BUIDLING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE OF TRUST

Arnie Dahlke, Ph.D.

www.arniedahlke.com

Sitting at lunch with a group of colleagues the other day, my friend asked me an interesting question. "You've been working with both public and private sector organizations for over 25 years," he said. "Given your experience, what do you think is the most important attribute of a successful and smoothly functioning organization?"

I didn't have to think about it more than a second. "A climate of trust,' I answered. "No matter what I'm doing with an organization, whether it's training managers, building teamwork, improving work processes, or conducting surveys, it all rests on building relationships. And trust is an essential building block of a strong relationship"

Accomplish required tasks and get them done on time. Meet targeted profit levels. Achieve high customer satisfaction.

From the CEO to managers and supervisors to front-line employees, an organization's success at attaining all of these goals rests on the collective performance of every individual. The better each person performs, the higher the likelihood of attaining these goals.

Widespread performance in an organization is based on a foundation of trusting relationships—employee relationships with each other, with managers and supervisors, with vendors, and with customers and other stakeholders. Employees can have all of the best equipment, all of the latest technology, and all of the other resources they need. But, if they don't trust their managers, supervisors, or one another, they will communicate defensively, cover mistakes, and not take chances. They will not perform at their best.

Over the years, I've conducted numerous employee surveys in several different types of organizations in both the public and private sectors. Sifting through the pages of comments I've collected from people responding to those surveys, I've identified ten factors that erode trust in an organization.

In the remainder of this paper, I will describe those ten factors. For each factor, I will present an example of a survey response from an employee and give you guidelines for building trust in your organization. Some guidelines will be directed specifically at managers and supervisors who play a critical role in cultivating a trusting organizational culture. Others will apply to everyone.

— 1 —
Trust Is Eroded
When People Don't Feel A Sense Of Belonging

People trust other people who they like and enjoy. Repeatedly, I hear employees telling me they want to feel like they are part of a family at work. After all, most of them spend more time at work than they do at home with their own families. They want to be with people who care about each other and who have a shared sense of fun and values. Many people have told me that good relationships at work are even more important than salary.

From an employee in a Planning Department: *"I am very unhappy with many of the people I work with around here, especially the people in the front office who are very unfriendly. When I walk by one of them in the hall and say hello, they don't even acknowledge me. How can I trust someone I don't even know?"*

Guidelines For Building Trust: Help People Feel They Belong

Cultivate a family climate. Make the effort to know something about the people around you. A cheery "good morning." A question or two here and there about how someone is doing. An inquiry about the state of a sick child. All of this helps everyone feel they are part of a group that cares and it reinforces a family feeling in the organization.

Acknowledge the key events of others. If someone has a death in the family, or a child getting married, or a new grandchild, etc., make a point of appropriately acknowledging the event. A kind, sympathetic, caring, or congratulatory word (or action), goes a long way in making people feel they are part of a family culture at work.

Help others with their work when they are overwhelmed. There are times that individual workloads become very heavy and hard to deal with. In those instances, pitch in and help out, even if it isn't in your job description. That's what family members do.

— 2 —
Trust Is Eroded
When People Don't Respect Each Other

Strong relationships are built on mutual respect. Mutual respect means that people regard each other with esteem and accept each other for who they are. The more people build relationships at work in which they respect one another, the more they will appreciate and care for each other, and the more they will trust one another. And, managers and supervisors play a very important role—how they treat each other and their employees sets the tone.

From an employee in a Field Inspection Section: *"Obviously, my supervisor doesn't respect me. I recently brought him a great idea for a way we could speed up the inspection process. He looked at me as if I were his little kid and told me that it was a stupid idea and I didn't know what I was talking about. Do you think I'll bring any other ideas to him in the future? Not on your life!"*

### <u>Guidelines For Building Trust: Promote Mutual Respect</u>

Communicate with others from a "win/win" position. This means communicating with other people in ways that convey to them that, just as you have your own unique set of talents and skills, so do they have their own unique set of talents and skills. When you communicate with others on this kind of "equal plane," you signal to them that you respect them.

Actively listen to others when they express themselves. Not paying attention to and focusing on what someone is telling you is a signal of disrespect. Continually practice the principals of active listening—don't talk over them, stay focused, and don't allow interruptions. Listen objectively and analytically, pay attention to their nonverbal behaviors, and beware of reacting from their tripping your own emotional buttons.

Acknowledge the contributions of others without discounting them. When someone has an idea, don't immediately point out flaws in their thinking or describe a better idea you have. Listen to them to understand their point of view. Don't simply return their suggestion with an idea of your own. If you do believe you can improve on their idea or that you have a better one, be tactful in introducing your thinking—say something like "That's an interesting idea. I see what you are trying to accomplish. [*Pause*] Have you ever considered…?"

— 3 —
Trust Is Eroded
When People Don't Feel Safe
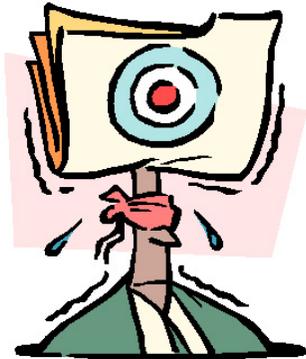
People want to feel safe no matter where they are. They don't want to be threatened by the wrath of an unhappy manager or a critical supervisor or a fellow-employee. Not feeling safe breeds distrust. People will resort to covering up mistakes to protect themselves from punishment or losing their jobs. They will become defensive and self-protective, and not admit when something goes wrong. They will be too cautious to invent new, more efficient, and more customer-responsive ways of doing their work.

From an employee in a Customer Relations Department: *"It is very difficult to feel like a professional and handle the public in a professional manner when you yourself are being treated like a grade-school child. My supervisor stresses me out. She is so critical of everything that I don't trust her. I try to avoid her when she's around."*

Guidelines For Building Trust: Help People Feel Safe

Leave your problems at home! If you are experiencing unhappy situations in your personal life, work hard to prevent your bad feelings from spilling over into critical comments during your conversations with other people.

A*void communicating from your Critical Parent*. When faced with a problem with an another person, communicate from what psychologists call your "Adult Ego State"—keep yourself in a logical, analytical, problem-solving state of mind. Don't act like a critical parent.

View disciplining as a constructive process, not as a punishment. As a manager or supervisor, help your employees bring out their best by treating a disciplinary situation as an opportunity to learn from mistakes.

Critique behaviors, not people. When you are upset by something people have done, talk about the act, *not* about their character or personalities.

Listen with empathy. Let people know that you are paying attention to what they are feeling. Acknowledge their feelings. Discounting their feelings is a sign of disrespect.

— 4 —
Trust Is Eroded
When Employees Are Not Recognized For Doing A Good Job

People want to work at a job they feel good about. They want their managers and supervisors to recognize them when they do something well. In spite of all of the talk these days about the decline of the work ethic, I have found that most people, by and large, are motivated to do a good job. It's no wonder they are less motivated and more distrustful of those managers and supervisors who rarely pat them on the back and only talk to them when things go wrong.

From an employee in an Accounting Department: *"Praise? No one seems to notice or care. It is rare to receive praise around here. In fact, it is quite the contrary. I do a lot of work above and beyond my job description but I'm never recognized for it by anyone. And my supervisor only tells me when I do something wrong. He never tells me I'm doing a good job."*

Guidelines For Building Trust: Recogize A Job Well Done

Praise Employees for a job well done. Managers are constantly under pressure, busy responding to multiple demands and many employees. As a result, too many managers only comment to employees about their performance when things are going wrong, not when they are going right. Look for opportunities to praise. Make a daily habit of finding people to praise. It helps them build their own self-esteem. People with high self-esteem communicate more effectively and perform at higher levels.

Coach your supervisors to praise their employees. Talk about praising employees in staff meetings. Have participants bring examples to every meeting of praising employees for a job well done. This will help them develop a habit of rewarding good performance.

Make a habit of praising others for work well done. When you see a fellow employee do something beyond the call of duty, compliment him or her. Everyone likes a pat on the back!

— 5 —
Trust Is Eroded
When People Are Inconsistent In Honoring Their Commitments
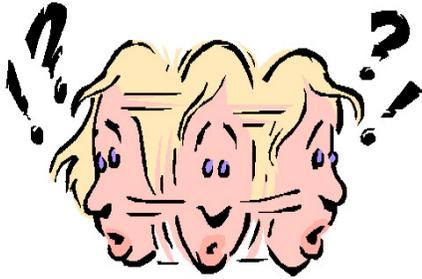
When you tell your people you will do something, they want to see you doing it. In particular, employees come to distrust managers or supervisors who don't follow through on commitments. How can they trust you if you never do what you say you are going to do? They want you to be reliable, dependable, and true to your words.

From an employee in a Business Office: *"I'm tired of surveys. Managers promise us they will consider our suggestions and then we never hear what happens to them. I've stopped trusting their promises. When we do ask why a suggestion wasn't adopted, they just make excuses as to why we can't change. It's like talking to a wall."*

## <u>Guidelines For Building Trust: Consistently Honor Commitments</u>

Honor your commitments. When you tell someone that you will do something, either do it or promptly explain to them why you did not. They will trust you more if they see that you honor your commitments.

Reliably respond to suggestions. As a manager or supervisor, when an employee offers a suggestion for improving a situation, implement it, explain why it can't be implemented, or promise to get back to him or her. If you tell employees you will get back to them, be sure to promptly get back to them, even if it is to explain why a suggestion can't be implemented!

Don't make promises you can't keep. Because some managers want to be the "good guy" with their employees, they rush to make promises before they really know they can deliver them. As a manager, you will build trust by telling them "I'll check into it" and then following up by getting back to them with an answer. You will not build trust by making a promise that you cannot keep.

— 6 —
Trust Is Eroded
When People Are Not Fully Informed
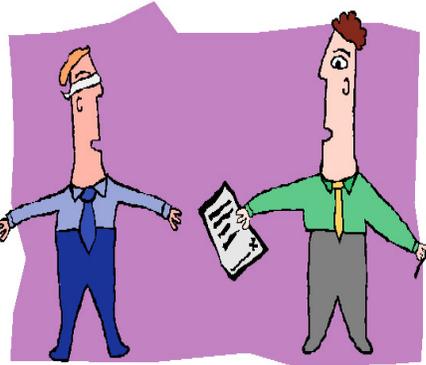
Employees want to know what's going on in the organization. They don't want managers and supervisors to simply give them orders. The less they know about what is happening in the organization, the more they suspect that managers and supervisors are operating out of hidden agendas, and the more they distrust them. They want managers and supervisors to tell them what is happening and why, or why has something been changed.

From an employee in a Service Department: *"I have no idea where this department is going. Managers meet for hours every week and never tell us what is going on. I'm told what to do and expected to do it. The word around is that there will be severe budget cuts, but managers don't tell us what the situation is. When I ask my manager, he tells me it's confidential."*

Guidelines For Building Trust: Keep People Informed

Keep employees informed. The more information employees have, the better they will be able to make decisions without having to go to management. In turn, the more they will feel in control of their own work lives. The more they feel free and in control of their own work lives, the more they will feel that you trust them.

Counter rumors before they spread. When employees are uninformed they become more attuned to rumors and participate in spreading them. The spreading of rumors leads to distrust of each other, their managers and supervisors, and executive management. Don't participate in the spread of rumors. Find out what is really going on. As a manager or supervisor, counter rumors as soon as they occur with the real facts before they spread.

— 7 —
Trust Is Eroded
When People Promote Turf Protection
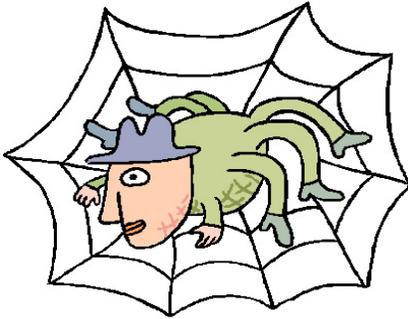
When I conducted initial interviews in a county permitting department recently in preparation for a process improvement project, I was struck by how much turf protection I saw among sections. Many people mistrusted people in other sections and blamed them for things going wrong. They particularly mistrusted the management group who they thought were making decisions to protect their own power base.

From a long time employee: *"I see a real division between the administrative-support staff and the technical-professional staff. They don't trust each other. I think it's mostly because neither really understands what the other group does on a daily basis. If each group was able to better understand the workload, pressures, and stresses of the other group, then I think we all would appreciate and respect each other and not blame and finger-point."*

Guidelines For Building Trust: Discourage Turf Protection

Actively discourage finger-pointing and buck-passing. Departments or sections operate interdependently in the service of the organizational mission. When a problem occurs, look for solutions. Why did it happen? (Not: Who is to blame?) What could we do to prevent it from happening in the future?

Cultivate a Team climate. As a manager or supervisor, use staff meetings to help everyone cultivate a team climate. Coach people to counter any instances of blaming or finger-pointing between people in different areas with constructive problem-solving.

Bring people together from different departments or sections. Involve employees in interdepartmental or intersectional problem-solving teams. When there is conflict between two groups, bring people from each group together as a team to solve the conflict. In the process of resolving the conflict with a problem-solving attitude, they will learn to trust one another.

Model interdependence. Be an example. Work cooperatively and effectively with each other to solve problems and accomplish tasks. This will reinforce teamwork and build trust.

Copyright © 2007 by Arnie Dahlke
805-371-8781 ◆ arnie@arniedahlke.comsegment>

— 8 —
Trust Is Eroded
When Employees See Managers And Supervisor As Not Competent

Employees want to respect managers and supervisors for their competence. They expect them to be knowledge-able, not only about managing, but also about everyone's job in their department or section. They don't feel they can trust a manager or supervisor who doesn't know the jobs of his or her employees—how can he or she make the right decisions or take the proper actions that involve or impact on them?

From an employee responding to a training-needs survey: *"Many managers and supervisors don't even know how to do the jobs that their own staff members have to do. So how can they offer training to us or know much about our training needs when they don't fully know what the job entails?"*

Guidelines For Building Trust: Develop Competence

Learn what your employees do if you don't already know. Sometimes people rapidly rise up through the ranks and end up as managers or super-visors without a detailed knowledge of what many of their employees do. If that is true for you, take the time to systematically learn what each of your employees does. When they know that *you* know what they do and *you* are aware of the problems they face, they will trust you more.

Don't fake it. If you do not know the in's and out's of an employee's job, don't pretend you do when talking to him or her. Admit your inexperience and tell employees you want to learn from them. They will respect you for building your competence, and they will trust you for your truthfulness. When you fake it, they quickly will see you as incompetent and distrust you.

— 9 —
Trust Is Eroded
When Employees Are Micromanaged
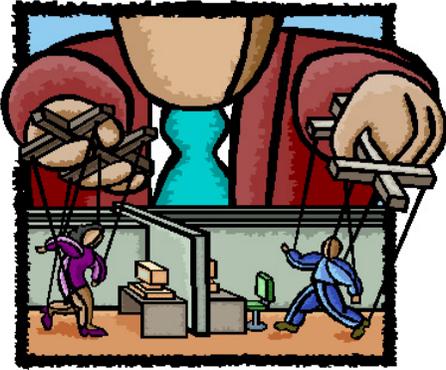
Some managers and supervisors insist that everything must be done *their* way, down to the last detail. They hover over their employees to make certain that work is done exactly the way they want it done. They don't know how to simply turn employees loose and let them do their jobs. They convey a belief that nobody can do the job as well as they can. Employees end up feeling like they are not being trusted.

From an employee in a Billing Department: *"Stop micromanaging us. Trust us to do the job we're supposed to be doing. My supervisor is constantly interfering with the way I do things. She wants me to do things exactly like she would, even if my way is faster (and I think better). Sometimes it feels like I'm in jail."*

Guidelines For Building Trust: Stop Micromanaging Employees

Focus on job outcomes. The most important element of anyone's job is what is being produced—the outcome. There are often many ways to reach the same outcome. Some people prefer one route, while others choose a different tack. Unless you as a manager or supervisor are restricted by safety or other regulatory guidelines, describe the outcome you expect from your employees and let them reach it in their own way.

Empower your employees. As a manager or supervisor, give your employees the information they need to make decisions on their own, without having to come to you or their department managers for approval. Generally, the more people have control over their lives, the more they feel happy and fulfilled. This rings true in the workplace. The more employees feel they are in control of the work they perform, the more satisfied they will be with their jobs and the more they will see that you trust them. Micromanaging them sends the message that you don't trust them.

— 10 —
Trust Is Eroded
When Employees Think They Are Being Treated Unfairly

Employees expect their managers and supervisors to treat everyone the same way. If there is a specific policy in place, they expect that everyone must adhere to it. They don't want to see policies applied to one person in one way and applied to someone else differently. That leads them to perceive that their managers or supervisors are playing favorites. When they see managers or supervisors playing favorites, they end up not trusting them.

From a long time employee: *"Managers and supervisors should be models of honesty and integrity—not simply doing things to build up their own position of power. Managers around here are not fair to everyone. They play favorites and twist policies around for their own gain. How can I trust a manager who I think is trying to take advantage of me?"*

Guidelines for Building Trust: Treat Employees Fairly

Discipline everyone by the same standards. As a manager or supervisor, don't play favorites. Don't give a break to one employee because you have good feelings about him or her, while coming down hard on another employee for the same behavior. Playing favorites breeds distrust.

Don't use a policy as a battering ram. As a manager or supervisor, don't cite a policy when disciplining someone simply because it's convenient for you at the time. Find out more about exactly what an employee did, try to understand why he or she did it, and turn it into a problem to be solved rather than an opportunity to punish. Employees will trust you more when you demonstrate that you can go the extra mile.

SUMMING IT ALL UP

The following summary table lists the ten factors that erode trust and corresponding guidelines for how to build trusting relationships, separating those guidelines that apply to everyone in the organization from those that especially apply to managers and supervisors. *Keep this table uppermost in your mind and practice the guidelines daily!*

Trust Factor	Guidelines for Building Trusting Relationships	
	For Everyone	**For Managers & Supervisors**
1. Trust Is Eroded When People Don't Feel A Sense Of Belonging	*—Acknowledge the key events of others.* *—Help others with their work when they are overwhelmed.* *—Cultivate a family climate.*	
2. Trust Is Eroded When People Don't Respect Each Other	*—Communicate with others from a "Winner" position* *—Actively listen to others when they express themselves.* *—Listen with empathy.*	
3. Trust Is Eroded When People Don't Feel Safe	*—Leave your problems at home!* *—Avoid communicating from your Critical Parent.* *—Critique behaviors, not people.*	*—View disciplining as a constructive process, not as a punishment.*
4. Trust Is Eroded When Employees Are Not Recognized For Doing A Good Job	*—Make a habit of praising others for work well done.*	*—Praise employees for a job well done.* *—Coach your supervisors to praise their employees.*
5. Trust Is Eroded When People Are Inconsistent In Honoring Their Commitments	*—Honor your commitments.*	*—Reliably respond to suggestions.* *—Don't make promises you can't keep.*
6. Trust Is Eroded When People Are Not Fully Informed	*—Counter rumors before they spread.*	*—Keep employees informed.*
7. Trust Is Eroded When People Promote Turf Protection	*—Actively discourage finger-pointing and buck-passing.* *—Model interdependence.*	*—Cultivate a Team climate.* *—Bring people together from different departments or sections.*
8. Trust Is Eroded When Employees See Managers And Supervisors As Not Competent		*—Learn what your employees do if you don't already know.* *—Don't fake it.*
9. Trust Is Eroded When Employees Are Micromanaged		*—Focus on job outcomes.* *—Empower your employees.*
10. Trust Is Eroded When Employees Think They Are Being Treated Unfairly		*—Discipline everyone by the same standards.* *—Don't use a policy as a battering ram.*