

Trust or Confront--A Learnable Choice

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Healthy, confident cultures attract and retain competent, contributing individuals. Would you like to have that in your organization? CAUTION: This information may change the way you think!

Two weeks ago, I attended the annual Catalyst Conference in Atlanta. John Maxwell and Andy Stanley started this two-day learning event for Christian leaders ten years ago.

I've dealt with the topic of "trust" many times with my clients. However, Andy Stanley provided a new insight that every leader should master. I invite you to consider Andy's advice.

Sometimes individuals fail to execute the commitments they've made to you. What do you think when that occurs? Do you typically assume there was some circumstance that explains the variation? Or do you assume the individual failed to function? Though your thoughts are a choice, you typically respond from habit. Do you normally say something supportive of the person or are you critical?

Stanley suggests that you always believe the best of the individual. If that doesn't usually occur for you, Stanley and I suggest you train yourself to presume the most generous explanation for the other person's behavior. You'll reduce your stress and enhance your organization's culture if you'll practice choosing this perspective until you can easily believe it.

Stanley supported his contention with information reported in Marcus Buckingham's book *The One Thing You Need to Know*. When missed expectations occur in the happiest of marriages, the spouse presumes "that their relationship really is a good one and their partner can be counted on to be caring and responsive across time and situations." Specifically, they assume "the most generous explanation for each other's behavior."

Is that hard to believe? It was for me. I guess I've not witnessed many genuinely happy marriages (they certainly aren't reflected in the media). The point for you, however, is that the concept applies to you and your organization. Don't you want your team to be characterized by employees who are "caring and responsive across time and situations"?

Andy Stanley is not naïve. He admitted that there is often emotion involved when gaps occur between what you expected and what you actually experienced. Unchecked, your emotions may take over and make the decision for you. As a leader, however, shouldn't you intentionally make the choice that will strengthen the culture of your organization?

Andy identified two things that make it difficult for leaders to believe the best. The first is outside of you: it's what you see repeatedly. Because you frequently hear of unhealthy marriages and dysfunctional teams, it's much easier to assume the worst. After all, aren't people lazy, greedy, and irresponsible?

The second thing that makes it difficult for you to believe the best when you see a variation is who you are. You see the world not as it is, but as you are. You've been hurt and betrayed. You are territorial and a little insecure. You don't want someone to take advantage of your good nature.

However, your every action influences your organization's culture. All eyes watch how you handle every situation. If you telegraph suspicion, your doubts will filter through your organization. However, if your facial expressions, tone of voice, and comments express confidence in the employee who performed differently than you expected, that faith will also filter through your organization!

Your decision to trust (believe the best) or doubt (assume the worst) is almost a reflex. Until you've trained yourself to automatically believe the best, you must be more conscious in making your choice.

What if you can't choose to trust in a given situation? You should confront, compassionately, quickly, and intentionally. Ask open-ended questions that seek information. You'll usually learn something that you did not know and you surely did not imagine. The new information will either relieve your fears or will cause you to move in the direction of separating that individual from your organization.

The consequences of confrontation are far less severe than the consequences of concealment! The outcome of a confrontation is immediate, tangible, and obvious. If the information you gain clears up your concern, the matter is over. The consequences of concealment, however, are intangible and eat at you internally. Concealing your suspicions will surely poison your relationship!

You're investing in developing individuals who, when they make a mistake, tell you about it and make it right. They learn from their mistakes and avoid duplicating them. You risk little to trust team members like that. Actually, refusing to trust them is far riskier!

Like it or not, the culture of your organization is an outcome of your behaviors. Your organization will survive mistakes. But your organization cannot survive a culture devoid of trust. Think deeply about what prevents you from trusting. Challenge presumptions that pervade your thinking. Then construct your choice between these two options: believing the best or seeking clarifying information immediately.

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