

## Six cornerstones to building a culture of trust.

# business issues

## TRUST ISSUES

BY WALT GRASSL

**ALICE AND BOB ARE BOTH SUPERVISORS** at a medium-sized company.

One day over lunch, they were comparing the pluses and minuses of some of their past bosses. During the discussion, they were reminded of Greg, probably the best leader they'd ever had.

While Greg was personable and focused and set high standards, they concluded Greg's greatest quality was that he created a culture of trust.

Greg did not yell, threaten or lie to get his teams to meet short-term deadlines. He also did not, and would not, sacrifice long-term success to meet short-term deadlines.

This was in stark contrast to Mack, who was Greg's polar opposite. Mack would lie to his customers about the ability to meet accelerated schedules. In turn, he would peddle these same falsehoods to his team about a nonexistent urgent customer need to meet the accelerated schedule. The kicker? After the team rallied to accomplish its goals on a sped-up timeline, Mack would proudly—and fraudulently—claim success for their results. He abused his team for his personal gain, and the team members would leave Mack's team at the earliest opportunity.

Alice and Bob were both students of leadership and decided to compile a list of some of the things that Greg did to create a checklist for themselves as emerging leaders.

Here are six things they came up with—six things that leaders do to create a culture of trust:

**1. Trusted leaders are dedicated to doing the right thing.** Trusted leaders have a keen sense of right and wrong. When circumstances arise that threaten to change their moral compass, these leaders stand their ground and hold firm to their morals. They resist the urge to do the wrong thing to avoid uncomfortable situations. They do the difficult right over the easy wrong.

**2. Trusted leaders keep their word.** Trusted leaders keep commitments. They do what they say they will do and don't make promises they can't keep. Leaders dedicated to constructing a culture of trust place a high priority on meeting deadlines. They realize that if they don't keep their word, there is no way that they can hold others accountable for theirs. "Do as I say, not as I do" does not breed trust.

**3. Trusted leaders explain the politics of the workplace.** Politics exist everywhere—including the workplace. Trusted leaders are aware of the politics and make sure their team is aware of them as well. There is often tension between the needs of the bigger organization and the needs of the team. Trusted leaders seek balanced solutions. When decisions flow down from higher authorities that may not make sense to the team, they explain the politics and the big picture. When it is important, they push up the concerns of the team.

**4. Trusted leaders do not expect blind obedience.** Trusted leaders realize that trust is a two-way street. They empower their team members. They want team members to be comfortable speaking up when they don't understand something. They *insist* that they speak up when they see a potential problem. Should

someone make an error in judgment, it becomes a teaching moment, not an inquisition. This is the highest form of trust.

**5. Trusted leaders focus the credit on deserving team members.** When a team is successful, leaders are immediately recognized for the success of their teams. Trusted leaders shine the spotlight of success on *deserving* team members. They don't hog the spotlight. They publicly recognize their team members so that others may know who they are. That improves their opportunities for advancement. They don't use the "peanut butter" approach

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and spread credit around to everyone equally—even the undeserving. When they share the spotlight, it does not take away from the leader’s prestige. It greatly improves the relationship with the team.

**6. Trusted leaders accept the blame when the team fails.** Trusted leaders do not create scapegoats. They live by the old maxim “The buck stops here.” When things don’t go well, they step up and accept the blame. Team members that report to these individuals know that they will not be thrown under the bus in the event that a project does not turn out the way it was intended. To the extent that a team member’s behavior or judgment

contributes to a lack of success, these leaders will *privately* correct them. They investigate and analyze to find the root

cause of the problem and then publicly address opportunities to improve, provide training if needed and/or introduce process improvements.

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Alice and Bob became accountability partners in trust. Once a month they would meet for lunch and review the six cornerstones, and share when they had the opportunity to practice and where they might have missed opportunities. Their leadership skills improved. They had higher levels of trust with their teams. Team morale improved and their teams became more successful.

At the end of the day, we all want to trust our leaders and our teammates. Creating a culture of trust is one of the most important roles of a leader. ■