

Betrayal of Trust—How to Recover

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My article last week identified how to recognize if you don't keep promises to your organization or your family. It also encourages you to determine if the frequency of your failures is severe enough that people have lost faith in you. This week, we look at how to correct that situation.

If those around you have experienced "betrayal of trust" with you, it may have nothing to do with your motives. In fact, your intent may be pure, genuine, and honorable. Your desire to serve may be extremely high. The problem occurs when what you actually do is different from what people expect.

Maybe you are spread too thin. Maybe you don't manage your time well. Could it be that you're just disorganized? Perhaps you are forgetful or you have no reliable system for identifying and tracking your follow-up commitments. Maybe you can't say "No." Do you avoid conflict, so you fail to address demanding issues? Perhaps you say whatever is required in the moment to release you from a difficult situation, and once the heat is off, you ignore whatever promises you made under stress.

Surely if any of those things were true for you, you'd know it, right? And if you were guilty of betrayal of trust, people would have brought that to your attention, right? Nope. Sorry. Your behavior may baffle those who interact with you. They may not understand why you do what you do (or why you don't do what you led them to expect you would do!).

Are you willing to examine this concept of "betrayal of trust"? Here's the essence of the problem. When you take any kind of action, you know why you are doing it and what your intended outcome is. Ah, but you don't know the full effect of your behavior on the other person.

Sure, you think you know the effect on the other person. But we all see the world through our own eyes and history. Is it possible that the other person experiences something different from what you had intended? Your failure to follow-through on a promise may give the recipient the impression that he or she is not important to you. When it happens multiple times, well, it feels like a major rejection.

That may not be true, of course, but do you ever really know what the impact of your actions are on that other person? Is it possible that the other person loses respect for you? Ooh, that's not good!

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to overcome may be your lack of awareness. In some cultures, offering or receiving feedback is a very rare occurrence. You may have to be creative and persistent to determine if betrayal of trust is a problem for you! If you are in a position of power (as perceived by others--not by your definition), people likely tell you what they think you want to hear. And no one thinks you want to hear, "I don't trust you because you don't do what you say you will do!"

Do some soul-searching. With one or two trusted colleagues, evaluate honestly what has caused your repeated failure to follow-through. Determine if you can change and are willing to change. Generate a plan. Refine that plan, considering what you will do if you face resistance--internally or from others.

Apologize privately to those who may have been severely hurt. Give them plenty of opportunity, time, and space to talk. Ask for forgiveness, including how you might make restitution. Ask for their help, both in supporting your behavior changes and in providing you feedback on the progress you make.

Then make a more public confession of your past failures. Explain why and how you intend to behave differently in the future. Invite people who have been hurt to come to you and suggest how you might make reparations. Encourage everyone to provide you with feedback on how well you are making progress against your new intentions.

Arrange with two or three trusted colleagues to allow you to blow off some steam. Some people may not forgive you and may openly give you a hard time. You'll need the freedom to share frustrations with one or more individuals who will give you the space and time to do that without blabbing about those occurrences with others in your organization.

"Betrayal of trust" need not be a killer defect. If not addressed, however, your diminished respect by members of your team limits the effectiveness of your organization. Work to improve the frequency of feedback delivery in your organization. If improvements are in order, take corrective steps quickly!