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DEEP RELATIONSHIPS. ENDURING LEGACIES.

Why is Trust so Fundamental and So Fundamentally Important?

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"Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly, and they will show themselves great." Ralph Waldo Emerson

The word "trust" has become tossed around so much in the literature of organizations and family business. It is analogous to the word "love" in that it is seen as important, even essential, but has become so overused that it is difficult to ascertain its exact meaning and it's exact best place in terms of utility.

A colleague of mine once defined trust as "the confidence I have that you will act in my best interest in my absence". I appreciate both the profoundness and the simplicity of this definition. Certainly, any valid definition of the concept would include both a positive predictability and confidence of "having one's back".
The famed developmental theorist and psychologist, Erik Erikson postulated that the development of the capacity for trust begins very early with an infant forming the basis for trusting relationships if their caregivers are consistent with food, nurturing, and responsiveness to their needs. If the caregivers are unable to meet these needs with positive consistency, the child carries deficits in building trust into their adulthood.

The concept and phenomenon of trust is so fundamental to the health of relationships, organizational and family systems as it is the basic building block of communication. In essence, trust is the variable that enables us to more accurately hear what a person is actually trying to convey to us. When we trust someone, we are more likely to fill in the blank positively about what they haven't said or if they accidently misspeak. We will assume good intent, and actually hear what they say more congruently with what their actual intent is.

Many years ago, another colleague friend of mine worked with the Peace Corps on a project where he would interview potential candidates for selection. He and his fellow interviewers became interested in whether you could actually trust what the candidates were saying in the interview. They decided to do an experiment with two groups, one of which they assumed that the interviewees were telling

the truth, and the other where they assumed that the interviewees were lying. They then recorded their impressions and had an independent group work to verify the truthfulness of the responses independently. They concluded that when they believed that the candidates were telling the truth they made significantly fewer mistakes in their perceptions and assumptions about what is was they were saying. In other words, they were more accurate in their assessment when they assumed good intent and truthfulness.

When mistrust (or "the suspicion of ulterior motives) is present, the assumptions move in reverse; if the person misspeaks, or is not clear, it is likely that the receiver of the information will use the absence of information to confirm what it was that they already negatively suspected. This is often how rifts in communication and trust deepen, even though there have not been specific profound events that would cause them. It also appears that when there is an absence of information, our tendency is to project something negative onto that situation or associated person.

How Do You Maintain Trust?

It is interesting to note that it is not just being positive and consistent that maintains a trusting relationship. There is evidence to suggest that it must be maintained in a far more deliberate manner. Years ago a seminal study was conducted at the University of Oregon on this topic The researcher was interested in whether you could predict a trusting relationship, and if you could what factors would predict it. He found that there were four factors that when consistently present would predict trust. These were: 1) Time spent together. The parties must log some time together in order for there to be trust; 2) Shared relevant information. The parties need to share information about how they perceive situations, how they approach things, etc. 3) An absence of unchecked negative assumptions. In trusting relationships, people check negative assumptions fairly quickly to ensure that they do not harbor negative feelings or become distrustful; and 4) An absence of built up resentments. Obviously, if two people are consistently doing the first three, resentments and bitterness do not build up.

In addition, careful and skillful listening also is essential for maintaining a trusting relationship. It is the ability to really focus on what the person is saying and intending to communicate, and convey to the person that you really hear and are seeking to understand that is at the heart of building a trusting relationship. There is also a certain amount of interpersonal risk that also comes into play when building a trusting relationship. Sharing personal information, particularly feelings, is an important part of the establishment of the positive predictability needed to build trust. It is interesting to note the synergistic relationship between trust and interpersonal risk; as trust builds, the more likely it is for interpersonal risk taking, such as self disclosure, to occur, and as this occurs, trust builds.

Two major obstacles to the development of trust are defensiveness and the perception of personal agendas that are self oriented. The ability to listen deeply and focus on what another person is communicating is greatly impaired by the other party's defensiveness, or essentially their focus on their perception and unwillingness to hear another point of view. In addition, if the it is perceived that the person is not open to listening, it may not even feel safe enough to share in the first place.

In addition, the leader sets the tone for the overall culture and for the development of norms of trust. It is the person who is the greatest position of power who has the responsibility to create the environment for the open sharing and listening necessary to build trust. As such, it is essential that they model effective listening and assume good intent of those that they have carefully entrusted with roles of authority. Similarly, when trust has broken down, it is the leader's responsibility to take the initiative to address and resolve the issues in order to re-establish the relationship and set the norms for trust. It is rare that a subordinate, or family member without significant authority is able to lead such an effort on their own.