Are You Worthy of Trust?

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2010, published in the Jan/Feb 2010 issue of the "In CASE" Newsletter

Effective leaders are trustworthy people. If folks don't trust you, it's tough to inspire, influence, or engage the very people you serve--those who serve your customers!

For over thirty years, Barry Posner and Jim Kouzes have researched to learn what people expect in their leaders. Since 1987, they've published their results in six editions of *The Leadership Challenge*. The primary item that individuals report that they expect in their leaders is honesty. We want our leaders to be worthy of our trust--truthful, ethical, principled, and of high integrity.

In 2008, independent research by the Gallup organization was reported in *Strengths Based Leadership* by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie. Ten thousand followers were asked to list three words that best describe the leader who most positively influences their lives. Trust, honesty, integrity, and respect were among the most frequently identified words.

Here we have two independent professional research studies that confirm what you already know to be true. Healthy boss/subordinate/colleague relationships are critical for satisfaction at work, and healthy relationships do not exist without a strong foundation of trust. (It's true away from work, too!)

Have you ever tried to resolve a conflict between two individuals who don't trust each other? How easy was that? Troubleshooting a trust relationship can be quite difficult. "Trust" is a conclusion people tend to draw subconsciously. Rarely do we understand the factors that contribute to that conclusion.

When someone you support says, "I don't trust him," you may ask, "Why not?" Chances are that you'll receive either a shrug of the shoulders or an exaggerated description of an emotional incident. We humans tend to draw the "trust" or "no trust" conclusion first, then search for the rationale to justify it.

For a moment, however, think about specific people who influence you and who you influence. Start by thinking of someone you deeply trust. Once you have someone in mind, consider what he or she does that earns your trust. Also, please think of someone you don't trust. What is it that he or she does that contributes to your lack of trust?

After I share this simple three-element model, I'll ask you to test it using your relationships with these two individuals who represent the extremes of trust among the people you know.

The first element that must be in place for trust to exist is "**competence**." The question is, "Do I believe that this person is capable of doing what he or she claims to do?" For example, you might not trust your automobile mechanic to conduct surgery if your appendix bursts, but you definitely expect the mechanic to discover and replace brakes that are about to fail!

The second element that must be in place is "**honorable motive**." The question is, "Do I believe that this person offering help is doing so from a genuine desire to serve me, or is there some intent there that is more selfish?" We often make judgments about why people do what they do, and we are often wrong. Still, it's our perception of their motives and intentions that determines whether we trust them or not.

The final element that must be in place is "**reliability**." The question is, "Do I believe that this person will do whatever it takes to keep his or her promise, even if the going gets rough?" Sometimes people have good intentions when they establish expectations, but they fail to follow through. They don't have to let us down very often before we conclude that we're not able to trust in what they tell us to expect.

Are you ready to test the model? Think about the person you trust. I'll bet he or she rates highly in all three areas. (All three areas are required for trustworthiness.) For the person you don't trust, I guarantee that he or she rates poorly in at least one of these three areas!

This model is not mine. I discovered it in 1994 in an issue of "Executive Excellence" magazine. The article was written by Robert E. "Dusty" Staub and was entitled "Trust: Taproot of Innovation."

This model was also offered by Chalmers Brothers in his 2010 book *Language and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Check out Brothers' insights on these three critical characteristics on pages 53 and 54.

If you have responsibility for developing future leaders in your organization, it's helpful to use this model in providing feedback for their growth. A person can improve the first characteristic, competence, by seeking additional training and experience (practice). The second and third criteria can be improved if people receive genuine and loving feedback and make different choices about their future behaviors.

The best way to apply these three criteria, however, is to your own behaviors. Do you claim competence only in areas where you genuinely have it? Are you careful that your motives are pure, not seeking glory for yourself but genuinely desiring to serve those you support? And do you make promises sparingly, with a dependable system to ensure you reliably follow up on every expectation you generate?

As a leader, your behaviors are watched all the time, and people are making judgments about whether they can trust you based on what they observe. I encourage you to build your competencies continually through personal growth, to think through why and how you are contributing your services, and to follow through on every commitment you make!

Added after publication: Further contributors to establishing (and even enhancing) your trustworthiness are being willing to disclose information about yourself (especially your motives) and welcoming and accepting feedback from others. More information on this thought can be found on my website alphabetically at "Disclosure and Feedback--JoHari Window."