



LEADING THE CRUSADE FOR ETHICS IN BUSINESS

IS TRUST TAKING A HIT?

Is it just me, or is trust “taking a hit” lately? How about the lead story of the past several weeks; Do you feel the information released has been 100% accurate on the situation in the Gulf of Mexico? How about politics? Do you feel totally confident about the accuracy of information circulated by political candidates? What about consumer products? Do you ever question the safety or effectiveness of a product, even if backed by a big name brand? How about your healthcare provider? Ever questioned a diagnosis or treatment plan?

No matter which way you answer the questions above, the element of trust-- specifically your determination of trustworthiness-- factored into your answer. I view trust as the glue that holds relationships together and serves as the basis for growth—personal or business—as long as trust is present, the relationship is positioned for growth. Once trust is injured or destroyed, restoration of trust can be an uphill climb.

A spate of media reports recently started me wondering if we are in the middle of some kind of trust crisis. Then I saw an amusing and thought provoking piece by Penny Herscher, CEO of the software company FirstRain, with a novel approach to the twin subjects of trust and the company vacation policy. The article begins with, “On January 1st I changed our vacation policy dramatically to be ‘Take as much as you need.’” (She then admits, “This is not a new idea, it was pioneered by Netflix.”)

In a Huffington Post article, (January 6, 2010) “A Vacation Policy for the New Decade,” she describes the culture of FirstRain as “very intense” with long hours “inside and outside ‘normal business hours,’...” While reading that article I got the impression that trust is also a key element of the culture at FirstRain as she went on to offer....

“After all--if we entrust an employee with critical algorithm design or with talking to customers—why wouldn’t we trust them to manage their own time? And one of our five values is, ‘Take ownership for the company’s success’ so people managing their own time is really consistent with that – I trust them to do what’s right.”

Around the same time, I noticed this item, “The University of Michigan Health System encourages doctors to apologize when they make mistakes, trusting patients to forgive them—and risking legal liability. The number of malpractice suites has dwindled, and other providers are adopting this approach.” (Bloomberg Businessweek August 27, 2009)

Like everything else, I guess what you find depends on what you look for. As I looked for more examples of trust being “alive and well”, and found them, my skepticism diminished.

Since it is much easier to maintain trust than to restore it, I’ll offer a few ideas to help maintain trust:

- If you are in a position of leadership—keep this simple phrase in mind—“morale filters down, not up.” Generally, those in leadership positions set the tone. While your position gives you authority over others, your behavior will be pivotal in gaining and keeping their respect. A disconnect between what you profess and how you behave will cost you credibility and weaken trust.

As any parent knows-- kids seem to have an amazing ability to detect when parents or others in authority say one thing but do something else. I have come to view this as the “hypocrisy-o-meter” which, in my experience, seems to be fine-tuned once kids reach junior high.

In the corporate environment, an example of this disconnect might be when “belt tightening” is being required of the rank and file, while at the same time executive bonuses are being reported in the media as the highest in the industry.

- Pay attention to your Moral Compass! Just like the benefit of paying attention to your physical health, maintaining an awareness of what is going on around you as relates to your own sense of right and wrong, can be a wise idea. Practicing awareness with regard to moral obligations at home and in the workplace will help if red flags start to make an appearance.
- Recognize that trust requires a commitment to “High Road” behavior, and high road behavior includes not only the letter of the law but also the commitment to “doing what is right.”
- Reputation countsYou are going to have some kind of a reputation; Why not make it a great one!

One of the things I enjoy about my work is when work and personal experience intersect. This happened recently when I was asked to do two programs for the Automotive Service Association’s Automotive Management Institute (AMI) Conference in Washington, DC. I was honored to be asked to present at the AMI Leadership Conference and they were an outstanding group. The presentations focused on leadership and trust.

Not much digging into my personal experience was required to come up with an example of the level of trust I have in my own mechanic—and I was delighted to discover that he was one of their members. I shared this story with the conference attendees and I’ll repeat it here....

I have gone to the same repair shop for years. John, the owner, just happens to be a former student of mine from my earlier career as a teacher. I knew he was capable and honest, but one day I had an experience that showed me how exceptional he really was. Several years ago I arrived back at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport late on a Friday afternoon tired at the conclusion of a busy week of work and travel. Friday afternoon is a less than ideal time to arrive at one of the world’s busiest airports, and it is even less desirable to be in traffic in and around O’Hare at that time.

I started my car in the airport parking garage anticipating a long ride home, smelled smoke and turned the car off. The thought of driving the car down the steep, narrow and curving ramp only to end up in bumper to bumper Friday gridlock gave me pause. Hoping to gain some insight into the problem, I dialed my mechanic John. I was at least 40 minutes away (in ideal traffic conditions) from his shop so I figured the best I could hope for was some help brainstorming my options.

The call was answered and before I could finish my description John said, “What level are you on in the parking garage?” and “I’ll be right there.” Sure enough John showed up, started the car, and this time flames shot out. He doused them, did a mini-repair, and told me to drive to his shop to drop off the car. He also said that he would drive right behind me in case there was a problem. In the years since, my trust in him and my confidence in his knowledge and integrity have been unwavering. I recommend his business whenever the opportunity arises.

Talk about trust today is not in short supply, but when it comes to being someone people trust, or being a trustworthy organization, the field narrows as actions become the real test. I think this might be what Alfred Adler had in mind when he offered...

Trust only movement. Life happens at the level of events, not words. Trust movement.