

Betrayal of Trust—A Preventable Leadership Blunder

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Are you guilty of “betrayal of trust”? Before you quickly answer, please take a moment to understand the question. Because you are human, you’ve probably disappointed those you influence. The question is not only how significant was your failure to satisfy, but also how frequently such a situation occurred.

Because “trust” is so critical for any successful relationship, I deal with the topic frequently. Allow me to repeat something that perhaps you’ve read in my articles in the past.

Broken trust is a difficult topic to troubleshoot. Typically, if someone tells me “I don’t trust him (or her),” I’ll ask a few questions. Usually people are not able to explicitly explain their feelings. Violated trust is an emotional conclusion based on data that is often quite “squishy.” People respond to my questions with vague, general thoughts like, “There’s just something about him that doesn’t feel right to me.”

Additional questions can successfully pinpoint the cause. The source of the mistrust is likely one of three things. The person doubts your competence, is suspicious of your motives, or has experienced you failing to keep promises. “Betrayal of trust” is typically caused by the last of those three possibilities. The promises may be small, like a missed appointment. But broken promises add up over time!

Before you conclude you’ve not betrayed anyone’s trust, you should understand that disappointed individuals have probably never told you. They may complain to a friend, but most people don’t tell leaders that they’ve failed to execute their responsibilities. The perceived difference in power is typically too great, and frustrated individuals likely presume you don’t care anyway.

All their speculation may be very wrong, of course. Still, many people typically respond with reluctance when they feel let down. Volunteering straight feedback is a rare gift from those who feel hurt.

If no one under your authority has complained that you’ve betrayed their trust, that doesn’t mean you are innocent! To confirm your standing, you’ll need to exercise some special effort.

Sound like too much work? I understand. Your lack of awareness, however, explains why you may be quite surprised when I inquire about “betrayal of trust.” You may be genuinely stunned. But the first step to improvement is greater awareness. And I don’t serve you well if I continue the charade.

I always assume that “betrayal of trust” is correctable. It’s an unintentional blunder, not an irreversible flaw. But correcting it does require a bit of humility on the part of the leader.

Let me emphasize that we all mess up. No matter where you are in the hierarchy, you’ve fallen short of someone’s anticipation. You make a promise casually, with every good intention of following through. Then something happens. You get distracted. Or you forget. Or you think, “It’s not that important.”

You’re not likely to violate someone’s trust if you make promises sparingly and you are absolutely certain to follow through and execute each one. In fact, your relationships will be strongest if you go beyond satisfying the bare minimum of the commitment you’ve made. Think about what you can do to help the person you are serving achieve whatever is important to him or her.

But what do you do if you’ve blown it? Too many leaders make their mistake when they first learn of the violation. They deny they ever made the promise, or they ignore the situation (maybe believing it wasn’t that big a deal), or they pretend that saying “I forgot” is sufficient in getting them off the hook! WRONG! The proper action is to acknowledge that the commitment was not met—not on time, not in the way the person expected it, or not as extensively as was intended when the promise was made.

Once you acknowledge the mistake, apologize and make good on your promise. (For a helpful article on apologies, go to my website listed below. Click on “Article Archives” and scroll down to “How Comfortable Are You with Apologizing?”) If you catch your oversight at this stage, you can usually reestablish your relationship with the individual with a genuine apology and delivery on the promise.

When I began this article, my intent was to focus on leaders who have broken promises repeatedly. How do you find out if this is true for you? First, provide a copy of this article to two or three people who you trust. Ask them to read it, share it with two or three others, and report back to you what they learn. To understand what to do then, be sure to read my article next week!

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