

Defining Trust: Step One in Building Trusting Relationships

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What is the level of trust among your organization's stakeholders? How do you know? How do they know?

If you cannot answer these three questions, it's time to stop talking about trust and to start defining and describing it. Unless you and others can articulate what trust looks and feels like – i.e., you share a common “picture” of trust AND you personalize it – you can neither evaluate its presence accurately nor develop and maintain trusting relationships effectively.

Here are some questions to help you begin to develop a common picture of trust in your workplace:

- How do you know you can trust someone? What must others do and say for you to conclude that they are trustworthy?
- Do others know what they must do to earn your trust?
- Do you know what you must do and say to earn others' trust?

Developing a common picture of trust is a key first step in building trusting relationships in the workplace. However, you also must personalize this value by ensuring that every individual can articulate clearly what trust means to him/her, AND how it relates to the organization's definition. Here are some steps to get you started in building trusting relationships:

1. Define trust at the organizational, work unit, and individual levels. For example:
 - a. Organizational: The public can rely on the fire department to show up quickly and provide professional service when they need us.
 - b. Work unit (Administrative

Services): Our actions demonstrate that employees can rely on us to maintain the confidentiality of their personnel and other sensitive information.

c. Individual: We train continuously to ensure our skills remain sharp.

2. In behavioral terms, describe how people must experience others (i.e., see, hear them) to agree that they are trustworthy. For example:

- a. We rely on facts to inform our decisions and actions.
- b. We accept responsibility for errors rather than try to hide them or shift blame to others.
- c. We have a consistent track record of following through on our promises.

3. Practice engaging in the stated behaviors.

4. Give and receive feedback about how well you are demonstrating the behaviors.

5. Reward and support these behaviors over time.

Six months after engaging in these steps, ask yourself the three questions at the beginning of this article. The answers should be good indicators of your progress in building trusting relationships in your organization.

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