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There's something about trusting people—and having people trust us—that is exciting. It's a part of human nature to give and receive respect. Yet when it comes to work, all too often trust—real trust—is in short supply.

According to the dictionary, trust has essentially two meanings:

- ➔ To have confidence in someone, or
- ➔ To expect/hope/suppose that someone will act or something will happen

In the workplace, we need to consider this distinction. For me, real trust is about the first definition—the belief in a person's ability to perform a specific task under specific circumstances. It is a positive statement about the relationship between two people: “I believe you are capable of [taking some action].” This form of trust implies interdependence and is crucial to the development of a healthy relationship.

The second meaning connotes obligation: “I expect that you will [take some action].” As such, it implies dependence in the relationship. This attitude blocks the development of an equal partnership, where both parties can feel fully valued. Unfortunately, this latter definition of trust is all too prevalent in many organizations.

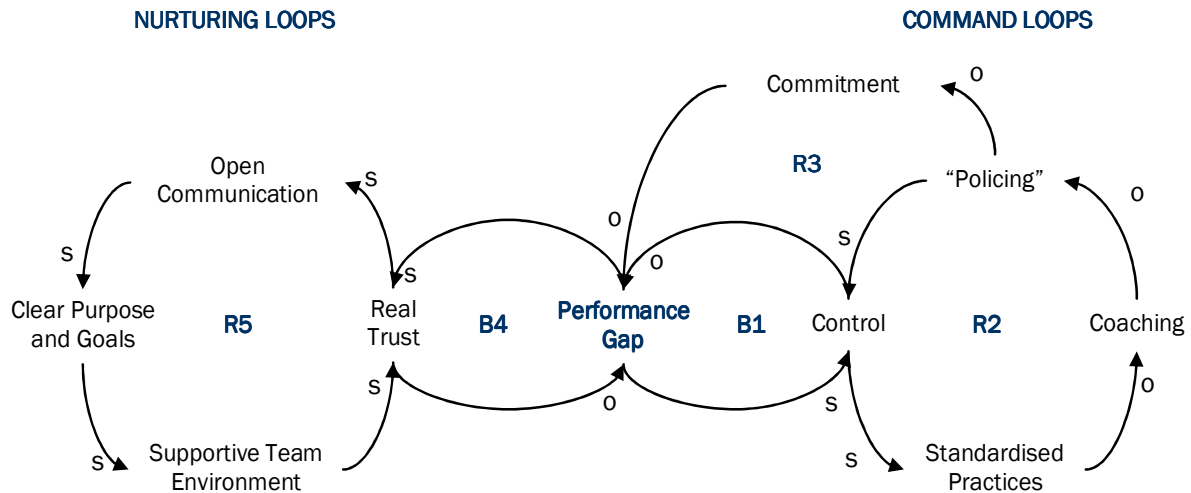
We Are in this Together

Why is real trust so important? Studies have shown that it improves task effectiveness, because it reduces the need for people to check up on each other. Great teamwork requires real trust because members need to feel confident that their co-workers are fulfilling their commitments as they work interdependently toward the same aim. In relationships based on the first definition of trust, people feel relaxed and can communicate openly; these factors boost individual and group enthusiasm for joint undertakings. Lack of real trust increases anxiety, diverts attention from the task, stifles innovation, and drains energy.

But real trust can be difficult to achieve. All too often, we see people as assets that are ultimately replaceable. We forget that others have aspirations and needs, and, given the opportunity, want to do their best at work. We fail to acknowledge that the individuals who design, operate, and manage our organizations are key to our mutual success.

Dynamics of Trust and Control

When an organization fails to achieve the desired performance, managers have a choice [see diagram below]. They can set in place mechanisms designed to reduce the performance gap—procedures, scripts, checks, and measures that assess and constrain performance. Or they can trust their staff and colleagues and support them by having a clear common purpose, coaching and encouraging them, and engendering a collaborative learning culture.



In the Command loops, managers address a performance gap by instilling control mechanisms and standardised practices. This approach works in the short term, but over time, workers' level of commitment falls and further undermines performance. In the Nurturing loops, real trust builds on itself, leading to improved performance.

Command Loop. One option for addressing the performance gap is to introduce control, setting in motion the Command loop. At first the control may take a supportive form. Common, standardized practices can help everyone behave consistently and successfully. Managers usually introduce control with this positive intent, believing that if the implementation is well managed and aligned to a common purpose, then everything should be okay.

The problem occurs when managers see control mechanisms as *the* means to minimize performance gaps and use them more and more frequently. They rely less on coaching and open discussion for learning and fine-tuning performance, falling back instead on policing mechanisms designed to ensure compliance with rules.

Inherent within the Command loop is the *second* definition of trust—"I trust that you will..." meaning "I expect you to adhere to these rules/standards." These requirements do not constitute real trust in someone; they are about compliance with a directive.

Yet people are not machines. As Maslow documented more than half century ago, we all have a basic need for fulfilment and involvement. To command performance in a work environment may have been successful when commanders held the lives of workers or slaves in their hands. Today, workers have a totally different set of rights and expectations. People typically respond to being told what to do by digging in their heels or complying with reduced self-motivation. Both responses are saying, "If you don't trust me, then why should I bother?"

If you've never experienced this dynamic, believe me, you don't want to. Compliance costs people and companies money, mental energy, and time. When the use of control

mechanisms escalates, it undermines individual and team performance and leads to a pervasive lack of trust.

When this happens, the challenge becomes more than just addressing the performance gap; it involves addressing increasing numbers of employee issues. Employees behave in ways that may not conform with their supervisors' wishes as they seek to rationalize the rules with their own needs and understanding of what will work. They may lack motivation or commitment, as demonstrated by increased absenteeism; they may become obsessive and emotionally volatile, rejecting all outside input; or they may become politicised, seeking allegiances and undermining perceived threats to their survival.

Suppliers, customers, and other third parties readily pick up on the lack of trust. The organization probably uses the command loop with them, too. No doubt it seemed like a good, or at least an expeditious, idea at the time!

Once lost, real trust can be hard to rekindle. In a control culture, if people's performance isn't what managers want it to be, then managers put additional controls in place. But, as Evert Gummesson states in *Total Relationship Marketing* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999), "Trust cannot be assured through contracts."

Nurturing Loop. The other option is to address the performance gap through the Nurturing loop. Here, real trust allows for open communication when a problem occurs. Healthy relationships and open communication enable people to work together to proactively learn how to address the gap efficiently and effectively. Basic guidelines and protocols provide consistency and help people avoid illegalities. However, any control mechanisms should be minimal, designed with the involvement of the relevant operational teams.

For the Nurturing loop to succeed, the organization must have a clear, explicit common purpose to which all goals and decisions are aligned. This provides a coherent message and environment with which people can engage and to which they can contribute positively. Everyone is explicitly going in the same direction. Trusting appropriately recruited people to meet agreed performance goals breeds a positive, supportive team environment and serves as a basis for success.

People may lack a common purpose because none exists in the organisation, or because it's not clearly communicated. Humans are goal-oriented beings. We need something to justify our actions and from which to derive self-worth and a sense of identity. Without a common purpose to work toward, we create our own goals or ask colleagues and friends until we find one that makes sense for us.

As a result, most people in the organisation have disparate goals and act in disparate ways. When different parts of the organization try to achieve different things, tension builds. Managers then put more controls are put in place. In these circumstances, it can be hard to establish a common purpose, as people may have been working to their own strongly defined goals for some time and will be wary of the new initiative.

Solutions

If you find yourself in a control culture, take heart; there are things that you can do.

1. Understand why the situation is as it is, identify the difference that will make a difference, and leverage change for the better. Finding out about the situation helps to inform you of the underlying dynamics:

- ➔ What and who is sustaining, or benefiting from, the distrust?
- ➔ Who is predisposed and motivated to address it?
- ➔ What sense of “we’re in this together” exists?
- ➔ Where is the leadership?
- ➔ What do people feel they need to move forward?

Once you’ve identified the dynamics; the players, their goals, motivations and beliefs; and peoples’ openness to change and desire to get involved, then you can plan your approach to reinstate real trust. The aim is to decide on the most efficacious route to break the patterns in a sustainable way. This can be difficult; organizations driven by red-tape, procedures and protocols are usually plagued by inertia, providing an extra challenge to change.

2. Stop the cycle of distrust and find ways as a group to rebuild positive relationships.

3. Get a commitment from top leaders to follow through on a program of reengagement and realignment in the organisation.

4. As an individual, define your own overarching goal. Work to nurture and protect your team as you build support for your approach with colleagues and senior managers. All the time, you must align your actions and decisions to your goal, even if you don’t explicitly refer to it. If people are used to following controls, you may have to create new, aligned procedures and processes until you are able to dismantle the old ones.

Some organizations are so deeply entrenched in the cycle of distrust that one person alone won’t be able to make much of a difference. In that case, you have two choices. First, you can accept the ways things are, do your 9-5, and enjoy life. If you work in a large organisation full of inertia, you’ll be okay for a while. At some point, you’re likely to become deadwood in the eyes of colleagues. At that point, you either should move on or take another stab at implementing change.

The second choice is to find somewhere else to work. You’ll feel good and will leave on a positive note, looking forward to the next part of your life.

Conclusion

Tom Peters speaks of trust as being the “single most important contributor to the maintenance of human relationships. And for business, it can, quite simply, mean the difference between success and failure.” Relationships are about achieving more together than we could on our own. If problems occur, the most fruitful approach is to work with

people to resolve them, based on trust, open communication, and proactive learning. For once you start putting in systems of control that force or constrain behaviours, you will be on the slippery slope toward lower performance and a dysfunctional organization.

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