in flawed feedback is inviting others to weigh in by voting with their feet as they walk out the door.
- Trust others. One of the phenomena of human behavior is that *trustworthy* people are also usually *trusting* people. As the saying goes, a man only looks behind a door if he has hidden behind several himself. If a boss can't trust his direct

reports, one of two things is wrong. Either he is not willing to trust because of his own doubts, or the direct report has given him reason not to trust her.

For example, I worked with Mike, a vice president who routinely worked a 70-hour week. He complained that he had no life balance, and his wife was tired of shouldering all the family responsibilities herself. When I probed more, I learned some of the reasons he was working so many hours on a consistent basis. He failed to delegate because he wanted to ensure quality. Therefore, in addition to all the things he had to do to fulfill his obligations, he reviewed expense accounts to make sure no one was cheating.

These are two separate issues, but both are related to trust. First, Mike needed to let his direct reports know that he trusted them to do their jobs their ways, without his micromanagement. Second, Mike needed to let them know that he expected integrity in their expense accounting. One of his direct reports had previously cheated by taking his wife to dinner on the company. This sort of violation should result in the direct report being punished with either a stern, formal reprimand, or dismissal. Mike should not be punished by having to assume the additional duties of reviewing all expenses. This is something one of his direct reports, possibly his assistant, could do.

The ability to foster trust is probably one of the single most important skills an effective leader needs to develop because it is at the heart of accomplishing tasks and taking care of people. If your direct reports trust you and know that you trust them, they will work to get the results everyone needs for success. *What* you do to balance your focus on task and people is your first concern as a boss, but the *way* you lead will be important too.

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