

A Lesson in Trust

by Margaret Seidler

The author provides readers with 7 Guidelines to create TRUST in the work place and invites reflections on each point in this article.

The front page article in The Post & Courier newspaper in my hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, caught my attention, "LAPSES AT NASA EXPOSED, *Shuttle board finds key errors by top leaders*". It was a report, filed by R. Jeffery Smith of The Washington Post, about possible missed opportunities within NASA to save the lives of seven crew members aboard the space shuttle, Columbia.

As I read on, I found one expert on space policy refer to NASA's "organization pathology," an unhealthy work culture and workplace where "dissent was not welcome." For example, the chief structural engineer stated he didn't press his findings about the severe implications of the insulating foam crash at takeoff because "he felt too junior and that he was worried about his job." Finally, the article refers to, "NASA's long-standing culture of defensiveness, sense of isolation from the public and know-it-all culture."

From the report, it seems employees were afraid and their leaders were afraid; afraid to speak out and disagree, afraid to be wrong, afraid to hear the painful truth, afraid to lose their jobs. Instead of trying to overcome their fears, it appears that employees and leaders were spending their energy assigning blame to others and making excuses.

I assume the folks at NASA are mostly good and honorable people, just like the rest of us who go to work every day. So, then, how can a group of good people find themselves not speaking up even when the ultimate is at stake, the lives of fellow co-workers? I believe the cause can be found in the work environment employees and leaders create for themselves through their daily interactions.

The lesson for me is in the importance of our collective responsibility for creating work environments with high levels of TRUST, not distrust. And, TRUST is not just the job of leaders; it is also the responsibility of all employees who choose to work in that organization. TRUST in the workplace helps to diminish fear and enables people to be successful, not fail as has happened at NASA. When leaders and employees demonstrate TRUST, they are cooperative, dependable, honest and predictable in how they work with all others.

Avoid NASA's failure, create TRUST at Work

Reflect on your own organization or your client organizations as I share some key elements of TRUST from a wonderful work experience I enjoyed several years ago.

1. *The drive to reach a common goal*

I worked in an organization where people lived by these key elements of TRUST in being cooperative, dependable, honest and predictable. We focused our energy and efforts on cooperation to achieve the organization's purpose and mission rather than on divisive personal agendas or need for personal control and power over others. Here the overarching objective was what we could create together...that every single person's contribution counted.

2. ***Openness/listening to others' ideas and opinions***

One way of encouraging diversity was positively responding to others' ideas and opinions when they surfaced. We experienced the magic moment when our idea comes to the surface. We also understood that openness and listening did not imply agreement or commitment to action. The opportunity to be heard fully was important reinforcement for generating future ideas and engagement.

3. ***Risk-taking in speaking up***

Our intense will to achieve the higher purpose created an environment where we spoke up without fear of retribution. Further, we were encouraged to disagree as long as those conversations centered on the issue or problem at hand, not the person.

4. ***Problem solving***

We understood the crucial juncture when things go wrong. In our organization, we learned about the choices we can make at those times and how our choices either create benefits or consequences. Thus, were aware that we created a direct impact on future outcomes based on our choices.

5. ***Collaborative conflict resolution***

While this is tough for many people, we were trained and held accountable for using a step-by-step method to have those really hard conversations and to do it in a respectful, caring and compassionate way.

6. ***Constructive feedback***

Feedback was a way of life. It was solicited as frequently as it was given. We each held a strong desire to succeed personally for the organization; aligning intentions with our actual impact on others was essential to our personal growth and development for the organization's success.

7. ***Genuine appreciation***

The final element was sincere appreciation for what we brought to the organization in terms of our personal strengths, talents or qualities. The positive work environment brought about confidence and self-assurance.

Creating a work culture of TRUST takes a lot of hard work. It blends the elements of a cooperative spirit and compassionate honesty with the ability for others to depend on you and to act predictably. Sounds like these elements of TRUST are missing at NASA which now has paid the ultimate price. So ask yourself, is TRUST missing in my organization or in my client's organization?

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