

How To Earn Your Employees' Trust

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Most managers think trust is an important factor in the business of managing people. But trust is not a given, it has to be earned. And you don't do that just with your words, important as they are. Employees watch your behaviour, and base their opinions on what they see you do, versus what you say. Can they believe what you say? That's what makes them trust, or not trust. It all sounds disarmingly simple, but in practice it's much harder to do.

Principle Number One

To earn anyone's trust - whether in business or in life - Principle Number One is :

Do as you say you will do.

It may seem trite and simple, but it is fundamental. You damage your good name every time you say things like : "I'll phone you back on that", but you forget. Or, "I'll get it to you by Thursday", but you don't. Or, "I'll get that equipment repaired for you by tomorrow", but it doesn't happen. They may all be relatively trivial by themselves, but each failed promise adds inexorably to your image of unreliability.

Soon people feel they can't take you at your word. They start checking up on you, they chase you to make sure they will actually get what you have already promised. When people lose trust in you they start phoning you repeatedly before the deadline day 'just to make sure'. Whereas one phone call would have done it in the past, now you get several on the same subject. It's not only annoying, it's a great waste of your time.

People much prefer to work with correspondents whose word they can take at face value. They say things like : "George won't be pushed around, but if he says he'll get something to you by Tuesday, you'll get it by Tuesday". It's obvious : if you prefer to deal with people like that, become a person like that yourself.

Now you don't have to be perfect exactly. If things turn out as you say nine times out of ten, people will forgive the odd misdemeanour. They will still see you as someone they can generally count on. That rule applies whether it's the people you manage, your boss, your colleagues, your suppliers, or your customers. But if something you said looks like it is slipping, tell your people or your colleague in advance, so that they're not disappointed. They'll appreciate your showing you treat your commitments seriously.

And that kind of attitude just enhances your reputation. People talk positively about you when you're not there. They say things like : "I can work with George, he's all

right". Or, "Jenny's OK, no problem there". You can take it that when your staff or colleagues see you in that light, they'll be much more willing to help you out when you have problems. And best of all : the respect you get from your staff and your colleagues creates in your mind the kind of good feelings which make it a pleasure to come to work every day.

The Corollary of Principle One

There is one key point about being able to keep your promises on a regular basis, and it's this : Don't make easy promises which you are then unable to keep. It's easily done: you come under heavy pressure to deliver something on an impossibly short timescale; or you get pressed into taking on overly ambitious objectives by your boss; or colleagues in a meeting railroad you into making unwanted concessions.

Generally, these unwilling concessions are made just to get rid of the pressure at the time, to avoid public embarrassment, or simply to get people 'off your back'. It certainly relieves the pressure temporarily, but it's nothing to the pressure, criticism and embarrassment people pile on you when you then fail to deliver. And it can leave your credibility in tatters. So, take the pressure at the time – once. Don't store up trouble for the future.

During my career, I worked for a well-known international company with production plants, marketing units and offices all round the world. Every year, each company would be required to produce its annual plan for examination and approval by the international board. That was an anxious time. Nobody wanted to get their plans stomped over by the board, queried, questioned, or rejected. The larger companies with good profit records could put their plans over with some confidence, and could resist calls for unrealistic growth or profit projections.

The smaller companies did not find that so easy, and many of their chief executives were tempted to put forward ambitious numbers to try to impress. That may have made for an easier ride at the plans meeting, but they then found themselves pummelled and pilloried every month thereafter, as they repeatedly failed to 'make their numbers'. The 'easy-ride' strategy turned into a twelve-to-one losing bet.

In the end, you have to decide whether your reputation is important to you. There's always a price to pay if you want to maintain it. If you don't pay the price up-front of holding out for realistic objectives in the first place, you risk paying the price many times over as your repeated failure gradually sinks your good name. That's where reputations are often won or lost. The choice is up to you.

What Does Trust Mean To You?

One of the problems with the word 'trust' is that it has so many different meanings

to different people. A company we worked with had a great reputation with both its employees and its customers. They paid well above average salaries, offered a string of benefits including excellent pensions, and operated a company-wide single status policy. Employees usually stayed for many years, but whenever a vacancy did appear, there was always a great line of applicants eager to work there.

The company decided to conduct an employee opinion survey, and the consultants they used persuaded them to include the question : ‘There is not much trust around here between employees and management’. Much to the company’s astonishment, more than half of the employees agreed. Naturally, they wanted to find out why, and started to investigate.

“Well, I agreed with the question because I couldn’t trust my manager with my life,” said one employee. “We don’t think there’s not much trust in our department,” said another, “but I’m not so sure about these other departments.” Another comment was : “If my manager was forced to choose between supporting his employees and supporting the company, I think he would choose to support the company. After all, they pay his salary.”

Rather than ask a question which was subject to such wide interpretations, the company decided they needed to personalise the question more to bring it closer to home. The following year the question they asked was : “I feel I can trust my manager”. This time, 75% of employees agreed. The company felt this was an important factor, as the immediate manager is the face of the company employees see every day; indeed for many, he is the company.

However, the company decided to push further on this. In their discussion together they concluded : The word ‘trust’ has a particular charm of its own, but leaving the word ‘trust’ aside, what would we want employees to say about us? What would we be content with? For example, people want to be treated fairly. They might put up with their manager being firm, but they would still want him to be fair. And they wouldn’t want him to indulge favourites, for whatever reason, but to treat everyone even-handedly. We think that should be part of what we mean by ‘trust’.

The following year, they added a new question to their survey. It was : “I get fair treatment from my manager”. More than 85% of employees endorsed this statement. So the company has made this aspect part of their definition of trust now - that employees should not only find their managers reliable and credible, but that they should also expect from them fair and even-handed treatment. Just to keep managers ‘eye on the ball’, the company now asks these same two questions of employees every year. We think that focus is a good one.

Maintaining Your Integrity Under Pressure

Situations often arise in business through no fault of your own which put your reputation for integrity to the test. For example, rumours may start circulating that the company is about to be taken over, or that a number of people are to be laid off.

Some of your staff may get wind of this and confront you directly : “We’ve heard rumours that some of us are about to lose our jobs. Is it true?” Now, you may be tempted to deny the rumours just to put your people’s minds at rest, but what if the rumours later turn out to be true? Your people are not going to feel they can trust what you say in the future after that.

So what can you say? You could say this : “I’ve heard these rumours too, but as far as I am concerned that’s what they are – rumours. I can’t enlighten you any further unless and until I get some genuine facts or statement on the situation. But if I do (don’t say ‘when I do’ as it may imply their worst fears are about to be realized), you will be the first to know, I assure you.” These are sensitive times for both you and your staff, so tread carefully on this.

The situation can be made even worse when you have actually been given more background by the company, but have been asked to ‘keep it confidential’. If your people realize a meeting has been going on, and they then ask you what you know, it’s obviously difficult to plead ignorance. In that circumstance, probably the best you can say is : “As soon as I get the go-ahead, I’ll be passing on all the information I know”.

However, just when you thought the pressure was getting intolerable, one of your staff tells you his friend in another department has already been told by his manager everything that’s going on. (Implication : ‘so what’s wrong with you?’) That’s a real dilemma. What now? Well, don’t go and spill the beans immediately to your people (the reported incident may not be true, and senior management don’t like disloyalty either). Speak to the departmental manager concerned to see if anything has happened. If you sense the rumour might be true, tell senior management that the information is leaking, and that something has to be done. Most companies will then make a pragmatic decision to resolve the situation in a company-wide fashion. That way, you will have shown loyalty both to the company that gives you your living, and to the people you manage. That’s a good position to be in.

Managing Employee Expectations

Expectations are important things to watch where trust is concerned. For example, one of your newer people may be struggling with a computer system, and you tell her : “I’ll give you some training on that over the next couple of weeks”, and she seems content with that. Three weeks later, nothing has happened, and she reproaches you : “You said you were going to help me with this computer program, didn’t you?” You pull a face, but that doesn’t help. The implication was that you had better things to do with your time, and that doesn’t make her feel any better. It’s a simple thing, of course, but every time you raise someone’s expectations and then don’t fulfil them, it chips a little off your people’s trust in you.

Sometimes you can even damage that trust quite inadvertently as people make assumptions way beyond what you intended. For example, overtime can be

'engineered' in some companies by way of giving employees the opportunity of extra earnings to keep relations sweet. Under pressure one day to get an important job finished, a manager in a production company could not find anyone willing to work overtime. He pleaded with one employee : "If you help me out on this one today, I'll see you all right".

The manager felt this vague statement wouldn't commit him to anything definite, but would get him over the hump for the day. The employee saw it quite differently however : he thought it meant that if he complied, he would be favoured with a lot more overtime in the future. A few weeks later he challenged his boss : "You said I would be getting more overtime". "I didn't say that," his boss said. "Yes, you did!" the employee retorted. Whatever the boss says then doesn't matter, he's lost that argument. That was what the employee wanted to hear, and what he thought he had been promised.

What's worse about this situation is that disgruntled employees will often go and complain to their mates to let off steam. Since their friends only hear one side of the story, they may well sympathise with their colleague, and conclude that maybe their boss's word cannot always be trusted. That's not good news.

The fact is employees will tend to put the best possible shine on any vague statement the manager happens to make. Often, you as the manager may be quite unaware of what the employee may be thinking, and only find out when you are suddenly confronted. Even if you are able to prove that 'that was not what I said', you may well get as a reply : "Maybe, but that was what you meant!" It's too late to recuperate from that situation, the damage is done.

So, what's the answer to all that? The rule is this : employees will only be happy when actual events match their expectations, however these were created. If events beat their expectations, they will be delighted. If they fall below their expectations, expect them to be disappointed and upset. Pleasant surprises (events that beat expectations) will be well received, but nasty surprises will get plenty of negative feedback. So, be careful what you say, it can be easily misinterpreted. Don't let expectations get out of hand simply by default. Make your intentions abundantly clear, so that later there's no doubt what you meant. Your good reputation depends upon it.

Making Reliability Into A Habit

Anything can be made into a habit simply by repetition - that applies to good habits as much as to bad habits. One UK company - part of a world-renowned international business - realised they had gradually fallen into bad habits over a period of time. The point emerged when we were engaged in an Awaydays conference with the senior management team. When asked : "What one change would make the biggest difference to the effective use of your time?", the Chief Executive answered : "If people would do what they said they were going to do at

the first time of asking". The rest of the team agreed wholeheartedly : they all had exactly the same problem.

Having seen the same syndrome in many other companies, the consultant told them a story. He said that from time to time he would buy some shares, by phoning his broker, agreeing how many shares he wanted of the company he was interested in, and a price per share. Unless the broker told him immediately there was a problem, he knew it would all be done as agreed. He didn't need to send a confirming letter or email, he didn't have to do any chasing up, it was all done by word of mouth and one phone call. That's because the rule in the Stock Exchange is : 'My word is my bond'.

"Now", said the consultant, "if hundreds of millions of pounds of transactions can be done successfully in the city every day all by word of mouth, no doubts, no chasing, why can't you do it here? Is it really all that difficult? In fact, I would say you are not even beginning to manage if you can't do these simple things." The group felt stung into action. They started to draw up a statement of how they intended to operate together from then on. This is what it said.

- **To eliminate unnecessary memos and paperwork, we will adopt an 'Our word is our bond' philosophy throughout the business.**

Everyone in the team realised that they would all have to 'buy-in' if they were really going to do this. It had to become part of the company's culture. It may not be how they had acted before, but it had to be "how we do things around here now".

- **In particular, each verbal request for information or action will automatically get a completion date from the person undertaking the task. There will be no subsequent 'chasing' required by the requestor.**

This meant that whatever your request was, the person who had to do the work involved got to decide on the completion date, but once they had committed, that was it! No reminders needed.

- **With customers, the actioner will always give their name, both to make further reference on the matter simple, and to indicate that they are taking on responsibility for the item.**

When dealing with outside customers, the person concerned would give the customer their name, and indicate they would handle the whole issue for them. Just like dealing with your broker, there would be no need to phone back and chase. 'One call would do it all.'

- **In the event of a problem developing, the actioner will let the customer and/or requestor know before the deadline when the action will be completed. Waiting till the deadline (or beyond) will be regarded as a failure.**

We all run up against unforeseen problems - that's life - but let your customer know before the deadline, and immediately agree what you can do to meet their need. Most of the time, the customer will be grateful not to be let down at the last minute, and you can agree some compromise. Before the deadline, your problem is a reason, after the deadline,

your 'problem' is just an excuse.

- **Note : The actioner should only agree dates which are achievable. He or she should then do whatever it takes to meet the committed date. More than one change of deadline is not acceptable.**

As we said before, don't take on impossible dates, whatever the pressure. Don't make easy promises which then kill your reputation.

To their credit, the management team didn't then suddenly announce this as a new company policy. Instead they let every department decide whether they wanted to do the same. Interestingly, every one did. After a few months, I asked one of the managers if it was making any difference. "David," he said, "it's changed the business. You used to be able to give people some date or other just to get them off your back. You can't do that any more, you have to deliver." In fact, the company got so proud of their policy, they etched the words in gold above the receptionist's desk in their entrance hall : "Our Word Is Our Bond". That's real commitment.

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In most organizations, employees simply want to feel :

- they can believe what you say
- you will do what you say you will do
- you will treat them fairly

For them, that's what trust is about. You don't have to be soft or compliant for employees to like working with you. On the contrary, you can be tough and demanding as long as you are fair. Whenever employees are asked who was the best manager they ever worked with, they regularly quote someone who was 'firm but fair'. They inevitably prefer to work with someone they can respect and trust. Isn't that something you would like your employees to say about you?

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