

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2023 Edition

Feature

Building Trust in Stressful Times

The cost of not doing it is devastating

Michelle Phaneuf
P.Eng., ACC
Partner, Workplace
Fairness West

Leaders have been working hard over the last few years to address constant change and respond effectively to increased workplace stress. It's been a difficult task to build trust with employees in these erratic, unpredictable circumstances.

Trust is a firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability or strength of someone or something. It is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another.

The need for trust arises from our interdependence with each other. Leaders depend on their employees to help obtain, or at least not to thwart, the outcomes they value (and vice versa). As these needs with employees are intertwined, we also must recognize that trust is very valuable in workplace interactions.

Communication is the fundamental tool for building trust. People who have an opportunity to safely explore negative events and build understanding can begin to rebuild trust. Trust implies mutual understanding between people; each person understands the values and needs of the other. Trust is the stepping stone to enable people to reach an agreement that meets both their needs or recognize that common goal.

People who successfully work together need to establish a common goal or identity. Nurturing a common identity creates a sense of unity that can further strengthen trust. Leaders work to keep employees engaged in talk and actions that build a sense of 'we' rather than 'me'. They can support employees to step back and see the bigger business problem and show that they have more commonalities than differences. Working toward the collective achievement of these bigger business problems (goals) fosters a feeling of "one-ness" that can bring people together in a way that strengthens a shared identity and builds trust.

According to the Reina Trust & Betrayal Model, there are seven steps to building trust after difficult situations:

- 1. Observe and acknowledge what has happened.** People need to feel heard. Leaders who can paraphrase and help others acknowledge the impact of their actions in a safe environment can make a difference. Healing begins when everyone can acknowledge what has occurred, the effect on people and the resulting outcome.
- 2. Allow feelings to surface.** A leader focuses on providing a safe environment to give employees permission to express their concerns, issues and feelings in a constructive manner. Doing so helps people begin to let go of the negativity they are holding, freeing up that energy for strong working relationships and returning their focus to the future.
- 3. Get support.** Building trust is hard work. People under stress or in the middle of a difficult situation cannot do it alone. They need support to fully understand what occurred and what actions are necessary to move through the healing process. It is through support that small steps begin to emerge for growth, innovation, shared responsibility and accountability. Ensure your employees have the support they need through an EAP or HR.

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2023 Edition

Feature continued

4. Reframe the experience. Employees can reframe their experience by looking at the bigger picture, reflecting on circumstances, noticing the reasons for concern and exploring opportunities that the situation presents. Leaders can shift the focus from the past (what employees don't want) to the future (what they do want). When reframing the experience, consider that while employees might not have control over what has occurred, they do have control over how they choose to respond.

5. Take responsibility. People take responsibility when they acknowledge their mistakes or oversights. Telling the truth, without justification and rationalization, demonstrates a person's trustworthiness and exposes vulnerability. Doing so as a leader makes it safe for others to expose their own vulnerability, seek support and take responsibility for their own behaviour.

6. Forgive yourself and others. Recognize that forgiveness is freedom and is the gift we give ourselves. Anger, bitterness and resentment deplete people's energy and interferes with relationships and performance. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting or accepting that the violation was OK. Leaders realize when someone has done wrong to them but can also forgive them.

7. Let go and move on. Leaders accept what is so. Acceptance is not condoning what was done, but experiencing the reality of what happened without denying, disowning or resenting it – facing the truth without blame.

While not easy, building trust is essential for those in leadership roles and for those seeking to build strong working relationships and employee connections. The cost of not doing so is too high to be ignored. Leaders can play an instrumental role in supporting people to heal from stress and past negative events, to rebuild and sustain trust and renew working relationships.

Michelle Phaneuf is Partner at Workplace Fairness West and can be reached via email at phaneuf@workplacefairnesswest.ca.