



Article from

**The Stepping Stone**

March 2018

Issue 68

# CAREER DEVELOPMENT

## It's a Matter of Trust

By Mitchell Stephenson

**W**hat do you think is the most important quality in a leader? It might surprise you to learn that it's not the *ability* to motivate others, to be influential, or even the *competence* level of the leader. In fact, a 30-year cross-continental study on leadership conducted by professors Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner indicated that it is something different altogether. "In almost every survey conducted, *honesty* has been selected more than any other leadership characteristic. Overall, it emerges as the single most important factor in the leader-constituent relationships," they write.<sup>1</sup>

Why is honesty so important in a leader? It is about what others expect from you over time. People want to know that they can trust you, and they will evaluate that based on whether you have built a reputation of being trustworthy. In building that personal reputation, honesty is the quality that can most enhance it—or cause damage. Billionaire investor Warren Buffett captured that sentiment when he said, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, it can take a lot fewer than five minutes to create or destroy trust with others. Studies show that people often make judgments within the first seven seconds of meeting you.<sup>3</sup> One of those judgments is the question, "Can I trust this person?" Answering that is more important even than the other question people ask themselves immediately upon meeting you, "Can I respect this person?" Psychologist Amy Cuddy explains why this is so at a very basic level: "From an evolutionary perspective, it is more crucial to our survival to know whether a person deserves our trust."<sup>4</sup>

So how can you convince others that they deserve your trust, and at the same time, avoid pitfalls that may inadvertently display inauthenticity, and sow seeds of distrust? Here are a few suggestions.

### BE AWARE OF YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

A famous study by UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian indicated that people trust you when your words, tone of voice, and

nonverbal gestures are all synchronized.<sup>5</sup> When all three are not working for you in unison, however, people tend not to trust you. In fact, they tend to rely much more on your tone of voice and body language to determine what you are really trying to say, rather than your actual words. Such inconsistencies cause "people to sense that something isn't right, and they begin to suspect that you're trying to deceive them, even if they don't know exactly why or how," writes author and Ph.D. Travis Bradberry.<sup>6</sup>

There are certain, specific nonverbal gestures that can cause others to mistrust you, which you should try to avoid. These gestures include leaning away, crossing your arms, touching, rubbing or grasping your hands together, and touching other parts of your body during a conversation. While no single one of these gestures clearly corresponds to untrustworthiness, say authors and communication experts John Neffinger and Matthew Kohut, your brain recognizes these four behaviors as warning signals.<sup>7</sup> Avoid these gestures during conversation, and people will be more likely to place their trust in you.

That is also true of exaggerated gestures, which can imply that you're stretching the truth. Be careful of these. "Aim for small, controlled gestures to indicate leadership and confidence, and open gestures—like spreading your arms apart or showing the palms of your hands—to communicate that you have nothing to hide," writes Bradberry. And when it comes to avoiding eye contact, that certainly "makes it look like you have something to hide, and that arouses suspicion," he writes. Don't do this if you want to earn someone's trust.<sup>8</sup>

### CHOOSE THE MOST EFFECTIVE FORM OF COMMUNICATION FOR THE SITUATION

Many sources say that it is better to communicate with someone in person, as compared to a less personal method of communication, such as phone, email or instant messenger. This is especially true when having a difficult conversation, or when trying to make a collaborative decision on a complex topic. With in-person communication, you can rely on nonverbal, as well as verbal, cues to project honesty and trustworthiness.

It may not always be possible to speak in person, however, due to your schedule or physical location. In some cases, you may rarely be able to meet in person, and must rely on other methods to develop trust over long distances. The good news is that there are some specific actions you can take to build trust across physical barriers. Jim Clark writes about his experience in building trust while managing a remote team: "Working as a remote manager requires a bond of trust between the employee and manager. A remote manager needs to make a continuous effort to build trust in and with his or her employees. Trust is

developed by regular contact, follow-up, mentoring, encouragement and allowing team members to grow and feel a sense of ownership in their work.”<sup>9</sup>

It is very important to remember that even a single bad interaction can damage the trust you have worked so hard to establish with another person.

### BE CONSISTENT

It can often be the case that you work for months, or years, to establish trust with others. The more consistent you appear over time, in terms of your temperament and engagement, the more people will come to trust you—and expect the same of you in the future. You must watch out and not let your emotions get the best of you. This can affect your relationships with others. “To be consistent, you must be reliable, and you must ensure that even when your mood goes up and down it doesn’t affect how you treat other people,” writes Bradberry.<sup>10</sup> If you can maintain your consistency over time, despite your mood in the moment, people will come to trust you even more.

It is very important to remember that even a single bad interaction can damage the trust you have worked so hard to establish with another person. Neffinger and Kohut write, “There is one especially critical difference in how we judge warmth and strength. One cold incident, in which you show clearly that you don’t share another person’s interest, or care about how they feel, can make it very difficult to establish warmth between you later.”<sup>11</sup> It is important to remember that over the long term, putting aside your feelings in the moment in favor of the longer-term relationship, will reap benefits with others, and allow you to maintain your trustworthiness with them.

### MAKE THE MOST OUT OF YOUR INTERACTIONS

There are certain ways of speaking and listening that can help you to establish and maintain trust with others. For example, psychologist James Pennebaker has found that people who use “I” frequently are more likely to be telling the truth than people who use less forthright language, which deflects attention from themselves.<sup>12</sup> Listening effectively can also help you to develop trust. It is important for others to know that you are truly listening to, and trying to understand, them. “Authentic listeners . . . reflect back what they heard to clarify . . . and they ask questions to probe the other person’s feelings or opinions on the topic of

conversation,” writes executive coach Marcel Schwantes. “That can be as simple as: ‘Tell me how you feel about this.’”<sup>13</sup> If you can convey authentic listening to others by asking critical questions and seeking first to understand, it will lead them to trust you more.

### PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

In his 1986 song, “A Matter of Trust,” Billy Joel warned about the risks of losing trust in relationships when he sang, “The closer you get to the fire the more you get burned.” If you incorporate some of the previous guidance into your daily activities, you can avoid getting burned by the figurative fires that cause others to distrust you, and you can work toward building, maintaining and growing trust in your most important relationships. Building that trust, in turn, will give you the skill that is universally most admired in a leader. Just remember that building and maintaining trust takes effort and attention. As best said by Bradberry, “Trust is a peculiar resource. It is built, rather than depleted, by use.”<sup>14</sup> ■



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### ENDNOTES

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